

Title: *Judy Chicago Reinvented Through Soft Sculpture*

Contact Information: Brenna Johnson

Art Teacher Franklin High School, Franklin, MA

Address: 65 Orchard Street Millis, MA 02054

Cell: (814) 380 – 1556

Email: brenna.m.johnson@gmail.com

Curriculum Project Overview

Word Count: 502

I began *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project* in Term 2 of Semester 1 at Franklin High School Franklin, MA in late November 2013 and it concluded during the second week of January. This multilayered project was completed in a beginning level sculpture course that included 14 students spanning grades 9-12; 3 of which were honors students. In addition to this, 4 students were on an Individualized Education Plan and 2 of them came from sub-separate programs within FHS; The Bi-County Collaborative and The Special Education Program. While this class was small, it was populated by a diversity of learners who had different academic and creative capabilities.

In part one, *preparation*, students read Judy Chicago's short commentary online titled *On Being a Feminist Artist in The Twenty First Century* and then, as a class, we discussed Chicago's comments on what is feminist art, can men be feminists, and how can art be a voice for change. Then, the students watched *The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition* in class connecting to *Encounter 10: The Artists Voice*. At the conclusion of the video, with a better understanding of Judy Chicago's *artwork* we 1) reflected on the tour; 2) the women included in *The Dinner Party*; 3) the collaborative nature of Chicago's artwork; and 4) we began to discuss the role of the dinner table in each student's life. Using a handout I created from information found in *Encounter 1, 2, 8, and 10* the class began to work through guiding questions in the preparation of making their own soft sculpture.

In part two, *process* using information in *Encounter 2: Extending the Invitation* students answered the question:

“Who are you going to invite to join *The Dinner Party Project* and why? She can be famous, anonymous, from the United States or abroad, living, or someone from history?”

Using questions from *Encounter 2*, students completed online research in class, chose a woman to focus on, and strategized on how to *symbolically/metaphorically* represent her in sculpture. To supplement this work, I employed the ideas embedded in *Encounter 3: What is Feminism* and highlighted two women included in *The Dinner Party* helping students better understand how/why the Women's Movement came into being and why there has always been a need for activism. To do this, I discussed Sojourner Truth and her work as an African American abolitionist and women's right activist and then I discussed the work of Margaret Sanger and read the class her treaty *My Fight for Birth Control*, 1931 prompting Sanger to become a champion for women's reproductive rights.

In part three, *artmaking*, students moved from sketching, idea development, and creative problem solving to the design of an individual soft sculpture. Then, at the conclusion of the project, we came full circle and the students revisited *Encounters 1, 2, 8* and *10* writing about their invited guest. In the end, this was a type of thinking and art making my students had never encountered before and I believe they benefited greatly from this endeavor.

Narrative Description

Word Count: 2500

I feel an enormous power in the decisions I make as an artist and educator in terms of what I put into my curriculum, what I leave out, and how I engage with all the diverse learners that enter my classroom in terms of individual voice and authority. This power that I hold continuously shapes my work as a 38 year art teacher in her second year of public school teaching. It is true, that I have lived several professional lives before becoming a full time teacher and those experiences bring both confidence and fear. Confidence in the fact that my professional history and education has prepared me for this work and fear in the notion that high school students are distracted by modern technology, after school commitments, college aspirations, friends, and parents. I contend with these issues each day I step into G137 at Franklin High School. As a long-term sub in October 2013 turned full-time teacher this past August I inherited a classroom and curriculum that were strong and produced good artwork but I have consistently asked myself “where is the diversity, where are the women and minority artists, where are the politics of today.” Therefore, I will discuss my responsibilities as an art teacher, the implementation of the online *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project*, and my strategies for moving forward within this paper.

I am responsible for teaching most of the 3D studio art courses including Ceramics and Sculpture then bounce in between Intro to Art, Portfolio, and Advanced 3D Art when our enrollments in art classes shift at Franklin. As I have thought about each established curriculum in the courses I am responsible for my belief in feminist pedagogy is always with me. Villaverde (2008) states: “pedagogy is an emancipatory process; it is about identity formation and the development of critical consciousness and political awareness.” I have begun to incorporate a feminist pedagogy into my teaching and learning *quietly* as a new teacher through 1) curriculum - by introducing women and minority artists in several units of instruction that explore issues of race, class, and gender in their artwork and 2) by creating a learning environment where students voices are valued, where they are empowered, and where their individual experiences are important but that is not enough? Therefore, finding the Judy Chicago *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project* online gave me a stronger feminist platform to work from. It gave me a forum in which to teach more critically focusing on the key tenants of a feminist classroom which are dialogue, reflection, and creative problem solving that produces a more political education – an education where my students and I can discuss and validate the experiences of woman and minorities both past and present.

To accomplish this work, I adapted several *Encounters* as they are termed from the online *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project* into the unit of instruction I titled *Judy Chicago Reinvented through Soft Sculpture* that spanned five weeks during Term 2 of Semester 1. The **curriculum objective** for this project was 1) to raise awareness of feminist art and the work of Judy Chicago,

2) to promote women's experiences and contributions to society both past and present, and 3) to teach students how to create soft sculpture employing artmaking practices of Claes Oldenburg.

In class one and two, the **introductory objectives** were 1) students will develop a definition of feminist art; 2) students will learn about Chicago's reasoning for making *The Dinner Party*; and finally 3) students will understand why Chicago choose certain women to be a part of *The Dinner Party*. To begin this work, students read Judy Chicago's short commentary online titled *On Being a Feminist Artist in The Twenty First Century* and as a class, we discussed Chicago's notion of feminist art. Most students were unsure of what to say because they rarely engage with controversial topics such as feminism. Therefore, I supplied the class with a handout (documentation # 3 below) drawing information from *Encounters 1, 2, 8, and 10* that allowed students to begin analyzing Chicago's ideas and artwork through their own writings. The students were more comfortable with this form of analysis and then we shared it we each other. For example, Bryanna, a sophomore, wrote after the reading (in documentation #1), "feminist art is an art that reaches out and affirms women, validates our experiences and makes us feel good about ourselves" which was a strong analysis on Chicago's view of art. Then, in discussing the role of the dinner table in each of my student's lives Evan, an honors sophomore wrote (documentation #2):

"Most of the time: my sister, my dad, and I eat dinner together on weekends and often times weekdays. Most of the time: my sister, my dad, and I eat dinner together since my mom is home too late on weekdays. On weekends my mom cooks family meals and we eat together....The table is rectangular, brown, and scratched up since it was bought used...To have a place at a table is the have a location at which you consistently sit at. This location is recognized by the other users of the table.

Here Evan astutely recognizes what transpires at the dinner table in his family, how place means power, and then concludes his analysis suggesting that dinner tables are "like altars – an elevated space in which more supposedly important objects rest and supposedly more important tasks are done." This perspective is insightful for a sophomore in high school and this recognition of place and power have grown from his engagements with *The Dinner Party* which were exciting to witness.

Then, the class watched *The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition* found on YouTube drawing from *Encounter 8: Investigating Meaning*. Using the accompanying handout (Documentation #3), students continued to develop a clear understand of Chicago and *The Dinner Party*.

Sculpture
Semester 1- Term 2
Ms. Johnson

Judy Chicago – Beginning Steps

- Describe a table with which you are familiar. What is its shape? How is it used?

- When and why do you sit at tables?
- What are some of your personal experiences with being around a table?
- How do people interact around this table?
- Who is the head the table and why?
- What does it mean to have “a place at the table”
- How have tables functioned in your life? In the lives of people you know?
- What different shapes might a table take? How might the shape of a table influence what people do and how they interact?
- Does everyone have the same experience with tables or at tables?

The Artwork in Question

The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago - Housed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art

https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/

Questions from the Film

1. How many place settings are included in *The Dinner Party*, how was the table organized, who was included on each side of the triangle, and why do you think the table is shaped as a triangle?
2. How was *The Dinner Party* made, by whom, and what materials were used, and how long did it take?
3. Describe **one place setting** included in *The Dinner Party* and the woman it was dedicated too. Use the website above to talk about the woman and her place setting.
4. Who are you going to invite to join *The Dinner Party* project and why? She can be famous, anonymous, from the United States or abroad, living, or someone from history.

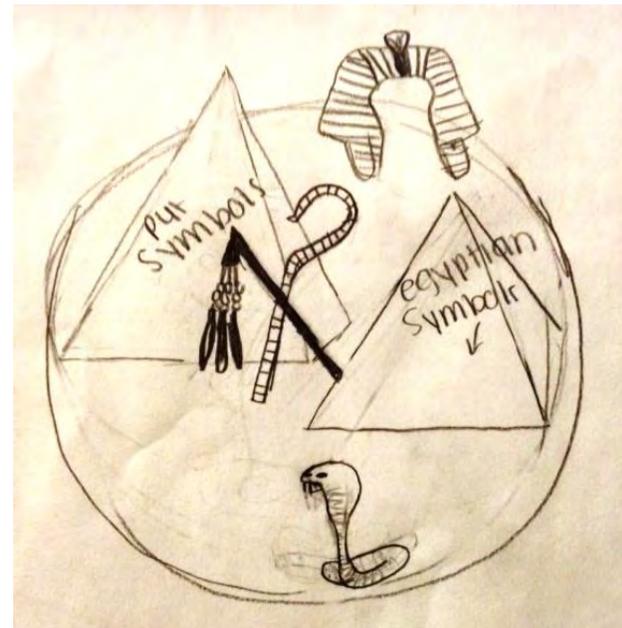
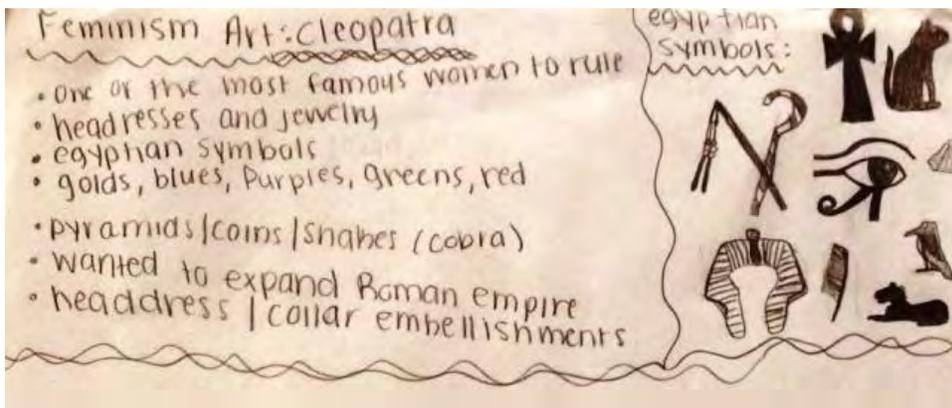
Questions to Consider:

- How would you build a sculpture that **symbolizes** this woman?
 - Did she make a worthwhile contribution to society that should be highlighted?
 - Did/does her life embody some kind of achievement?
5. How does Judy Chicago define feminist art and does she believe that men can make feminist art?

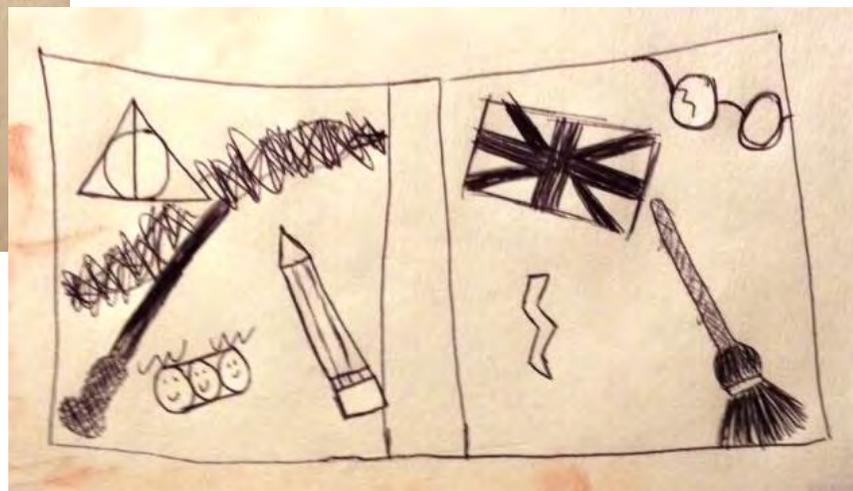
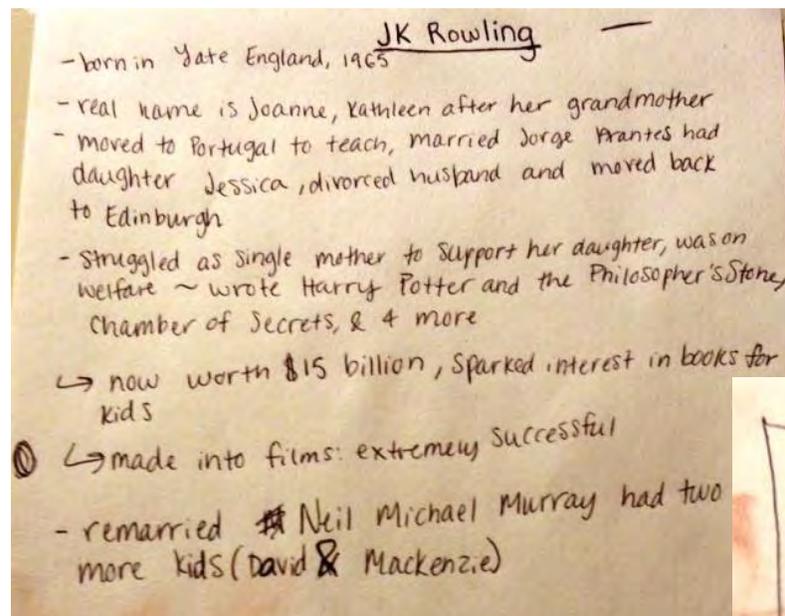
In class four, drawing from *Encounter 3: What is Feminism* I highlighted two women included in *The Dinner Party* with the **objective** of teaching students about the Women’s Movement and the need for continued activism. First, I highlighted Sojourner Truth and her work as an African American abolitionist and women’s right activist. I discussed the challenges she faced as both a slave and mother. Then, I discussed Truth’s ability to emancipate herself from slavery and her transition from an evangelist to a voice for women and minorities. I shared with the class [Kerry Washington’s](#) interpretation of Truth’s seminal speech in 1851 where she spoke to a gathering of feminists in Akron, Ohio. I hoped the power of Truth’s words would help the class better understand the early struggle that both women and women of color faced in this country. Then, moving to 1931 I discussed Margaret Sanger and read the class her treaty titled *My Fight for Birth Control* found in *Women’s Voices: Feminist Visions* (2008). Here we learn of Sanger’s experiences assisting poor women giving birth in New York City and her realization that women had the right to know about family planning options. This supplemental work was to assist students in making strong invitations to *The Dinner Party*.

In the next series of classes, students revisited questions 4 and 5 from the handout above and completed additional research and sketching working from *Encounter's 1 and 2*. The **research and planning objective** was 1) students will complete research on a woman they wanted to invite to *The Dinner Party*, 2) students will draft and sketch ideas for their soft sculpture highlighting symbols and metaphors that would represent this women well, and 3) students will share their work with the class. The documentation #4 and #5 below are examples of this work by two students; one invited Cleopatra because of her strength as a leader, intellect, and commitment to keeping her country free and the other invited J.K Rolling because of the gender obstacles she met within the publishing world when trying to publish her first *Harry Potter* book.

Documentation #4: A sophomore's research on Cleopatra and working sketch for her sculpture.



Documentation #5: A sophomore's research on J.K Rolling and working sketch for her soft sculpture.



Other students in the course chose to extend an invitation to the Buddhist Tara because as woman she represented strength; Oprah Winfrey, because of her work with girls in Africa; Amelia Earhart, who was the first female pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic; Manon Rheaumf, the first and only female hockey player to play in an NHL exhibition game; Lady Gaga for her independent spirit; Ellen DeGeneres, for her pioneering work an television as an openly gay woman; and finally Helen Keller, because of her work as an activist, lecturer, and author. Each of these women made and continues to make important contributions to society that benefits both the young and the old and men and woman. Furthermore, these guests embody Chicago's thesis for *The Dinner Party* in that they each struggle/ed to find their own place at the table in their career, sport, or religion. These are strong invitations that were fortified by the classes work with the online content in *Encounters 1, 2, 3, 8, and 10*.

In the **construction objective**, students were required to transform 2 to 3 symbolic or metaphorical images into a soft sculpture that represented their invited guest. After each student developed a working sketch and we discussed it together they learned how to design paper stencils then they transformed white cotton fabric, heat tape, shredded office paper, and acrylic paint into multiple sculptural components. Each of these individual components were anchored onto a shaped base influenced by the students invited guest. In the end, it took the class several weeks to make a series of objects that were painted, stuffed, and attached to a base. All of this work was support by *Encounter 2: Extending the Invitation*. Finally, I chose these materials of this project because I believed they were the complete opposite of the clay and glaze used to make the 39 plates in *The Dinner Party* prompting a new interpretation of Chicago's artwork. The documentation below #5, #6, and #7 show the progression of this work and the finished sculpture.

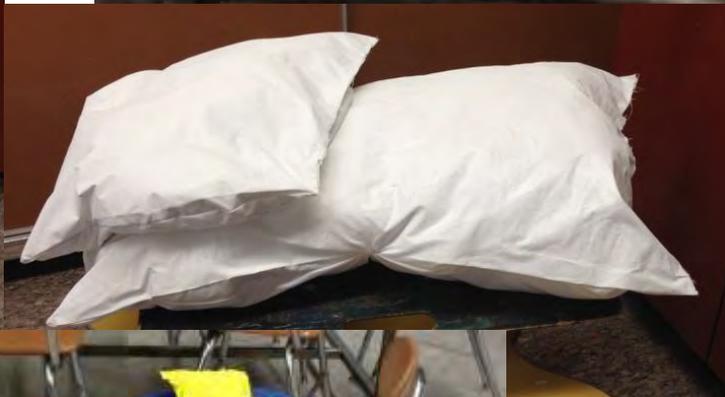
Documentation #5: Cleopatra – Made by a sophomore.



Documentation #6: The Buddhist Tara – Made by a sophomore.



Documentation #7: J.K Rolling – Made by a sophomore.



Finally, in the **unit assessment**, students were asked to review the journey they made within *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project* revisiting *Encounters 1, 2, 8* and *10*. They had to complete the handout below as a homework assignment (documentation #9) reflecting back on their work in this unit of instruction. Then, with this handout and the FHS art department rubric the students were graded on their artwork.

Ms. Johnson
Sculpture
Semester 1 – Term 2

Directions:

Please use 5 to 8 sentences to answer each of these questions in Times New Roman and 12 point type with 1.25 margins.

Project Reflection on Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party

1. Describe the woman you focused on in the soft sculpture you made. Then, why do you believe this individual is important enough to be added to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* in comparison to the 39 other woman already represented? Use specific examples from The Brooklyn Museum's website to answer this question.
http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
2. Who would this woman sit in between or next to in Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and why? Use specific examples from The Brooklyn Museum's website to answer this question.
http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
3. What symbols or metaphors did you choose to focus on in the soft-sculpture you made and how do they connect back to the woman you focused on? And describe how the materials you used including acrylic paint and mix-media strengthen those connections.
4. Please *Google* the name of the modern artist **Claes Oldenburg** and tell me about his life and artwork. Then, choose one work of art documenting the title, date, and materials he used to make that work of art. Then draw/color the image below.
5. Do you see any commonalities between your soft sculpture and the artwork of Claes Oldenburg? Give specific examples.

In the end, it should be clear that my students 1) raised their awareness of feminist art and the work of Judy Chicago, 2) promoted women's experiences and contributions to society both past and present, and 3) learned how to create a soft sculpture applying the artmaking practices of Claes Oldenburg. Furthermore, by using several of the *Encounters* from *The Dinner Party Curriculum Project* as a facilitator for a feminist pedagogy my students made artwork that is political, engaged and relevant, which inspires me as a new public school art teacher. I am emboldened by the richness of this work and plan to continue to bring this type of thinking and artmaking into my classroom. Therefore, I want to thank Judy Chicago and Penn State for helping make this possible and I would close by saying, this curriculum is an invaluable tool for twenty-first century learning.

Resources

Villaverde,L. *Feminist Pedagogy and Activism*. In *Feminist theories and education*. New York. Peter Lang. 2008. pp.119-142.