



# SUFFRAGETTE CITY:

## LOS ANGELES AS FEMINIST ART CENTER

BY BETTY ANN BROWN

Just as geopolitics conspired to establish Paris as the center of avant-garde art activity in the mid-nineteenth century, and then shifted that center to New York in the mid-twentieth century, so a unique confluence of artists, politics, and place came together in the early 1970s to make Los Angeles a major hub of feminist art. Analysis of this confluence is important not merely for feminists—and those interested in feminist issues—but for all interrogators of our current postmodern condition because, as Craig Owens asserted as long ago as 1983, the questions feminist artists have posed are central to the postmodern project.

### 1971: THE YEAR IT ALL BEGAN

1971 was a pivotal year in the history of Feminist Art. Linda Nochlin, an art historian who was teaching at Vassar College, overturned centuries of unquestioned male dominance of the art historical canon when she published "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *ARTnews*. In Washington D.C., when the Corcoran Biennial excluded female artists, a large group of women picketed the show; the Corcoran was forced to offer to host a conference on women artists. In New York, the new group WIA (Women in Art) protested commercial art galleries that refused to show women's work.

Feminist consciousness was exploding in California as well. A large group of women—eventually over 300 in number—formed the Los

Angeles Council of Women Artists to protest the discriminatory practices of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. They pointed to the dearth of women and artists of color in the permanent collection and in the current Art & Technology exhibition. At the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Judy Chicago founded the Feminist Art Program with New York painter Miriam Schapiro. At the same time, June Wayne began her Joan of Art workshops in her Hollywood studio. And a year later, Los Angeles feminist artist Betye Saar created an iconic assemblage that addressed media stereotypes of African American women.

### JUDY CHICAGO & THE WOMAN'S BUILDING

It is no accident that Chicago founded the Feminist Art Program in Southern California. Born Judy Cohen in Chicago in 1939, she came to Los Angeles to attend UCLA, receiving her MA in 1964. Within a few years, she was teaching art at Cal State Fresno, where she founded the first Feminist Art Program in 1970. And this is where Los Angeles comes into play: the following year, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) invited Chicago to join the faculty on its newly opened campus.

Although CalArts had been founded by Walt Disney in the 1960s to become the "CalTech of the arts," it did not move to its Valencia location until 1971. At that point, the faculty included such notables as



conceptual artist John Baldessari and the instigator of Happenings, Allan Kaprow. Also on the faculty was sculptor Lloyd Hamrol, the man Chicago had shared a Pasadena studio with for several years, and recently married. CalArts seemed like a great place for Chicago to base her feminist program.

Chicago began team-teaching her radical new pedagogy with New York painter Miriam Schapiro. Together, the two artists led a group of students through the shared process of creating *Womanhouse*, a series of female-identified installations in the rooms of a condemned house in Hollywood. The list of students who created *Womanhouse* rooms is impressive: Robin Mitchell, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding, and Nancy Youdelman, among many others. But the house was torn down, so the project was ephemeral.

It only took a short time for Chicago to realize that her feminist art program would not survive in the patriarchal enclaves of academia—no matter how avant-garde, accomplished, and welcoming the faculty. She left CalArts and began to think about creating an alternative structure for feminist art education. To this end, she recruited the input of art historian Arlene Raven (who died tragically in 2006) and graphic designer Shelia Levant de Bretteville (who is now head of the design program at Yale). Together, Chicago, Raven and de Bretteville founded the first independent art school for women, the Feminist Studio Workshop. By November of 1973, they opened a home for the FSW in what they called The Woman's Building, naming it after the edifice designed by architect Sophia Hayden for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Two years later, the Woman's Building moved to its permanent located on Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles. Remaining open until 1991, it was the longest-lived feminist art institution on the planet.

I became involved with the Woman's Building in 1985. As the mother of a very young son and on the verge of leaving a seriously troubled marriage, I found the all-female community as comforting as a warm bath. I ended up on the Board of Directors, and soon became president of the board. Everyone on the board was a feminist, and yet it could not have been a more diverse group of women. There were multi-millionaires and schoolteachers; very masculine lesbians and very feminine housewives; artists and businesswomen; Christians, Jews, pagans, and atheists. We lived the truth that there is no one feminism; there are many feminisms and they are often conflictual.

The multiplicity of feminisms made the institution inviting to a wide variety of artists and activists. The Woman's Building offered art classes, ran huge conferences, installed exhibitions, produced performances, published magazines, ran an offset printing press, housed artist studios, and honored accomplished women in annual gala events. The ultimate effect of all this programming was to build a vital feminist community in Los Angeles, one that educated and encouraged all kinds of women to express themselves creatively.

Here is one example of Woman's Building programming and the community it served: in 1979, Linda Vallejo was invited to the Woman's Building to oversee the funded project known as Madre Tierra Press. She and



OPPOSITE:

REMOVING THE SIGN FOR GRUBB & ELLIS FROM THE FORMER  
CHOUINARD BUILDING, THE FIRST LOCATION OF THE WOMAN'S BUILDING  
UNDATED, B/W PHOTO, 8" x 10"

ABOVE RIGHT:

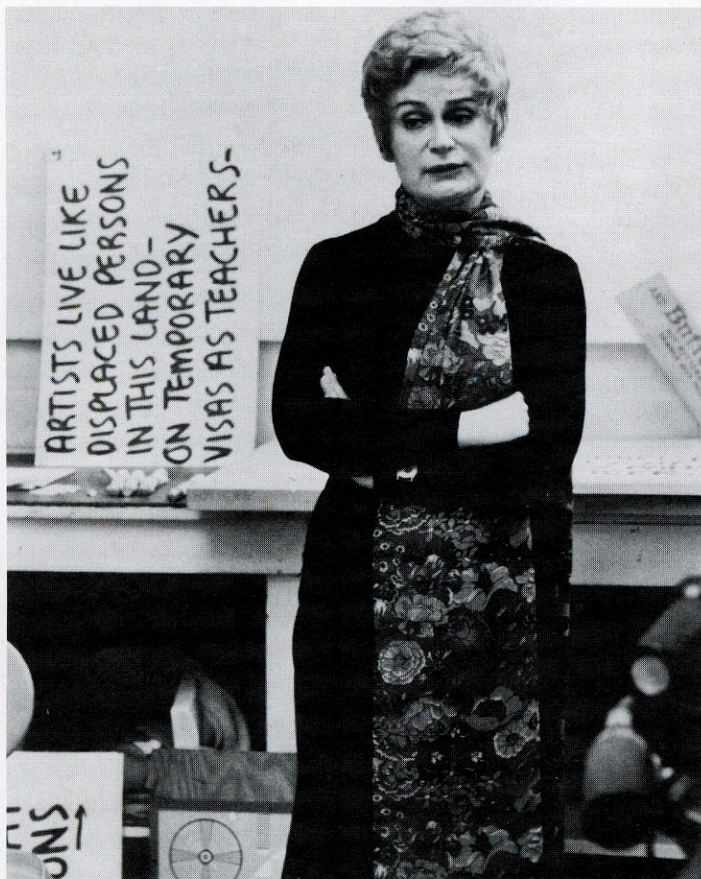
LINDA VALLEJO AND OLIVIA SANCHEZ USING A LETTERPRESS  
PART OF THE MADRE TIERRA PRESS PROJECT  
c. 1982, 8" x 10"

BILLS OF RIGHTS BY FEMINIST ART WORKERS  
PERFORMED AT "ART OF THE WOMAN'S BUILDING" SHOW, 1980

"POWER PLAY"  
LECTURE BY JUDY CHICAGO  
1987

PHOTO: COURTESY WOMAN'S BUILDING IMAGE  
ARCHIVE AT THE OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN LIBRARY





thirteen other Chicanas created a series of image and text volumes depicting the Chicano community and women's relation to it. Vallejo facilitated the collaborative genesis of images and texts. They oversaw the plate design, transfer of photographic images to the metal plates, use of letterpress, and printing of the final plates. Among the participants was Yreina Cervantes, who went on to expand her career through use of the identity-focused art she developed in the program. Vallejo, whose own art work was featured in several exhibitions at the Woman's Building and who served on the Board of Directors for several years, went on to become a prominent artist and community activist.

In spite of its notable successes and considerable contributions to feminist art education, the Los Angeles Woman's Building closed in 1991. The last FSW classes were offered in spring of that year. The Woman's Building Board remained active: the Woman's Building papers were placed at the Archives of American Art; and the slides were housed at Otis Art Institute and digitized by the Getty Research Institute. Otis Art Institute will host the exhibition "Doing It in Public: Feminism and the Art of the Woman's Building" as part of the Pacific Standard Time series of exhibitions, from October 2011 through January 2012.

#### JUNE WAYNE & JOAN OF ART

Rather than engage in protests in front of a museum or work within the confines of an academic institution, the ever-rebellious artist June Wayne articulated her feminist politics in a practical hands-on way: she determined to teach women how to negotiate the business of the art world. Born in Chicago in 1918, Wayne had always been both an artist and an activist. She traveled to Washington D.C. to testify on behalf of the WPA in 1938, after a member of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities (HUAC, then known as the Dies Committee), claimed he had "startling evidence" that both the Theater and Writing Projects of the WPA were "hotbed[s] of Communists." In part because of the chilling effect of the Dies Committee hearings and headlines about 'red artists,' the WPA was formally ended by presidential decree in 1942.

After Wayne moved to Los Angeles in 1945, she continued her political work in support of the arts. In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy

WAYNE CALLED HER WORKSHOP "BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL PROBLEMS OF WOMEN ARTISTS" BUT THE PARTICIPANTS DUBBED IT THE "JOAN OF ART" SEMINAR SERIES AND THE NAME STUCK. WAYNE TRAINED THE FIRST GROUP OF WOMEN AND INSISTED THAT THEY, IN TURN, OFFER SEMINARS TO OTHER WOMEN.

"JUNE WAYNE KCET SET," 1972

PHOTO: BETTY FISKE, COURTESY JUNE WAYNE

began his anti-Communist "Red Scare." It spread to California almost immediately. In 1952, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Department sponsored an art festival in ten city parks. In protest of the exhibitions' avant-garde content, city councilman Harold Harby and his Coordinating Committee of Traditional Art issued a statement asserting that the modernist artists "were being unconsciously used as tools of the Kremlin." Wayne went to the hearing held in response to Harby's outrageous assertions, where she joined the large group of Los Angeles artists challenging the councilman's allegations and working to support creative freedom.

Fast forward to 1971. Fresh off her decade-long experience with Tamarind, Wayne realized that informing women artists about professional practices would empower them. She decided to do so in an innovative, interactive workshop. She invited twenty women artists to participate. Together, they discussed how to present themselves, how to approach a gallery, how to deal with contracts and budgets, and interact with art critics.

Wayne called her workshop "Business and Professional Problems of Women Artists" but the participants dubbed it the "Joan of Art" seminar series and the name stuck. Wayne trained the first group of women and insisted that they, in turn, offer seminars to other women. As Arlene Raven notes, it was "a strategy for building community that would not be based solely on the fixed roles of leader and followers."

Wayne only led the Joan of Art seminar—a series of ten meetings—one time. However, the price of taking the seminar was that participants had to recreate it; each attendee was instructed to give the seminar to at least one other group of people. Wayne describes the process as "self-amplifying" and indeed, the seminar continued for several years after her initial tutelage.

Wayne used a feminist "discussion method teaching" as her pedagogical approach. As the workshop leader, she would introduce a subject, talk about it for ten to fifteen minutes, and the rest of the evening would be spent in group discussion and role-playing. As Wayne noted, the leader's role in the discussion is twofold: she must correct errors of fact and she needs to make sure no one dominates





the discussion. "Talk to people," the artist asserts, "and they learn ten percent. But in group discussions, they retain much more." Not only do students retain more, they enjoy it more: the Joan of Art participants "ate up the material like the finest Godiva chocolates."

One member of the original Joan of Art group was now famed Los Angeles performance artist Rachel Rosenthal. A classically trained actress, Rosenthal was particularly adept at role-playing. Wayne remembers, "Rachel made a big impact on me. When she play-acted the role of dealer, she didn't miss an opportunity to be sadistic and nasty while appearing to adore you." Further, the interactive teaching techniques Rosenthal learned in the seminar influenced the development of her improvisational performance process known as DBD (Doing By Doing).

#### BETYE SAAR, BAM & AUNT JEMIMA

Los Angeles feminist art has often been relegated to what is known as the "second phase" of the Feminist Art Movement, wherein women sought to rediscover women lost to history and to honor what they believed to be the essential nature of femaleness. This is certainly how Judy Chicago's monumental *The Dinner Party* (created between 1974 and 1979 in a warehouse in Santa Monica) has always been interpreted. However, I would like to suggest that examination of one of Betye Saar's major assemblage works indicates that some Los Angeles feminist artists were engaged in the later phase of feminism that interrogates how female identity is constructed.

Saar was born in Pasadena in 1926, and educated at UCLA and Cal State Long Beach. In the 1960s, she was active in the Black Art Movement (BAM). At that time, she began collecting folk art and advertising images of racial stereotypes.

In 1968, Saar went to a Joseph Cornell exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art, and was inspired by Cornell's work to begin constructing similar assemblage boxes. Instead of Cornell's nostalgic memorabilia, Saar deployed the box form to deconstruct stereotypes. Her *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* from 1972 combines a cast iron doorstop portraying a "Happy Mammy" black servant with a post card of a black woman holding a screaming white baby. The "Happy Mammy" stands on a floor of cotton. In addition to holding a broom for cleaning the white man's house, she is armed with rifle. At her feet is a large fist, clenched in the gesture of Black Power. The back of the shallow box is lined with labels from Aunt Jemima maple syrup bottles, their faces reflected repeatedly in the mirrors on the sides of the boxes. It is a powerful visual parallel of the repetition that stereotypes depend on. It is also a canny anticipation of the kind of investigation of how media images construct identity that dominated so much art in the 1980s.

#### WHY LOS ANGELES?

Los Angeles became a major center of the burgeoning feminist art movement in the 1970s because of three reasons. First was the confluence of remarkable artists, including Judy Chicago, Linda Vallejo, June Wayne, and Betye Saar, among many others. The second involved institutional opportunities, from UCLA (where Chicago was trained) to CalArts (where her Feminist Art Program was welcomed) to the Los Angeles Woman's Building (founded by feminist artists themselves). Third was the history of radical politics in California, a history that had been firmly connected to art world protests in 1952, when the Los Angeles city council discussed progressive artists as "tools of the Kremlin." The personal, institutional, and political environment proved fertile for the growth of feminist artists who claimed their personal as political and gave it resonant visual form for decades.

ABOVE LEFT:

JANUARY 1977

BETYE SAAR IN HER LAUREL CANYON STUDIO

PHOTO: LEZLEY SAAR, COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK

LEFT:

"BLACK GIRL'S WINDOW," 1969, **Betye Saar**

MIXED MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE, 35 3/4" x 18" x 1 1/2"

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

PHOTO: COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK

