

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 6: What is Feminist Art?

Grade Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School



This Encounter builds upon students' understanding of feminism and introduces them to feminist art. Students are introduced to the work of artists who identify their work as feminist. They consider *The Dinner Party* in the context of these other artworks and Judy Chicago's statements about herself as a feminist artist. They also consider the artwork within the context of evolving ideas about feminist art. As students explore feminist artworks, they have the opportunity to observe the wide range of media, ideas, and personal expressions that can be considered as feminist art. They also recognize that feminist art is not limited to artworks created in the United States; rather, artists from all over the world identify their art as feminist.

This Encounter will reinforce the understanding that feminism is a chosen position, not a label placed on someone by another person. By studying *The Dinner Party* and other feminist artworks, students enhance their understanding about the importance of content in art. As they learn about artists who create feminist artworks, students recognize that art-making is a long path, research is often required, and that artistic thinking builds and grows over time. Ultimately, students develop deeper understanding of, and connections to, *The Dinner Party* as they see it within yet another context—the context of feminist art.

Investigation

Background:

1. Prior to the 1970's, there was no concept of feminist art, but now the feminist art movement has spread around the globe. There is still a lot of disagreement about what constitutes feminist art, in part because it is the first art movement that, first of all, was initiated by women and secondly, is not stylistically similar. Rather, what ties feminist art together is its content, which helps us see the many ways in which gender shapes the behavior and attitudes of both women and men.

There is also a lack of agreement about how feminist art developed. According to Judy Chicago's biographer, Gail Levin (*Becoming Judy Chicago*), the first mention of the term occurred in Judy Chicago's journal in 1971. On the other hand, curator Connie Butler, who curated *WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first major historic survey of feminist art, claims that one can see feminist impulses in art as early as the 1960's. Art history is always written with hindsight and at some point in the future, perhaps there will be a coherent history of the feminist art movement.

It is important for teachers to establish an understanding that although art by women and feminist art may overlap, they can be different. Art by women may be considered a larger, more general category within which all women artists fall, including feminists. And art created by women can indeed be about women, support women, and/or challenge the status quo (intentionally or unintentionally).

One possible difference between art by women and feminist art is that feminist art is conceived and/or created by self-identified feminists. At this point teachers should make clear that “Not all women are feminists and not all feminists are women” (Garrard, 1999).

The teacher will:

1. Explain to students that they will continue their exploration of *The Dinner Party* by viewing and understanding it within the context of feminist art. *The Dinner Party* is a considered a feminist artwork. Given what they know about feminism and what they know about *The Dinner Party*, why do they think someone might think of it as a feminist artwork? What are the characteristics of feminist art? Keep a record of student responses and explain that they will return periodically to their ideas.



2. Provide copies of Judy Chicago’s essay, “On Being a Feminist Artist in the Twenty-first Century.” In preparation for student reading, identify vocabulary that may be difficult and have alternate/age appropriate terms ready. (For elementary level, the teacher may want to read portions to the students). Hold a discussion in which the following questions are addressed:

- ▶ What is feminist art according to Judy Chicago?
- ▶ Why does Judy Chicago want to be called a feminist artist?
- ▶ How did her definition change or remain the same over time?
- ▶ In what ways are her ideas about feminist art similar to or different from those ideas in the list of characteristics (created in the previous activity)?

3. Have students work in small groups to investigate and interpret meaning in the work of an artist who creates feminist art. Provide images of the artworks, along with a description of the artist’s work, a biographical statement, and an artist’s statement. Using the skills practiced in Encounter Eight, *Investigating Meaning*, and/or Encounter Eleven, *Constructing Interpretations*, students should view the works, read the contextual information provided in handouts and compose interpretive statements in answer to the question, “What is this work about?” Their task will be to present the work of the artist assigned to them in a large group discussion, remembering that their job as interpreters is not to judge the work or share whether or not they like it, but to consider it in its very best light, assume that it has meaning, and provide their classmates with a way to think about—an interpretation of—this artist’s artworks.

A good source for images for this investigation is the Feminist Art Base on the website of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

- ▶ http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/index.php ◀

Many of the artworks on this site are appropriate for students in upper elementary, middle and high school, but some are not. Note that the Feminist Art Base posts the following statement: “*The Feminist Art Base may present images directed to adult audiences, and deals with challenging subject matter that may include sexual content or violence. If you are under 18, do not enter the Feminist Art Base without the permission of a parent or guardian.*”

The following artists represented on the Feminist Art Base are appropriate for students to consider as they investigate feminist art. Most have included feminist artist statements, biographies, and examples of their work. Some include

videos and links to artist or gallery websites (where other information and images may be found). They represent a range of media and approaches, and diversity in terms of age, ethnicity and geographical location. Note that this list is not exhaustive, but a sampling of what is available. Teachers are advised to check the ever-growing website and make their own selections based on what is appropriate for their students' ages, abilities and interests.

Joan Arbeiter	Virginia Maksymowicz	Jaune Quick-to-See Smith
María Magdalena Campos-Pons	Patsy Norvell	Mimi Smith
Audrey Flack	Howardena Pindell	Sanghee Song
Nicky Hoberman	Adrian Piper	Joan Snyder
Jenny Holzer	Janet Polsky	Tsuneko Taniuchi
Mako Idemitsu	Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen	Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Joyce Kozloff	Miriam Schapiro	Kara Walker
Sharon Molloy	Tomoko Sawada	Barbara Zucker
Joetta Maue	Laurie Simmons	



4. Have a large group discussion in which students share their interpretations of the artworks assigned to their small groups. Invite students to discuss whether and how the artworks they considered are feminist artworks. Direct their attention to the list of characteristics of feminist art created earlier. Ask, “Now that you have considered artworks from the Feminist Art Base, are there characteristics that you would add to the list?” Remind students that it is not necessary to come up with a firm definition of feminist art, but that they should be aware of characteristics in the range of artworks that artists and others consider to be feminist.

5. Suggest that students read the following statement about feminist art as another example of ideas about feminist art. Suggest that they look for points with which they agree or disagree. They might also consider how the ideas are similar to and different from the ideas in the statement by Judy Chicago, as well as in the list of characteristics of feminist art that they are creating in class.

Intention is another factor that defines art as feminist. When intention is conceived of as a political act, the goal is about raising awareness or even further, change. An intention of feminism is social change, not just for women, but for everyone. Feminist art contributes to that idea by addressing issues affecting women's lives and may also include that which affects life around them. In feminist art these issues become the content for artmaking so that a dialogue around these issues might be achieved. A feminist consciousness or seeing the world through a feminist lens keeps feminist artists alert to personal, social, political, ecological, and cultural issues. Through art, feminists can identify issues, present or re-present issues, deconstruct and/or theorize issues, raise questions, provide new responses, reveal hidden factors or problems, and offer alternatives that suggest new ways of seeing, thinking, or being.

Feminist art addresses issues through both content and form. Feminist artists expanded the definition of art and the form is much more inclusive than the traditional art forms of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Feminist artists brought changes into the artworld such as narrative in performance, different media including those often associated with women and women's work, and women's voices into the male dominated dialogue of the artworld. Form can define, expand, suggest, or erase the content of a work of art by adding another layer of meaning.

6. Have students investigate issues that are important to them. Explain or define *issue*. Mary Wyrick (2002) explains issues as “points of political debate or controversy” (p. 215). Gaudelius and Speirs loosely defined an issue as “an idea about which at least two distinct points of view can be held or articulated” (p. 1). Provide examples of issues to the

students and have them spend time researching and reflecting about issues of importance to them. What follows are suggestions for engaging students with issues:

- ▶ Provide news clips, front pages of newspapers, magazine covers or articles, and/or Internet sources that address different issues. Look for contextual information on issues that represent different viewpoints.
 - ▶ Choose one women's issue and become informed about it. An example might be equal pay for equal work. Explain different sides to give an example of the complexity of an issue and what most people may not know about the issue.
6. Have students return to *The Dinner Party* and consider it in light of their increasing understanding of feminist art.

Guide interpretive discussion by asking the following:

- ▶ What issues does *The Dinner Party* raise?
- ▶ How are these issues addressed within the work?
- ▶ Is *The Dinner Party* a feminist work of art?

Ask students to explain responses and provide evidence from both the artwork and from contextual information external to the artwork.



The students will:

1. Create a list of characteristics of feminist art, given their initial understanding of feminism. Read the essay by Judy Chicago. (For elementary level, the teacher may want to read portions to the students). Reflect on her ideas and discuss in light of their own ideas about feminism and feminist art.
2. Work in small groups to interpret the work of an artist who identifies her/himself as a feminist. Create interpretive statements about the work and share these with classmates. Return to the evolving list of characteristics of feminist art and discuss in light of their ideas about the artworks.
3. Continue to consider their evolving ideas about feminist art by reading and reflecting upon additional statements.
4. Explore issues to investigate—possibly through art making. Identify an issue (personal, social, political, ecological, cultural) about which students feel deeply. Generate a list of issues with the teacher. Discuss what they know and identify their sources. Identify issues from sources provided by the teacher, in the community, by watching the evening news, or by reading a newspaper, current magazine or journal. In groups, share lists of issues plus contextual information about them. Sort issues in piles (personal, political, ecological, social, cultural), giving reasons for placement. Discuss the possibility of issues falling in more than one category.
5. Identify issues raised by *The Dinner Party* and discuss the artwork in light of their understanding of feminist art.

Continuing Exploration:

1. Students can compare and contrast *The Dinner Party* to other existing feminist works of art. In correlation to the permanent housing of *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the Museum presented *Global Feminisms*, the first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to feminist art from 1990 to the present. This exhibition consisted of artworks of in a variety of media by approximately eighty women artists from around the world. The exhibition showcased perspectives of feminism beyond the Western view that has been supposed as the dominant voice of feminist since the 1970s. *Note that some of the artworks in this exhibit may not be appropriate for upper elementary, middle or high school students.*

2. Students plan an artwork or series of works in which their selected issue(s) will be explored. Once students identify issues about which they feel strongly they will research the issue in order to find out as much as possible about it. Possible journal prompts:

- ▶ How is the issue typically represented?
- ▶ What new information did you uncover?
- ▶ What about the issue should be brought to public attention? Why?

This research and journaling will help students investigate the content for art making. In their sketchbooks, students will propose different forms that this issue might take. They will consider how to best represent the issue though a series of prompts or questions regarding content and form:

- ▶ About what issue do you feel most strongly? Why?
- ▶ If you were to address the issue in a work of art, what would be the subject matter?
- ▶ How would you present the subject matter?
- ▶ In what ways could the issue be represented or suggested or symbolized?
- ▶ What metaphor would best represent the issue? Explain.
- ▶ What medium should be used? What material would support the ideas you would like to communicate? Why?

Students might work together to engage in the same research and reflection with their end product being a collaborative artwork in which two to five students' points of view regarding the chosen issue are synthesized into one work of art such as a collage, montage, or mural.



Materials:

1. Handout: "On Being a Feminist Artist in the Twenty-first Century," by Judy Chicago.
2. Prepared packets of images and handouts focusing on the work of selected artists from The Feminist Art Base, from the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art on the Brooklyn Museum of Art website: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/index.php

Resources:

1. Broude, N. & Garrard, M. (1994). *The Power of Feminist Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
2. Chadwick, W. (2007). *Women, Art, and Society*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
3. Chicago, J. (1993). *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*. NY: Penguin Group.
4. Garrard, M. (1999). *Survey on the Status of Women and People of Color in the Arts Professions*. Paper presented as part of a panel discussion at the National CAA Conference, Los Angeles, CA.
5. Garber, E. (1992). Feminism, Aesthetics, and Art Education. *Studies in Art Education*, 33(4), 210-225.
6. Gaudelius, Y. & Speirs, P. (2002). *Contemporary Issues in Art Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
7. Hein, H. (1995). The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory. In Brand, P.Z. & Korsmeyer, C. (Eds.), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (pp. 446-463). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
8. Wyrick, M. (2002). Art for Issues Sake: A framework for selection of art content for the elementary classroom. In Gaudelius, Y., & Speirs, P., *Contemporary Issues in Art Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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On Being a Feminist Artist in the Twenty-first Century

By Judy Chicago

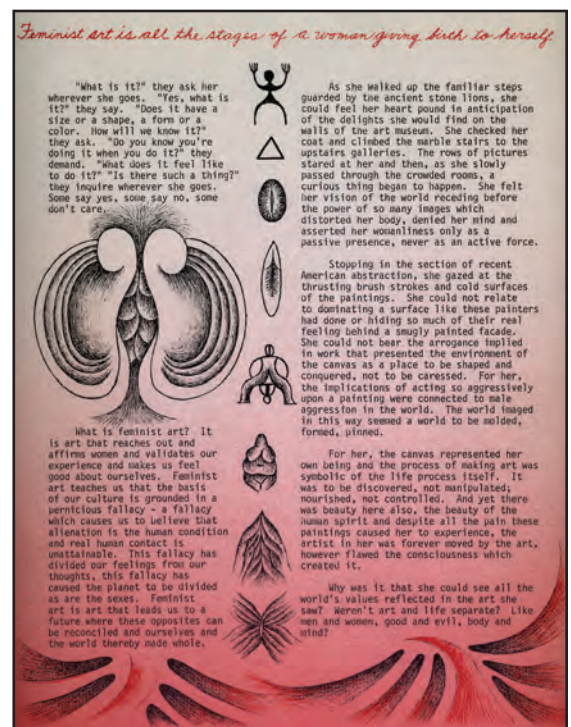


In 1970, when I started the first Feminist art program in Fresno, California, there was no precedent for the term “Feminist art.” A few years later, I tried to define what it meant in a small print that I created, titled *What is Feminist Art?* In this work, I stated that it was art that reaches out and affirms women, validates our experiences and makes us feel good about ourselves. I went on to say that Feminist art also teaches us that the basis of our culture is grounded in a pernicious fallacy—one that assumes that alienation is the human condition. This fallacy has led to the planet being as divided as are the sexes. I concluded with the hubris of youth by saying that Feminist art is art that leads us to a future where these opposites can be reconciled and our world thereby made whole.

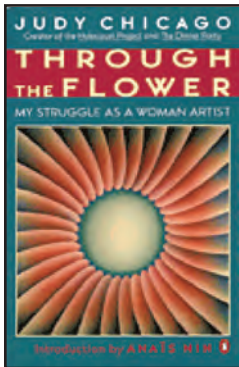
When I look back upon this idealistic statement, it is with a sense of gratitude that I was a young woman during the seventies, a time that was so full of hope. Many of us shared the belief that we as women could help to transform the world, not only for women but for

everyone. Moreover, as an artist, I believed that I could contribute to this transformation through art, believing that art has the power to transcend differences, to help us see the world through other people’s eyes and thereby help create a sense of empathy with those who would otherwise be entirely unknown to us.

Since that time, I have continued to create art with this goal in mind and have seen many positive changes, many of them brought about by the Women’s Movement. At the same time, Feminism has been turned into a dirty word. This feat was accomplished by a relentless media and right wing assault that managed to convince several generations of young women—along with many of their male peers—that two centuries of effort by countless women and some men which brought previously unheard of rights and opportunities to these same young women was not something to be proud of but rather, to disown, usually with the phrase; “I’m not a Feminist but...” Of course what they meant was that they were all for equal rights for women but not at the cost of being branded a Feminist.



However, I do not intend to write a defense of Feminism—though it does need to be defended against all the unfair characterizations by which it has been described. Rather, my intention is to explain why I insist upon being called a Feminist artist now, in the twenty-first century, when many pundits insist we live in a post-feminist world. It seems important to point out that my definition of such a world involves a toppling of the hierarchy of white male dominance as exemplified by the preponderance in museums of white Eurocentric male art. Since neither our male-dominated world nor the art museums that carry its visual messages around the globe have changed enough, I see no reason to abandon the Feminism



that is one of the few alternative philosophies around. Also, as my underlying Feminist philosophy shapes my art, I remain a Feminist artist. What this means to me today might be summed up by saying that my art aspires to excellence while remaining true to its purpose of helping to create change.

Certainly, the definition of Feminist art that I formulated in the early seventies and quoted earlier has expanded in response to the realization that women's experiences are various, that they are mediated by culture, geography, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and all the many attributes of human individuality. This is a definite improvement upon earlier ideas about Feminist art although I always hoped that it would become what it is today, a worldwide movement, practiced by women artists all over the globe. Even though Feminist art is stylistically diverse, central to it—

despite its diversity—is its focus on content, the personal content of each artist, which by its very nature will be distinct.

Can men make Feminist art? The answer is yes, if their art is (1) content based, (2) authentic to their own experiences, and (3) demonstrates a willingness to share the public stage with many voices rather than having that stage all to themselves. Do I still hope that Feminist art can make a difference in the world? That answer is also yes, an answer that has been reinforced by my experiences over three decades of hearing countless testimonies about how seeing my art has changed people's perceptions about women. This is one of the goals Feminist art is intended to accomplish. If I have contributed to this change, I am proud to call myself a Feminist artist, even today. Though my views have certainly become somewhat more humble as I've matured, I continue to believe that we still need an art that can lead us to a future where some of the differences between us can be overcome and the world thereby made at least a little more whole.

Judy Chicago, 2006