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“Judy Chicago’s Song of Songs: Toward a New Queer Feminism”

Presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston

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This paper emerged from a summer of research at the University of Cambridge funded by a Harvard University Rockefeller Grant and the Mellon Mays Fellowship Program. An earlier iteration was originally published in NOTES Magazine, Cambridge, and will be expanded upon in an upcoming interview project with Judy Chicago for the journals *Big, Red, and Shiny* (April) and *Art New England* (August).

A professor once said to me, “Why are people *still* talking about Judy Chicago?” Chicago’s artistic practice, as well as the tenets of second wave feminism that it has come to represent, are viewed as increasingly retrograde. It is the aim of this conference to reevaluate this moment, and I argue that Chicago’s practice leaves us with many more productive questions than simple answers. History is not a single linear progression, and it is our responsibility to consider methods to incorporate and expand upon past battles in a productive way.

The *Dinner Party*, first conceived in 1973, has become an icon not only of feminist art, but also of second wave feminism. It consists of an enormous triangular place setting, 48 feet on each side. In addition to the 39 mythical and famous historical women throughout time represented by place settings, there are 999 women’s names inscribed on its tiled floor. Each setting also has an embroidered table runner with representations of each of the 39 women’s achievements.

An offshoot of Judy Chicago’s feminist art education program at Fresno State and the California Institute of the Arts, the first of its kind, the piece represents many, many hours of volunteer labor. It was shown all over the world before its permanent installation in the Brooklyn Museum of Art. By 2007, the piece had garnered a viewing audience estimated at 1 million

people. It was even debated on the floor of the Senate, with many congressmen condemning it for being pornographic.

The Dinner Party has been constantly cited as a milestone of feminism and modern art. Entirely handcrafted, each place setting recalls the early second wave feminist interest in the vulva as a revolutionary representational site, as well as the deconstructive power of historically feminine art-making methods. This was directly opposed to the modernist ideal of the lone male painter working alone in his studio – the *Dinner Party* represented many different hands, most of whom were inspired by consciousness raising groups centered on specifically feminine expression. As Chicago stated in 1975, “I wanted to express what it was like to be organized around a central core, my vagina, that which made me a woman.”

As a result, her work has run into criticism for its particular viewpoint on womanhood, especially as gender studies developed as a result of poststructuralist and intersectional critiques. It could be said that *The Dinner Party* embodies the urge to unite women under an unstable category of femininity. In its celebration of the body in connection with women’s history, *The Dinner Party* presents a unified vision of Woman, which produces not only a corporeal connection among all female-bodied people, but also the conflation of personal stories into a constructed narrative. Some critics have considered this type of feminist expression to be an erasure, an essentialist vision of womanhood that is tied to the perceived shortcomings of Second Wave Feminism. In this way, the celebration of physicality and collectivity *as women* has been derided as an imperfect platform from which to advocate for women’s rights. *The Dinner Party* has come to represent what is seen as a flawed feminism that lacks an investment in deconstructive visions of gender and sexuality.

Central to the criticism of Chicago's work is the concept of gender and sex as culturally-produced and ultimately unsustainable products of constructed knowledge. The political implications of this shift are enormous. For instance, the now canonical article by Anne-Marie Slaughter in *The Atlantic* tells women that feminism itself perpetuates quixotic hopes for the chance to successfully manage personal, professional, and familial duties. These sentiments represent a trend in academic and activist discourse in the United States. Any talk of gender-based coalitions became associated with an underdeveloped, exclusionary notion of feminism, and analyses based on similarities among women as a group are almost immediately rejected as insubstantial and reductive. Women are constantly being described in terms of their unity with respect to various social and political issues, yet, with increasing prominence, they are being told that the bonds that hold them together are based upon a dangerous lie. Even as women unite around policies, both gendered and non-gendered, that are directly relevant to their lives, they are told that "feminism" is no longer a viable basis for identity formation or political action.

It is indeed important to look at the limitations of feminism as it has come to us today, especially with regard to race and sexuality. Many voices have been left out of the Second Wave legacy, and the attempt to complicate that narrative is part of the revolutionary task of expanding discussions of identity politics. But post-feminism and postmodern critique erects a new set of boundaries by disqualifying "womanhood" and "femininity" as acceptable categories for self-identification and critique. Moreover, this understanding posits that the call for equality advanced by feminism is now irrelevant, that the problem is either solved already or too big to solve at all. What about women whose self-definition *as women* is as dear as life itself, and what can be said for continued discrimination against women, *as women*, as female-bodied, feminine individuals? It could be that, in rejecting unity based on gender or physical sex, one forecloses

the possibility of meaningful connections produced by a celebration of womanhood as a personal, daily, physical joy. Freedom to appreciate one's gender *as such* has been traditionally denied to women. Chicago removes that barrier and provides the inspiration for a unifying, though deeply individual, experience that rests upon a vision of Woman as an inclusive web of interconnected memories and passions.

Where, then, is the line between the feminism of "the past" and "contemporary" feminism? If we understand history to be itself a subject, rife with starts and stops, echoes and memories, digging deeper into this relationship can help us understand the nuance inherent in our contemporary moment. Is Chicago's art and that of her contemporaries no longer relevant in an increasingly (and necessarily) complicated society that resists an association with the alleged shortsightedness of feminism's Second Wave? What are we to make of the progress we have made, and how can we incorporate Chicago's feminism into "postmodern" notions of gender and sexuality?

Chicago addresses the implications of this debate in her *Song of Songs* series, a set of lithograph prints created from 1997-1999 that illustrates the Biblical tale of love and eroticism. It consists of 12 paired prints, each image coupled with a piece of text from the Song of Songs. Wildly colored and meticulously drawn, the series, like the *Dinner Party*, represents a combination of conceptual and artistic rigor. Chicago visually retells the story of desire using a new translation that uses both male and female voices.

What defines *Song of Songs* is the sexual indeterminacy of the images. Though they are arranged by the gender of the speaker, the bodies that Chicago represents are decidedly unsexed, and there is no discernable hierarchy. What results is a process of linguistic subversion, an unabashed refusal to stabilize either the objects or subjects of desire.

She thereby acknowledges the process of sexual differentiation that defined Second Wave Feminism in the gendered voices of the Biblical speakers, even as she affirms the development of new conceptions of gender and sexuality in the indeterminate figures. There is thus a combination of a specifically feminine space, that which has been criticized for essentialism, with unmarked, insecure, bodies in flux. *Song of Songs* is the reenactment of the historical debates that plague women in this polemical age, and it brings together the binary-based concerns of earlier decades with the expanded, queer discourses of the present, without discounting the viability of either.

Chicago thus recounts the history of the feminist tradition of critique that has made so many indispensable gains, despite a contemporary urge to abandon, rather than expand and rethink, the tenets that produced such progress. Returning once again to history as itself a subject, the comparison between Chicago's early and later work allows for an approximation of a queer feminist history, one in which the center of history is at once centered and unfixed, singular and expansive. I mean this not only in reference to queerness as a mode of sexual expression, but also as a concomitant analytical tool that allows us to consider the interspaces of history - the procession of disparate, yet interconnected, moments that have resulted in present discussions. This is a moment not only of change over time, but also a conscious re-incorporation and adaptation of cultural and visual codes that results in a deeply impactful vision of feminist history as a multifaceted entity that defies a single lineage.

It is very appropriate, in conclusion, that this conference coincides with a year of programming to celebrate Chicago's 75th birthday. Her work will be on view in numerous international venues in 2014, including the Brooklyn Museum, the New Mexico Museum of Art, the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Jewish Museum, and

the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Her book, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*, will be available this month.

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