Rethinking the Monumental:
The Museum as Feminist Space in the *Sexual Politics* Exhibition, 1996

by

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Rethinking the Monumental: The Museum as Feminist Space in the Sexual Politics Exhibition, 1996

Devon P. Larsen

ABSTRACT

Rethinking the monumental suggests not only a reconsideration of Judy Chicago’s controversial installation The Dinner Party (1979)--as displayed in the group feminist art exhibition, Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History--but also refers to an unfixing of the monumental position of power afforded the museum and a re-invigoration of the debate in feminist visual art regarding the use of the female body. I use the Sexual Politics exhibition, curated by Amelia Jones for the University of California at Los Angeles Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center (1996) as an indicator of the museum as feminist space. Sexual Politics’ controversial reception by both the feminist community and mainstream critics provokes discussion for how the exhibition’s contradictions are part of the exhibition’s success.

I uncover that the museum has always been an important factor in the validity of The Dinner Party. Nevertheless, neither the curator nor critic (exemplified by the Christopher Knight’s 1996 review) of Sexual Politics goes far enough to exploit the museum factor as part of their re-readings of The Dinner Party.

I note that the exhibition backdrop, the contemporary art museum, is experiencing a crisis in representation in regards to its audience. Guiding institutional models originally identified by Duncan Cameron (1971) in essay Museum: Temple or Forum? prove suspect as the museum embarks toward a more self-reflexive sense of power in the postmodern museum.
Janet Wolff’s essay *Reinstating Corporeality* serves as a point of departure from which to explore the action of museum exhibition as the site suitable for corporeal reinstatement for feminism. Exhibition elements of artwork, audience and environment act as partners in a metaphoric postmodern dance. This view supposes foreclosure on the debate of essentialism in regards to the corporeal in the feminist visual arts through themes and criticisms associated with *The Dinner Party*. Jones sets out in her exhibition to contribute to the historicization of feminist art. This thesis looks at that initiative and suggests the museum exhibition, as the medium for this historicization, is an integral element to the success of the process.
Introduction

Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History is the worst exhibition I’ve seen in a Los Angeles museum in many a moon. It’s a shame, too, given the significance of the show.¹

From organization to reception, the Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition at the Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center, University of California at Los Angeles showed amid a flurry of controversy. The 1996 exhibition returned The Dinner Party installation to a forum for public viewing after a seven-year hiatus, this time in the context of artwork by fifty-six other women artists whose artwork, dating from 1960 to 1994, focused on women’s status in patriarchy. From six feminist artists who refused to participate in the exhibition—one of whom pulled her work from the show just before opening—to a scathing review and editorial response in the Los Angeles Times, the Sexual Politics exhibition incited almost as much debate in the 1990s as its principal artwork The Dinner Party had in its solo debut in 1979.²

In this thesis, I suggest that, in spite of harsh review and some artists’ reluctance to participate, Sexual Politics successfully promoted feminist discourse by opening opportunities for artists to combine the social construction of femininity with material experience of the corporeal woman. This study brings together disciplines of inquiry usually kept separate. Feminists have considered the artwork included in Sexual Politics; furthermore, the field of Museum Studies has regarded the museum for its position of power. However, few discussions of feminist art have focused on the conditions of the

¹ Christopher Knight, “Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’,” Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Full text), May 2 1996.
art museum’s affect in specific exhibitions. Feminist theorist Griselda Pollock’s belief that curatorial practice is an important arena for feminist interventions in art history informs my project. She writes:

If, as I have argued elsewhere, the model for modern art history is curatorial, shaped by categories of museal classification and conservation, it is here that we must intervene to elaborate other visualities and rhetorics—not of display but of encounter and shock that owe more to Walter Benjamin than to Wolfflinian oppositions that have structured the modern museum and art history lecture. History is not chronology; there are other temporalities than those that pass as linear and progressive time.³

Pollock’s statement alludes to an engagement with objects that favors an understanding of spatial suppositions in the museum rather than one-to-one comparisons in traditional art-historical lectures, or strict chronological ordering in art history textbooks.

I consider the ensemble of the Sexual Politics exhibition as a subject in itself, rather than focusing on individual works in the exhibition. In the examination of the exhibition, I wish not to replace the criticisms of The Dinner Party, or the larger context of Sexual Politics, with quid pro quo rebuttals. Rather I explore how these criticisms operated to deny feminism a consideration of its history, and I suggest that revisiting the controversies surrounding The Dinner Party was an important move for feminist politics in the 1990s. This group exhibition addresses artworks of similar subject—women’s position in patriarchy as evident in issues of domesticity, sexuality, and parenting—brought out in The Dinner Party. Through the exhibition, I can evaluate the role of the museum environment in re-imagining the female body for feminism.

Created with the help of 400 collaborators from 1974-79 in Los Angeles, Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1979 and then traveled internationally, its last solo showing was an exhibition in Australia in 1988. The work itself (fig. 1) is a forty-nine foot triangular table with thirty-nine place settings, thirteen per side. Each place setting commemorates a woman in Western history with a unique ceramic plate and embroidered table runner. The table is set on a tiled floor (fig. 2) that commemorates in script the names of 999 other women throughout Western history.

The Sexual Politics exhibition grew out of Jones' desire to give The Dinner Party an assessment that considered the process by which it reached an isolated, iconic status. Curator Elizabeth Shepherd and Director Henry Hopkins of the Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center invited Amelia Jones to curate an exhibition of The Dinner Party for the first time in its origin city of Los Angeles. A renewed interest in The Dinner Party following a national public debate on obscenity sparked a desire to return it to exhibition. In 1990, the United States Congress identified Judy Chicago's Dinner Party plates as pornographic. The ensuing controversy prevented the donation of the artwork to the University of the District of Columbia, whose federally supplemented budget was under review. Hopkins and Shepard created a new opportunity to evaluate the controversies that developed around this feminist artwork since its initial opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, throughout the eighties as the exhibition

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5 Ibid., 21.
traveled throughout the world in both museum and alternative spaces, and in the 1990s, as it lay in storage due failed attempts to find a permanent home for the work in a museum collection.

*Sexual Politics* explored how *The Dinner Party*s historical designations reflect and affect contemporary feminist discourse. The work was isolated by Modernists critics such as Hilton Kramer describing the artwork as ‘kitsch’ and singled-out by feminist art historians Lisa Tickner, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock as essentialist in the early 1980s. My analysis focuses on the location for the re-examination, the museum, and the format, the group exhibition, giving political weight to material comparisons rather than reputation to reassess *The Dinner Party*’s paradoxical position as both institutional monument and pariah of the art world.

*The Dinner Party* project was a result of Southern Californian feminist discourse and art developed in the early 1970s. Artists in Judy Chicago’s circle such as Miriam Schapiro and the students of the Feminist Art Program at Cal State developed visual languages to represent their own identities, identities that included treatment of sexuality. A new visual symbology of women’s sexuality was designed to encourage and affirm women expressing their thoughts and feelings on subjects typically denied a public forum such as menstruation, menopause, childrearing and sexual gratification. Later, these ‘celebratory’ visual languages that identified Woman in metaphoric body imagery were labeled essentialist because they appeared to distill her to biology.

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Artwork encompassing women’s sexuality that utilized symbolic shorthand for women’s experiences risked reducing women to a Universal essence dictated by sexual difference. In 1981, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in Old Mistresses made a distinction in feminist art techniques between Judy Chicago’s vulvar imagery first explicitly shown in the peeled back petals of Female Rejection Drawing (1974) (fig. 3), later aggrandized in the Dinner Party plates, and Mary Kelly’s textual narratives in Post-Partum Document (1979), (fig. 4). For Pollock and Parker, Chicago’s vulvar imagery was indicative of the 1970s women’s movement that explored “female sensibility” to make visible a commonality among women through the depiction of female genitalia. Pollock and Parker took issue with artworks that employed vulvar imagery, “...because they do not rupture radically meanings and connotations of woman in art as body, as sexual, as nature, as object of male possession.”\(^\text{10}\) This discussion spawned a new era of feminism focusing on exposure of the underlying constructs of gender formation. Pollock and Parker advocated this textual technique to uncover the power operatives while disrupting opportunity for the male gaze.\(^\text{11}\) As an example of the ‘new’ textual era, Post-Partum Document subverted the naturalization of motherhood, in confessional writings, charts, and analyses that disallow co-optation of the mother’s image by avoiding direct imaging of the body.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Parker and Pollock, "Painted Ladies," 130.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 133.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 130.
This division of feminist art techniques, taking form in 1979 in the different approaches to the feminist art of Kelly and Chicago, was promoted in the 1980s. An early noteworthy call to feminist artists to investigate the inner workings of the existing social construction of femininity appears in an article by Sandy Flitterman and Judith Barry for the journal *Screen*. Flitterman and Barry situate feminist art within a more theoretical approach, in the essay, “Textual Strategies: the politics of art making.” They state:

*We are suggesting that a feminist art evolves from a theoretical reflection on representations: how the representation of women is produced, the way it is understood, and the social conditions in which it is situated.*

Flitterman and Barry are writing of a new drive in theoretical approaches to feminism at this point feminist visual art begins to separate its approaches into camps: celebration of a self-defined femininity and the interrogation of the existing patriarchal representation of the feminine. Joanna Frueh described the organization of generational stages for feminist visual art in *Towards a Feminist Theory of Art Criticism*. Frueh states that these stages, informed by a similar demarcation found in feminist literary criticism, separate approaches of feminist methodology into generational and geographical (British, French and American) distinctions. In this conception, the first stage of feminist visual art was characterized by the 1970s approach of researching and exhibiting the work of women artists in order to counter an erasure of their achievements from traditional art history. Frueh identifies second-stage feminism as the moment at which “female sensibility” is

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sought visible in art by women to foster a bond in a common visual language of women's experience. The third-stage of feminism adopts a more theoretical grounding that focuses on the cultural construction of femininity. This stage aspired to critique the language of patriarchy and questioned the Universalism inherent in the notion of “female sensibility” and its equation of women to their biology as upholder of patriarchal values.

In the 1990s, the third stage takes on new dimensions as the distancing from the 1970s celebratory approaches also took with it a visceral connection with women, replacing it with a textbook-oriented approach that alienated artists and viewers longing for solid ground in which to situate their activism. Katy Deepwell, Professor of Art History at the University of the Arts, London, and editor of the online and print feminist journal *n.paradoxa*, noted a predominance of what she describes as “scriptovisual work,” that is the use of poststructural narrative in feminist visual arts of the early to mid-eighties. In 1987, Deepwell suggested that feminism would benefit from making space for those artists working in 1970s humanistic approaches. I believe she feared the feminist visual art audience was in danger of being too narrowly conceived, thus losing some of the transformative power of the newly defined directions within the feminist movement.

Jones thought it a valuable revisionist exercise to promote continued interrogation of feminist art history. Despite Jones’s stating of her reasons for a contextualization of *The Dinner Party* in the catalog essays and in the didactics within the exhibition she admitted her curatorial project might be flawed by the monumental

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16 Ibid., 156.
17 *n.paradoxa* is an online feminist art journal, started in 1996 by Deepwell as a way to enrich the rising popularity of the internet with a site that engages debate of feminist art practice. Deepwell, in 1998, created a print edition of the journal as well: both formats are still active today. Maureen Connor, "Working Notes: Conversation with Katy Deepwell," *Art Journal* 61, no. 2 (2002).
19 Ibid.
stature of *The Dinner Party*, which commanded one floor of the museum.\textsuperscript{21} The monumental presence of *The Dinner Party* at times distracted from the underlying argument of many of the artworks assembled in *Sexual Politics* that reviewed representation of female sexuality throughout three decades of feminist art.\textsuperscript{22}

I view the thematically organized, group exhibition with this aspect in mind: that the exhibition could never be completely comprehensive. Issues indicating this condition are not considered failures in my evaluation but dynamic aspects of the exhibition’s message. They include: the declination of six prominent feminist artists—Joyce Kozloff, Mary Beth Edelson, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Spero, Joan Snyder and June Wayne (who pulled her work from the show after initially agreeing)—all from Judy Chicago’s era, to participate in the exhibition, for fear the exhibition reinforced a heroicization of Chicago and particularly *The Dinner Party*; the overwhelming size of *The Dinner Party*; and the exhibition’s appearance as woman’s art survey.\textsuperscript{23}

In the woman’s art survey scenario a separate history is formed that supplements rather than challenges the Art Canon. If *Sexual Politics* resembles a survey because it reviewed selections of three decades of woman’s art, it functioned more keenly as an analysis of the feminism of those decades. Feminism itself benefits from the questioning-in-hindsight by evaluating assumptions of 1970s feminist art. The exhibition embraces cross-generational assemblages of work, unsettling traditional artwork patrilineage master-student comparisons, through juxtapositions that upset typical chronological arrangements in the museum setting. The re-examination of 1970s celebratory images of the female body in accordance with textual works of 1980s poststructuralist feminism suggested continuity with refinement rather than divisions in feminist art.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 24-25.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 24.
Jones agreed to the exhibition of *The Dinner Party*, on the condition that it include artists from all the stages of feminism working on issues of sexuality, domesticity, and motherhood—a condition formulated in order to address a larger feminist art history perspective. She started the exhibition at *The Dinner Party*, isolated icon of the 1970s, to suggest a rethinking of feminist art history through examination for how the qualities of each generational stage of feminist art may be overdetermined. Jones wrote:

*I am motivated here not by a belief that something “true” of the 1970s has been violated and can be rediscovered, but rather by my specifically poststructuralist suspicion of interpretations that pose as objective and of the exclusions put into play by the formation of restrictive historical narrative*  

This exhibition was an example of how the 1990s feminist art exhibition could change the discourse of feminism, circumventing traditional categorical divisions by physically re-contextualizing a quintessential piece of 1970s feminist art to feminist art history; to once again make available artwork of an earlier women’s movement deemed essentialist as legitimate subject matter for current and future feminist practitioners.

*Sexual Politics* provided a way for the public to become vested in theoretical feminism. The museum’s inherent focus on the visual invites a clear picture of the ways that the construction of gender is evident in effects of the body. Janet Wolff’s essay, “Reinstating Corporeality” in *Feminine Sentences* (1990) influenced my reading of *Sexual Politics* by providing avenues to consider how the feminine body can work for feminism. Wolff suggests the possibility of an interrogation of the social construction of femininity from the point of the female corporeal for feminist art.  

She remarked, “There is every reason, too, to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of repression and possession.”

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25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 122.
The exhibition’s re-reading of *The Dinner Party* brought about the opportunity to retrieve artwork from stereotypic reductions, but suffered a similar outcome through the six feminist artists’ refusals to participate and through heavy-handed newspaper reviews refuting its overall effectiveness as an exhibition. I see the exhibition as taking a well-researched stance and making successful use of the museum exhibition medium. I address the museum as something Jones overlooked, an operative part of her success in the historicization of feminist art, a goal she states in organizing the exhibition. Jones failed to highlight how the museum had positioned *The Dinner Party* in relation to value and appropriateness for feminist art in the past.\(^{28}\) The museum is a social institution that makes and reifies society’s values. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine remarked in *Exhibiting Cultures* that the museum produces cultural constructions as well as examines them.\(^{29}\) Meaning, acknowledged as viewer-derived as much as museum-produced shows the museum is not a neutral backdrop, but a proactive maker of meaning.\(^{30}\)

*Sexual Politics* is an exhibition informed and critiqued in the discourses of multiculturalism and feminism. In theorizing the postmodern museum, exhibitions are accountable to their immediate community. Karp and Lavine indicated that the art museum is in the process of transition, naturalized concepts of quality and innovation disrupted new engagements with marginalized people inform the normative patterns of these terms as exclusionary. Diversity initiatives opened new avenues for museum practitioners to address a plethora of perspectives. The museum is in the process of

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redefinition, discordance is evident between a need to protect society’s values and promote new ones, indicating for me, an institution ripe for a feminist intervention. 31

By investigating the reception of feminist exhibitions, my project seeks to promote continued dialogue advocating a renewed engagement with the medium. My project crosses the disciplines of museum studies and gender studies and is part of a developing feminist museology that interrogates, from the perspective of gender hierarchy, naturalized notions of progress, time, quality and innovation in museum practice. Feminist theorists such as Griselda Pollock and Alison Rowley treat curatorial practice as “theoretical subject,” producing a study that, rather than simply review artworks in exhibition, looks at the exhibition as cultural product, an object in itself for feminist intervention. Interest in this subject is evident in panel discussions at two recent art history conferences and in a forthcoming book by Griselda Pollock. The College Art Association presented a panel discussion entitled Re-Viewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Rosler (2001) that reviewed curatorial scholarship that reflected a new interest in 1970s feminist art.32 In 2004, Now and Then: Feminism: Art: History at the Old/New 30th Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians Pollock and Rowley led a panel discussion to review Documenta 11 (2002), positing it as a feminist exhibition without its being declared as such. Griselda Pollock will make, for the first time, feminist museology the subject of an entire book, in Time, Space and the Archive: Towards a Virtual Feminist Museum (preparation 2005, forthcoming release).

Earlier works on feminist museology include an essay by Gaby Porter, “Seeing through Solidity,” in the anthology *Theorizing Museums* (1996). Porter utilized the poststructuralist relation of “text, author and reader” and adapted it to the museum arena as “exhibition, curator and viewer” with a specific focus on the gendered bias that permeates the seemingly objective decisions that inform display and educational programming in the history museum.\(^{33}\) Carol Duncan, a social historian of art, reflected her own engagement with the modern art museum—from essays on the Louvre’s transition from “Princely Gallery” to state museum to the gendered space of the permanent collection exhibitions at MOMA—in her collection of essays entitled *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums*. Duncan’s influence on me is most overt in my adaptation of her concept of ritual to describe the behavior of the visitor to the museum. Duncan equated the Western notion of the aesthetic experience of the museum with ritual. She characterizes the museum visitation as a secular ritual, where the museum symbolizes a space where the community seeks enlightenment and reaffirmation of its values.\(^{34}\)

**Chapter One: Exhibiting The Dinner Party**

Did Amelia Jones take *The Dinner Party* to new critical heights in the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, or does the exhibition format inherently reify the artwork’s monumentality? To explore this question I elaborate on the critical categories highlighted in the Knight review as a way of structuring investigations of the feminist generational divisions regarding *The Dinner Party*, the women’s survey exhibition, and the role of the curator.

Chapter Two: Transitions: Reading the Museum for Feminist Potential

I posit the museum as being in a state of flux, with its audiences and guiding institutional models in the process of redefinition. In 1988, Karp and Lavine found organizational models first identified by Duncan Cameron, in the essay *Museum: Temple or Forum?*, to be an efficient approach for differentiating types of museums. Karp and Lavine advocated moving away from the temple to the forum. However, I argue that a reversal of the binary opposition that favors the forum model of innovation and experimentation perhaps misses Cameron’s warnings of generalizing diversity and leveling questions of quality. The organizational models, I believe, adhered to traditional gender hierarchies, even in reversal.

I argue that *Sexual Politics* indicates a desire for a synthesis of the organizational model dichotomy, dissolving the oppositional thinking required of the system. *Sexual Politics* situates the viewer in the process of museum redefinition. Tactics used to evaluate the objects on display for their indication of the larger institutional authority include recognition of the author’s specific perspective, recognition of other perspectives as equally informing, recognition of the exclusions, embracing a discussion of their absence, and allowance for contradictions to remain relevant without disrupting the impetus for exhibition.

Chapter Three: Dinner and Dancing at the Sexual Politics exhibition

In the final main chapter the *Sexual Politics* exhibition is understood to promote feminist discourse by presenting an avenue for a politics of the body in feminism, that while recognizing the risk of co-optation by patriarchy nonetheless attempts an intervention. The transitional museum, being more receptive to multiple viewpoints,

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36 Ibid., 4.
allowed Amelia Jones to introduce contradictory positions in the artwork of Judy Chicago without having to choose a side. I see this ‘Janus-headed’ exhibition dynamic as analogous to the possibility of feminist corporeality that Janet Wolff identified in postmodern dance in her essay Reinstating Corporeality (1991). Wolff promotes postmodern dance as the most subversive art for feminism because it is a medium centered on the active body.37 Wolff’s performance begins with female dancers whose naturalized, weighty movements ground the dancer but do not fix her in an essentialized way. Juxtaposed with other dancers, both professional and non-professional, the feminist corporeal deconstructs the process of the dance by “laying bare the medium.”38 I imagine the feminist exhibition as functioning in similar fashion, suggesting that the juxtapositions of artwork as well as the recognized contradictions and exclusions in an exhibition’s thesis are all elements that make up the dance. Feminist artists are freed to explore difficult imagery individually without being held to represent their community in a corrective or celebratory way when the exhibition function is central to the solution.39

In conclusion, I suggest that the museum exhibition, an activated space that has exposed its position in hierarchy and opened itself to multivalent views, is feminist space. This quality creates an environment conducive to Sexual Politics reevaluating essentialism for feminism. Despite criticisms by the mainstream media and other feminists, Sexual Politics participated in the historicization of feminism is a continual process; renewed engagement with artwork over time promotes elimination of the Universal. The critique of the Sexual Politics exhibition is one part of a process of this renewed engagement, looking at the exhibition history in order to access feminist discourse in the museum for future exhibitions.

38 Ibid., 137.
Chapter One: Exhibiting *The Dinner Party*

To exhibit *The Dinner Party* in 1996 was to challenge its monumental nature by teasing apart its historical position in feminist art. Criticisms of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, from Christopher Knight’s Los Angeles Times review, *More Famine than Feast: Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics,’* as well as from feminist artists who declined to participate, rehearse some of the original criticisms of *The Dinner Party* from 1979 without taking account of the new contextualization of the work within a group exhibition. This chapter describes the historical perception of *The Dinner Party* that influenced the reading of *Sexual Politics.* I offer comparison of *The Dinner Party*’s solo exhibition and the organization of *Sexual Politics,* focusing on three main themes brought out in the *LA Times* review. This discussion takes into account the author’s relation to the artwork, the state of curatorial practice in the 1990s, the location of the exhibition and the thematic organization. The differing *Dinner Party* exhibition organizations offers the background information pointing to the following questions which are taken up more specifically in the subsequent two chapters: is the 1990s museum advantageous for reconsideration of *The Dinner Party?*, Can Universalism be countered through thematic presentation that recognizes specific and local gendered identities? and can reading *The Dinner Party* beyond essentialism benefit future feminism?

Art critic Knight responded harshly to the *Sexual Politics* exhibition. I divide his critique into three facets: first, his visceral response to *The Dinner Party* itself; second, his insistence that the exhibition should have been a comprehensive survey, a view that prompts him to accuse curator Amelia Jones of overlooking key artists; and lastly, Knight
exaggerates Jones’ agenda as overly ideological with text-heavy didactics that obscured the aims of the artwork.\textsuperscript{40} Knight’s distaste for The Dinner Party is evident in his characterization of the artwork as a failure.\textsuperscript{41} He elaborates with a claim that The Dinner Party’s intentional institutional and monumental nature precluded it as effective insurgent art, and his review cast doubt on the success of the Sexual Politics show through refutation of the premise that The Dinner Party deserved a revision in Art History.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, in a review that did not effectively consider relevant qualities of the exhibition format Knight refuses The Dinner Party an opportunity to achieve transformation in accordance with new information evinced through real-time comparison and contrast within the exhibition format.

I structure this chapter against Knight’s review of Sexual Politics, because his review offers newspaper response comparable to mainstream reactions to the opening of The Dinner Party in its original solo museum exhibitions.\textsuperscript{43} Knight’s repeat of the demonization of The Dinner Party reifies its solo status. That view differs from the academic journal article by Sue Malvern or art magazine reviews by David Joselit and Jennie Klein who offered exhibition comparisons to Sexual Politics in order to contextualize the exhibition with its contemporaries.\textsuperscript{44} Knight’s article exists in the space between academia and the public, speaking to both audiences, simultaneously reflecting a portion of the debate in the 1990s ‘Culture Wars.’ Knight is forceful in pitting the academic feminist curator – a theoretician – against the artworld patron, berating what

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Knight, “Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.”
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Larson, “Under the Table: Duplicity, Alienation,” 51.
\end{itemize}
he perceives to be a misuse of the art in order to develop an illustrated lecture on feminist art theory rather than a successful exhibition.

The chapter’s first section reviews critical distaste for *The Dinner Party* both historically and in current contexts in order to delineate the points of departure of the current exhibition from previous treatments. The second section looks at the organization of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, its curatorial perspective and thematic groupings, to offer an analysis of the mechanisms of feminist exhibition-making that advocates clearly stated local, specific knowledge of the author and curator rather than surveying feminist art history in grand sweeping presentations that mimic Universal overviews in traditional art history. These two sections conceptualize the museum as informing the recontextualization process.

*Dinner Party* Distaste

*The Dinner Party* exudes a controlling presence through its sheer size and ambition. As in its original configuration, in the *Sexual Politics* exhibition *The Dinner Party* consisted of the triangular table with thirty-nine place settings for important women in Western thought and history "invited" to the party (fig.1). The table was set on top of a ceramic *Heritage Floor* that showed in gold luster script the names of 999 other women Chicago wished to commemorate (fig.2). The three-sided table of *The Dinner Party* reflects three periods: the Mythic to Classical Rome, the beginning of Christianity to the Reformation, and the American Revolution to Women’s Revolution.45 Chicago chose her “*Dinner Party* guests” to highlight their achievements and symbolically elevate them to a

level of recognition accorded men in Western History.46 Rich ecclesiastical-style embroidered table runners along with the gold luster chalices and painted china plates, at each place setting, reference the Eucharist (fig. 5). A vestibule that included five embroidered banners and Heritage panels documenting the research and production of The Dinner Party project preceded the main room. Dramatically lit, embroidered banners preface the ‘ceremony’ with words of renewal and hope (fig. 6&7) while the Heritage panels and studio photographs couched the ‘ceremonial experience’ in the pragmatic realm of research and technical production.47 The installation of The Dinner Party in Sexual Politics moved upstairs at the Hammer Museum to the exhibition’s reading room, where a selection of quilt segments from Chicago’s International Quilting Bee outreach project (fig. 8), completed during the 1980-88 exhibition tour, were showcased amongst research materials acquainting the viewer with other projects by Chicago and other artists in Sexual Politics.48

In his review of Sexual Politics, Knight called the Dinner Party an “agit-prop Monument.” He notes that, unlike early modernist agit prop art, Chicago’s “intended” institutional monumentality cancelled its effectiveness as insurgent political art.49 Knight continued a tradition of abrasive readings initiated in 1979 by Village Voice art critic Kay Larson in her review entitled “Under the Table: Duplicity, Alienation.” In that review, Larson expresses concerns over both the Dinner Party’s imposing quality and its lack of political engagement when she remarking that the work “manages to be brutal, baroque

46 Ibid., 3-4.  
47 The six banners read as follows: (1) And she gathered all before her, (2) And she made for them a sign to see, (3) And lo they saw a vision, (4) from this day forth like to like in all things, (5)And then all that divided them merged, (6)And then everywhere was Eden once again.  
48 Chicago, The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage, 213-14. The International Quilting Bee was a project initiated by Chicago for the 1980 exhibition at a theater space at the University of Texas at Houston. Chicago states that the project was to reiterate the inclusiveness of her artwork by inviting people to create and submit 2 foot triangular quilts commemorating woman they admired. The practice continued throughout the rest of the Dinner Party exhibition tour.  
49 Knight, “Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.”
and banal all at once.” Larson also remarked that the ‘off-putting’ sculpture installation had literally forced visitors up against a wall, undermining Chicago’s inclusive educative goal.  

50 Rather than challenging society, a monument implies preservation of the subject as it currently stands for posterity.  

51 Limiting The Dinner Party characterization to monument, as is done in both Knight’s review and in one by Chicago herself, pits Chicago’s feminist agenda for challenging the establishment in conflict with her implementation. In other words, a commemorative monument implies an after-the-fact recognition rather than a real-time challenge to the establishment. Paradoxically, Chicago saw the monumentality of The Dinner Party as an integral part of her message.

She wrote:

… one of my goals in undertaking such a monumental work of art was to test the art system, to find out whether a woman artist, working at a level of aspiration not unusual for men, would be rewarded and celebrated.  

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The abrasive reading continues throughout Knight’s review of the Sexual Politics installation of The Dinner Party. He is most persuasive once he moves beyond his general distaste to address specific problems with the celebratory aims of the 1970s feminist art which Chicago had come to represent. For instance, Knight remarks how The Dinner Party left the patriarchal system of acceptance into the canon intact. Knight, in this aspect of the review, unwittingly aligns himself with an observation of feminist art historian, Lisa Tickner. In her exhibition essay Sexuality and/in Representation: Five British Artists (1984) she describes this replacement process as “reverse discourse, a political/aesthetic strategy founded on the same terms in which difference has already

50 Larson, "Under the Table: Duplicity, Alienation,” 51.
51 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.”
been laid down.” In Tickner’s essay, *The Dinner Party* is emblematic of feminism interested in reclaiming femininity through symbolic representations of women, a sentiment that is rehearsed in Knight’s *Sexual Politics*’ review.

Since 1974, the imagery Chicago used to represent femininity was explicitly vulvar, as in *Female Rejection Drawing* (fig. 3); Chicago “peeled back” the floral, dome and butterfly images she had previously employed to represent the feminine. Even before the folds of the labia were explicit, as in *Through the Flower* (1973) (fig. 9) Chicago had coined a name for her feminine imagery as “central-core,” describing an abstracted female genitalia, a central round form surrounded by pulsating lines, a representation of feminine sensibility.” Chicago stated that “central core” was a way to combine the formal language of abstract art with personal experience, using the imagery to represent a reclaiming of her sexuality in the evocation of throbbing movement. In the *Dinner Party* plates, Chicago merged the “peeled back” vulvar form with a butterfly image to indicate the feminine in process of transformation.

Chicago said her “central core” imagery and the visual narratives on the table runners were designed to be legible to a general public. She designed this sign system as a way of connecting women’s histories through visuals that did not require her audience to possess an art historical background. Chicago wished her monumental artwork would transcend the artworld to reach a mainstream audience, opening the doors of the museum to an audience not accustomed to its particular behaviors and

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rituals. In *The Dinner Party*’s creation, Chicago enlisted many women whose skills were developed in the craft arena, including china painting and embroidery, to translate her designs onto the plates and table runners. Given the 400 workshop volunteers and the thousands of people that visited the exhibition in its fourteen venues, the artwork did reach diversified audiences creating an event that moved beyond the established artworld. *The Dinner Party*’s solo exhibition tour brought an estimated one million visitors to fourteen venues across six countries. Venues in the United States included San Francisco, Boston, and the exhibition’s first alternative or non-museum venue, in Texas, which alone recorded 80,000 visitors to a theatre space at the University of Houston.

Nevertheless, the popularity of the work did not dissuade feminist critics from finding fault with *The Dinner Party* on two major counts: its vulvar imagery and workshop production.

Focus on the vulvar plates began to undo the value of research into accomplishments of women identified for advancement by *The Dinner Party*. Vulvar imagery, representing her invited guests, became the crux of a critique of *The Dinner Party* as essentialist. Feminists Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker and Lisa Tickner, who criticized biological symbolism as essentialist earmarked Chicago as an artist working

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58 Ibid.
59 Jones, Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center., "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," 103-06. Chicago was accused of taking advantage of her collaborators by not giving them equal billing for the artwork. Chicago stated that her workshop empowered her participants towards a common goal, much like the pedagogical approach she developed for the Feminist Art Program at Cal State; debates were welcomed as a means to fortify her final design decisions. Feminist art historian Michele Barret in Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics (1982) compared Chicago’s style to Renaissance master workshops where the artistic achievements of many are subsumed under the name of the master artist. In this sense, Chicago had inadvertently obscured her collaborators’ achievements, repeating the pattern of erasure of women’s achievements the Dinner Party was attempting to counter.
During the early 1980s, the feminist visual art landscape shifted from a focus on picturing the body to investigation of the process by which representations of the feminine are understood by patriarchy. This shift in the discourse was a move away from representing the feminine Universal to a feminist discourse that focused on multifarious and fluid identity politics that recognized the varied facets of sexual, ethnic, racial, and class identity as a complex web of subjectivity. Pollock and Parker have said in reference to *Female Rejection Drawing* that despite the momentary uplifting experience in recognition of the previously taboo subject, Chicago’s metaphoric representation of woman upholds patriarchal equations of woman and nature, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical man/culture equation. Pollock and Parker declare in *Old Mistresses* that, “Within male-dominated culture, its language and its codes of representation, it is thus not possible to produce in any simple way an alternative, positive management of the image of woman.”

The prevailing tone in feminist visual art criticism initiated by Pollock and Parker supposed that images of the female body in feminist art were too easily co-opted for the male gaze and therefore ineffectual for the feminist project. This deconstructive approach to feminist visual art circumvented the essentialist posture of using women’s bodies in feminist art by opting for surrogate markers of the body, as in diary narratives, clothing and other possessions rather than images to represent the feminine. Feminist artists and curators working in this deconstructive vein began to turn away from representing woman’s sexuality, opting for critique of how representations of the feminine reinforced gender hierarchies in the male gaze.

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61 Parker and Pollock, "Painted Ladies," 130.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 132.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
1980s utilized poststructuralist theories developed by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes to develop means to uncover and disrupt the process of continual reiteration of normative institutional control. As feminism was drawn into the academy in the 1980s, espousing theoretical strains of feminisms influenced by the French and British feminist artists, art historians, literary critics and philosophers, evident estrangement grew within the women’s movement.67

In 1992, Lynda Nead in her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* argued for a renewed engagement with feminist art of the 1970s women’s movement. She proposed that all aspects of such work, including the vehement feminist critiques of Chicago’s artwork, could be re-examined for new feminist potential.68 Nead recommended exploring historical assessments as tools for current feminist presentations of the female nude.69 She recognized that over time a sense of what 1970s feminist art had been was distilled to the use of essentialist imagery. Nead advocated a review of the period in order to discover points of contradiction in the essentialist debate.70 Nead’s approach to using a new review of the 1970s artwork in order to unpack current feminist visual art is the same approach Jones adopts for *Sexual Politics*. Amelia Jones was suspicious of the wholehearted equation of *The Dinner Party* with essentialism. She suspected the information and environment informing Chicago’s sign system was not as simple as some critics had suggested. Jones looked to apply contradictions between the sign system and its critical assessment to the use of the body in current and future feminist artwork.

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 66.
In *Sexual Politics*, *The Dinner Party* is physically situated within a historical cross-section of feminist artworks. Supplemental materials, extensive wall labels and a seven-essay catalog delineating the exhibition’s three main sections encourage a theoretical contextualization. Jones utilized poststructural tools to evaluate the process that previously devalued categories of feminist art. She organized *Sexual Politics* thematically to set up a dialogue between feminist works dating from the 1960s to the mid 1990’s. In the themes: “The Politics of Cunt Art,” “Female Experience and Feminist Content,” and “Rewriting History” Jones set out to unseat the tendency to write-off *The Dinner Party* as quintessential work of the 1970s feminist movement.71 For example, the *Sexual Politics*’ theme, *Politics of Cunt Art*, is a discussion of the attack on the *Dinner Party*’s vulvar imagery as universalizing and essentializing of women. Within this setting are Hannah Wilke’s diminutive *Seven Untitled Vaginal-Phallic and Excremental Sculptures* (1960-3), (fig. 10), a series of ambiguous orifices that vacillate between vulvar, phallic and anal imagery. This early feminist artwork of Wilke’s employs vulvar imagery that indicates a postmodern ambiguity of gender identity. Wilke’s untitled sculptures in this arrangement are allowed a dialogue with *The Dinner Party* that did not deny the Wilke work its comparable theoretical weight, enabling the visitor to access commonalities in work that had been overshadowed.

By the mid-1990s, *Sexual Politics* was but one of several exhibitions (including *Bad Girls, Division of Labor: “women's work” in contemporary art* and *Inside the visible: an elliptical traverse of twentieth century art in, of, and from the feminine*) that addressed the female body for feminist art.72 These exhibitions showed artists who were creating

representations of femininity and included artists who were explicitly addressing female sexuality and motherhood alongside artists who chose textual investigations as a means of interrogation for similar concerns.73 In hindsight, the distinct shift in the feminist landscape from liberation in the 1970s to academic discourse in the 1980s, developed into more of a sense of multiple feminisms by the 1990s.74 I see a trend toward diversified feminist exhibitions that incorporated activist strategies of the 1970s liberation movement for effecting change on exclusionary practices coupled with academic feminism that questions the power system that upholds the exclusionary practices in the first place, despite a rising conservatism that worked to dissolve feminist political engagement on the visual arts. 75

The 1990s saw an increase in the Conservative side of popular debate commonly referred to as the “Culture Wars” which included censorship of the visual arts. This debate defined the arts in the 1990s, after US Congressman Jesse Helm railed against the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) funding of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, based on an assessment of indecency.76 Subsequent Congressional rulings managed to reduce the NEA’s budget and opened the door to future funding decisions based on opinions of indecency. These congressional hearings disavowed gay rights and feminism and threatened to revoke National Endowment for the Arts funding for artists, including performance artists such as Karen Finley, which Congress found

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74 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'."


offensive. In 1990, Congressional rhetoric on censorship went as far as to threaten abolishment of the NEA, based on opposition to grants given to individual artists deemed obscene.77

Continuing in this vein, Congress turned its attention to review of potential acquisition of *The Dinner Party* by the publicly funded University of the District of Columbia (UDC). In 1991, Representative Stan Parris argued for a reduction of UDC’s budget and cited concerns for the housing of the impending donation of *The Dinner Party*. However, the discussion, moved from fiscal responsibility toward opinions of *The Dinner Party* content. Representative Dana Rohrbacher pronounced the work pornographic, and Congress effectively killed the initiative for the donation when reductions in the University’s budget were passed.78 These actions in Congress contributed to an air of increased uncertainty that support from government resources for the arts would continue. Congressional reforms sponsored a new approach to grant making focused solely on support of institutions rather than individuals, and requiring accountability through new outcome assessment reports. Artworld decisions seemed to be more vulnerable to outside political influence, and in 1996, the NEA’s budget was a mere 60% of what it had been at the start of the decade.79

Increased hostility toward feminism, characterized in the media as ‘post-feminism, preceded the 1990s obscenity debates.’ This was an anti-feminism propagated in part by a Religious Right that blamed the movement for women feeling inadequate. Susan Faludi, in the book *Backlash*, documented this anti-feminist strategy

as early as 1982. Faludi noted *New York Times Magazine*’s introduction—in the story entitled *Voices from the Post-feminist Generation*—of a new generation of women eschewing feminism.\(^8^0\) Good Housekeeping embarked on a *New Traditionalist* marketing campaign designed to revive its own sagging sales. In 1988 the magazine promoted *New Traditionalism* as women choosing to give up on a ‘failed feminism’ to recommit to the traditional values of family and homemaking.\(^8^1\) Even the feminist publication *Ms.* lost standing when the magazine, reclassified as a for-profit company, bent towards mainstream fashion magazine markets under increased pressure from its advertisers. With this change, *Ms. Magazine* began supplementing political articles with fashion and beauty articles to stay afloat, until its publisher temporarily shut it down in October 1989 following a controversial abortion cover story.\(^8^2\) *Ms.* was reintroduced eight months later as a bi-monthly newsletter limiting its presence and former influence as a major magazine.\(^8^3\) By December 4, 1989, *Time Magazine* ran a cover story that asked, “Is there a future for feminism?” stating that “In the 80s they tried to have it all. Now they’ve just plain had it.”\(^8^4\) Despite this increased ‘backlash’ against the women’s movement, I argue that feminism made its first substantial appearance in museums in the mid-1990s. The museum is a zone in which cross-fertilization of feminist strategies from academic research to popular entertainment meet. A bridge between academic feminists and an audience now distanced from the political commonality of the previous incarnated women’s movement. *Sexual Politics* was able to contribute to the development of complex discussions of identity politics by suggesting a review of the process by which an increasingly distilled *Dinner Party* identity happens over time. Meanwhile the


\(^{82}\) Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 110.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 110-11.

\(^{84}\) Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 318.
increased, albeit negative, attention paid to the work tended to codify its existence, marking it as quintessential 1970s feminism. The fervor ultimately fixed the work. Against the trend, the exhibition provided an opportunity to retrieve artwork overlooked by a collapsing of categories of feminist artwork into one classifiable entity. Contextualization of this work was a contributor to change, creating tensions for examination such that distinctions between time-periods and schools of thought are rendered less distinct, but no less informative.

The museum was always part of Chicago’s The Dinner Party. Its exhibition history from 1979 to 1988 included both museum and ‘alternative’ spaces. After its debut at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the next exhibition was an alternative venue in Houston. Despite a 100,000-person turnout at SFMOMA, the work failed to show at another museum venue right away. Houston was booked after the two original tour venues cancelled. Chicago stated that she was happy for the opportunity to continue the tour, after the original bookings dissipated, but she had mixed feelings regarding the possible alternative spaces. She preferred the museum’s professional handling of the art, the prestige of the museum, and the clear expectations of the artist set out in formal exhibition agreements. This artwork was made with the institutional museum exhibition in mind; the anti-institutional make-up of the alternative space countered some of that institutional legitimization Chicago sought as part of her work. Chicago said she conceived this work to raise the stature of the women represented and that the acceptance of the work into the traditional canon at the museum created this

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85 An alternative space in this case was both temporary space, organized for just the occasion and established art centers or Kunsthalle that do not maintain a collection.
87 Ibid., 213-16.
88 Ibid., 214, 16.
pattern of recognition. For Chicago the museum environment was critical to the operation of the artwork. When Jones re-introduced *The Dinner Party* into the museum space it was not to fulfill Chicago’s agenda, since Jones believed that, in this respect, *The Dinner Party* maintained patriarchal parameters for genius. Rather, Jones engaged *The Dinner Party* to counter its isolation from the feminist art community. In this case, the museum is a laboratory for testing how the recontextualization works in actuality.

Sexual Politics not a survey

Despite Jones’s imperative, that Sexual Politics contextualize *The Dinner Party*, her thematic organizational strategy made no claims to be a comprehensive survey of feminist art. However, in Knight’s reading of Sexual Politics, several critiques of omissions to the exhibition imply he read the exhibition as unsuccessful because of its inability to fulfill as a survey. I have included two quotations as evidence: first he writes, “No historical survey can be comprehensive, but the wholesale excision of video art from Sexual Politics grossly deforms the shows.” His critique of the exhibition rests on this mis-identification of the exhibition as a survey. The second portion of his omissions critique bolsters this supposition, where Knight identifies Lee Bontecou as an artist who should have been included; he states, “Her absence distorts the immediate artistic content from which the *Dinner Party* arose, making Chicago appear unprecedented.”

Donald Preziosi points out in a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* that

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89 Ibid., 16.
91 Knight, “Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.” Donald Preziosi, *Art under the Boot? Counterpunch: ‘Sexual Politics’ an Important Show Unedited* [www] (1996 [cited accessed 3/26 2000]); available from Http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/arhist/cv/boot.htm. fah@bbw.mediamasters.com, 20 May 1996. Preziosi noted this declaration was false; there was a video component to the exhibition, on view in the exhibition Reading Room. Video art was not, however displayed in the main gallery
92 Knight, “Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.”
Bontecou’s forms may be stylistically similar to Chicago’s ‘central-core’ but have no similarity to her politics.\(^93\) This indicates that Knight’s argument here resides mainly in formal concerns and is a misunderstanding of the basic intent of the show. His stylistic recommendations are antithetical to this politically charged exhibition that makes central an ongoing interchange of feminist art theory through thematically illustrated arguments rather than chrono-progressive formal evaluations.

By focusing solely on feminist art and avoiding discussion of early stylistic precursors to the vulvar imagery of *The Dinner Party*, Jones avoids reiterating a troublesome aspect of the concept of the “central-core”—the proposition that it can be identified in artwork created by other woman artists of previous generations not engaged in feminism (such as Bontecou and Georgia O’Keeffe). Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro outlined this position on discovering feminine sensibility in the work of pre-feminist art in the essay “Female Imagery,” for *Womanspace Journal* (1973) (fig. 11).\(^94\) In looking to previous artists to suggest a lineage, Schapiro and Chicago highlighted aspects of artwork made by woman that repeat forms such as circles, radiating lines and floral images as possible places in which to read feminine sensibility. This part of the “central-core” uses the tropes of the normative femininity, such as soft edges and closeness with nature to assign hidden feminist politics. This formal analysis by Chicago and Schapiro that attributes feminist social agenda in the formal considerations of the artwork risks essentializing the aspects of feminine sensibility that they were championing. Jones’ subject for the *Sexual Politics* exhibition has little to do in this case with formal forerunners such as Bontecou’s art. Jones’ arguments question feminism

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\(^93\) Preziosi, *Art under the Boot? Counterpunch: ‘Sexual Politics’ an Important Show Unedited*.
from within feminist art history with a goal to expose the way in which criticisms of The Dinner Party have overshadowed other work in this same vein. Jones writes:

*These categories are not comprehensive (nor is the selection of artists intended to be) but, rather, highlight the issues that have been most controversial in feminist debate over this period, as epitomized by responses to the Dinner Party.*

Sexual Politics’ second floor gallery space was divided into three main thematic sections; the first was *Female Imagery: the Politics of Cunt Art* (fig.12). In this thematic grouping resided Marlene McCarty’s sparse untitled painting (1990) that spells out the word CUNT, a display case of Hannah Wilke’s *Untitled Vaginal-Phallic and Excremental Sculptures*, and Lauren Lesko’s *Lips*. These three works, spanning thirty years of feminist art, were displayed with Chicago’s Dinner Party preparatory drawings for the Georgia O’Keeffe plate, the Emily Dickinson ceramic test plate, Chicago’s painting *Through the Flower* (1973), and her sculpture *Iridescent Domes* (1968). In this arrangement, Jones assembled artwork from the 1960s, 70s, and 90s to illustrate approaches to vaginal imagery that are outside of the celebrated vulvar forms of The Dinner Party. The interrelation between Wilke’s biological vacillating forms and the unmistakable text “CUNT” screamed out from the large blocky orange letters on a pure white background. McCarty abandoned the image for text, avoiding any opportunity for patriarchal co-optation of the woman’s body, while Wilke’s vaginal imagery ambiguity defies a fixed sense of the feminine in it’s biological symbology. In *Lips* (fig.13), Lesko breaks apart the Universalism of the “central-core imagery” by using a collar from a fur coat to create satiric vulvar imagery specific to the social status of her representation of women, by referencing the wealth and comfort of the upper class that could afford to wear the material. This ironic ‘universal’ image underscored a marginalization in the

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women’s movement that neglected race, class, and sexual orientation. Lesko’s humor seems only to be possible in an exhausted imagery that has undergone thirty-year’s of theorization. The Dinner Party preparatory drawings, test plates and precursor painting and sculpture hone in on the issue of Chicago’s “central-core” and its relationship to other artwork employing vulvar imagery; so the entire thematic grouping demonstrated that vulvar imagery or “Cunt Art” was not only the purview of Chicago, proving the subject is rich with contradictions, ambiguity and irony.

Unlike The Dinner Party installation on the ground floor of the museum, the central exhibition space for Sexual Politics on the second floor was brightly lit, airy, and besides the 8-foot high photograph by Renee Cox, Yo Mama, many of the works were on an intimate scale. The format for displaying this group exhibition included rooms peppered with vitrines and sections broken up by temporary walls. The formula for each section was an introductory text panel, wall labels, and works by Chicago that were pre- and post-cursors to The Dinner Party. The material on the text panel couched the artwork within its theme, and the additional works by Chicago served to remind the viewer of typical aspects of The Dinner Party.

The inclusion of feminist artwork from the 1960s to 1990s in a non-chronological fashion, suggests an understanding of feminist art “stages” as mutable and encompassing, rather than definitive. Jones re-imagines a feminist historical project that allows for crossover between celebrationists and constructionists, seeing less division than perceived through The Dinner Party criticisms in the 1970s and 1980s. The exhibition is ‘book-ended’ by a timeline (see figs.14&15) presented in the exhibition.

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96 Ibid., 25.
97 Amelia Jones, Laura Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center., Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press Berkeley, 1996), 255. The term “Cunt Art” was coined by feminist critic Cindy Nemser in 1973 as a derogatory reference to art that focused on vulvar or vaginal imagery.
catalog: the catalog opens by marking 1920, the year the 19th Amendment was passed granting women the right to vote, and closes with the year 1996, when the University of California upheld a 1995 ruling calling for the abandonment of affirmative action procedures for hiring and admittance. A feminist chronology 1945-1995 is also compiled towards the end of the catalog reiterating the historicization of The Dinner Party amongst its counterparts as well as events outside the artworld. The catalog insinuates chronological history into the exhibition, freeing the installation from chronological comparisons in the gallery spaces. The catalog is a richly colored, densely packed explanation of the theoretical notions at stake in this controversial exhibition. Jones wrote two essays for the catalog and also provides five more essays by various contributors in order to fully convey the exhibition’s theoretical investigation. The catalog’s cover and insets (figs.16&17) became another artwork in the show, its hot pink background a close-up photograph of a closed pink flower with “sticky petals,” ornate title font and red ellipses on the heading pages extend the research component into the visual field of the exhibition. The introductory essay by Jones acquaints the reader with each theme of the exhibition and explains how each theme relates to Chicago’s work and how other artists have used, retained, or countered Chicago’s method of feminist art. What emerges is a challenge to the myth that 1970s feminist art did not acknowledge femininity as a social construction and the acknowledgement that since the 1960s artists have used and continue to use the site of the female body to question societal norms.

98 Ibid., 9-12.
The main room of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition opened with *Yo Mama* (1993), the 8-foot tall black and white photograph by Renee Cox (fig. 18), a self-portrait, nude, holding a child. She is part of the *Bodily Functions: Menstruation, Birth and Maternity* sub section of *Female Experience and Feminist Content* (the second major thematic grouping in the exhibition) (fig.19). Alongside this photograph was the documentary photograph of the *Birth Trilogy* performance at Womanhouse from the Cal State Feminist Art Program (1974) (fig.20) and across from *Yo Mama* is the *Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary, and Diagram* portion of *Post-Partum Document* by Mary Kelly (1976). The inclusion of Mary Kelly’s *Postpartum Document* in this section marks Jones’ most overt rethinking of the schism between 1970s celebratory images and 1980s poststructural feminists. The experiential context of *The Dinner Party* and *Post-Partum Document* together in the museum space physically bridges the psychic separation of a theoretical divide in feminism outlined in the *Painted Ladies* essay by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock.99 Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (fig. 21) illuminates how women internalize the language of patriarchy to understand their conditional desires of child rearing as natural.100 Kelly’s aversion to female imagery is part of an agenda to address motherhood from a personal, yet unsentimental perspective that defies objectification via co-optation of body imagery. Formal aspects of the work such as charts, typewritten diary notes, stains (as in fecal matter), handprints, measurements and calculations tap into the mother’s experience but it is accessed via psychoanalytic readings of the material, rather than evoking a celebratory identification with the subject. The placement of this work in juxtaposition to *The Dinner Party* complicates the chronological/theoretical divisions in the history of feminist art, which are

misleading: although Kelly’s work was created at the same time as Chicago’s Dinner Party; Post-Partum Document is represented as a member of a later (more sophisticated) generation of feminist art. Due in part to the writings of Pollock, who promoted Kelly’s new theoretical approach in Post-Partum Document over Chicago’s metaphoric approaches to “self-defined sexuality, 1979 became the turning point for generational separation.”101 Work such as Post-Partum Document established a strain of feminist art that disrupted the seemingly stable and universal notion of femininity and of patriarchy. Although Chicago accepted that gender was socially constructed, she nonetheless was more concerned with creating new representations of women, developing detectable ‘feminine sensibility’ as a way to talk about the work of woman cohesively.102

In the early years of the woman’s liberation movement, discovering the feminine and writing into history the contributions of women was important as a first stage for feminism. Historian Joan Wallach Scott noted that historians wishing to correct the erasure of women’s history from the established canon had to assume a stable gender category from which to argue their position.103 Acceptance of the existing canons of history as desired places for inclusion was also required. Thus, women’s histories were written under the same set of conditions for greatness or influence as their established patriarchal counterparts. Joan Scott described this moment in the 1970s when historians focused on adding women’s contributions to history as having limited effectiveness for

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102 Jones, Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center., Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History, 39.
historians spent time ‘correcting’ the canon rather than examining the underlying mechanism that sustained women’s erasure from history.\textsuperscript{104}

The operation extended to the art world. Art Historian Nanette Salomon described a situation where the creation of women’s art history that both uncovered women’s artistic contributions and wrote them into the Art Canon was laudable, yet feminist art historians working in this manner left questions unanswered because of adherence to the same system of art historical genius.\textsuperscript{105} Salomon remarked of a limitation with this type of early feminist art history, “Logically, the women artists who were hailed by the feminists of the 1970s were exactly the ones easiest to excavate, because their work most closely approximated that of traditional, mainstream movements as define by the academe.”\textsuperscript{106}

This dilemma surfaces in a landmark women’s painting survey exhibition, entitled \textit{Woman Artists 1550-1950}, co-curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1976). With this exhibition, Nochlin was able to extend her scholarship and research, borne of the 1971 essay \textit{Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists}, to the museum setting for the first time. Nochlin’s essay sheds light on the patriarchal standard of excellence that has systematically denied women artists acceptance into the canon of Art History, and by extension the art museum, primarily through a set of social exclusions that have prevented women from academic acceptance throughout Western History.\textsuperscript{107} In these women’s art exhibitions, the female body was ever present as subject of the work. Women posed for women artists, reflecting a common social sphere that centered on the home and restricted access to

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 344, 50-51.
formal training and academic subject matter. Later in the women's movement, artists in
Chicago's circle would celebrate this focus of the feminine social sphere. *Women Artists*
1550-1950 exhibition sought to establish or reestablish lost histories for eighty-two
women painters overlooked in art history, by retelling the history of painting from
Renaissance to early Modernism in the alternate perspective of women's art. Harris and
Nochlin highlighted patriarchal exclusionary practices by identifying an alternative. The
biographical scholarship of the catalog in tandem with the museum exhibition was an
important first large-scale intervention in the museum for first and second stage feminist
art discourse.

This type of grand sweeping women's survey exhibition continued into the 1980s;
for example, *American Women Artists 1830-1930* organized by the National Museum of
Women in the Arts, explored 124 works of art in various media spanning a hundred
years did favor women sculptors and their particular societal limitations associated with
studio access and assistance for the production of large-scale marble and bronze
works.\(^{108}\) Another example of a similar survey exhibition, employed for a smaller period:
This exhibition took an encyclopedic approach toward the artwork coming out of fifteen
years of the women's movement that had gained acceptance by the establishment.\(^{109}\)
For these feminist interventions in the museum, visibility was a solution, as the ability to
highlight the work of woman artists in the institution that has excluded them was the
main goal. Yet, the problem of organizing an exhibition based on a fixed category of
woman reinforced the timeless and biological imperatives of the feminine.

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As the social construction of the category of the feminine came more into focus in the 1980s, the category could be understood through a multiculturalist feminist perspective as exclusionary because of overlooked particularity in racial and ethnic aspects of women’s identity. To avoid glossing over diversity in a survey exhibition treatment, once marginalized artists and curators who gained access to the artworld in this way sought to interrogate the process of marginalization and acceptance through exploration of the social construction of identity to avoid a mere assimilative practice.\textsuperscript{110}

The incorporation of diversity into the art canon is the subject of the final section of the \textit{Sexual Politics} exhibition, \textit{Rewriting History}. The subsection \textit{Diversity/Universalism: Multiplying Female Experience} highlighted recognition of multifarious feminism. Here, (fig. 22) Catherine Opie’s photograph, \textit{Dyke}, (1992) and Chicago’s mythic depiction of the lesbian subject in the Natalie Barney place setting drawings for \textit{The Dinner Party} show a personal reflection that calls into question the lesbian stereotype.\textsuperscript{111} Chicago’s place setting presented a symbolic vision of lesbian women, whereas Opie’s documentary style photographs her actual friends and lovers. This section of \textit{Sexual Politics} reopens discussion on the representation of diversity or the lack thereof in \textit{The Dinner Party} and by extension in other early feminist art. Artists such as Opie sought in the 90s to explore the marginalization of homosexual women in feminism. In Opie’s photograph, (fig. 23) a brush-cut woman is turned away from us. The photograph shows her nude torso, back towards the viewer, with the word “Dyke” tattooed across the back of her neck. By inscribing text on the body, Opie’s subject plays with the move away from the bodily representation of feminism and toward the textual surrogate in the 1980s. Turned away from the viewer, Opie’s \textit{Dyke} resists being an object of patriarchal pleasure

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\textsuperscript{110} Scott, \textit{Gender and the Politics of History}, 3.
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while also referencing the invisibility of lesbians in feminism. Opie’s photograph represents a strain of tongue-in-cheek strategies in regards to the use of the female body for feminism in the 1990s artwork highlighted in Sexual Politics.

I centered my study on a group exhibition, because the motive and theme for the exhibitions does not lie with an individual artist’s progression. In the group exhibition the curator’s voice is easier to detect than in the monograph. The theme or premise for exhibition creates additional frames through which to view the artwork. Group exhibitions that are thematic are less governed by the traditional art historical movements than possible in the monograph and catalogue raisonné. Jones used the cross-generational thematic approach in Sexual Politics to participate in a feminist project that disrupts the patri-linear progression (as in the father artist trains the son apprentice then the son innovates and surpasses the father) as a system of innovation typical to describe traditional art history. The cross-generational thematic approach also highlights a process by which generational distinctions had made the feminist project appear fractured and disengaged. In Sexual Politics Jones limited her foci, acknowledged her perspective and did not assume an ultimate division between the social and celebratory feminist approaches to themes addressed in The Dinner Party.

Knight reads heavy-handedness in Jones’s approach to Sexual Politics; he is unwilling to accept the feminist curatorial presence in the exhibition. I see his critique as a denunciation of the curator for utilizing artwork as a means to examine and refine feminist discourse. He states in his review:

For Sexual Politics isn’t really about art at all. Instead, it’s a history of contemporary feminist theory. Works of art have been deployed as mere illustrations, picturing the twists and turns of feminist argument since 1970. Less a carefully chosen display of art than an illustrated lecture on feminist theory, the show features gallery walls laden with reams of printed text. Lengthy object-labels and preachy didactic panels direct the audience in

proper theoretical viewing of the art. With a curator who is an ideologist, theory is privileged over practice.\textsuperscript{113}

Even as there is a trend in the museum world towards “celebrity” curators whose contributions are prominent in the exhibition, such as Thelma Golden’s \textit{Black Male} and \textit{Freestyle} exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem, or the much anticipated curation of \textit{Documenta 11} by Okwui Enweazor in Kassel, Germany in 2002, Knight was reluctant to grant Amelia Jones an overt presence.\textsuperscript{114} Jones’ presence in the exhibition works in dismantling the Universal authority (Author with a capital A).\textsuperscript{115} Jones’s practice is evident in her freely discussing in the catalogue the circumstance of her invitation to curate the exhibition, her condition through which she accepted the position, and her poststructuralist feminist perspective upon which thematic groupings for contextualization of \textit{The Dinner Party} developed. Within the exhibition Jones’s writings enter the visual realm of the exhibition in didactic panels and extended label copy for each of her defined thematic groupings; a stylized font created for the exhibition shows prominently on the title wall visually referring back to the written material of the catalog.\textsuperscript{116}

Knight claims theory as privileged over practice in \textit{Sexual Politics}. I see a missed opportunity to evaluate the melding of theory with practice. Contrary to Knight, who described a scenario where works are just trotted out as examples of theory, I perceive the exhibition as a dynamic environment in which the curator, artists, catalog essayists and the visitors carry out a “practice.” These players collaborated not only to review

\textsuperscript{113} Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics',' 4.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, Paula Marincola, Robert Storr and Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative., "How We Do What We Do. And How We Don't" (paper presented at the Curating now: imaginative practice, public responsibility, Philadelphia, PA, 2000), 32.
\textsuperscript{116} Jones, Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center., \textit{Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History}. 40
foreclosed opinions on *The Dinner Party* but also to create presence for feminist voices in the museum, in the spirit of what Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests in her exhibition *Mistaken Identities* (1991), a political role is not just in the works themselves, but also in the exhibition organization.\(^{117}\) Solomon-Godeau saw a shift away from a restorative politics of identity by the artists, who present alternative visions of hierarchal ordering of race, class, gender and ethnicity, towards a practice whereby the curators and institutions connect the theoretical arguments of the social construction of identity to material experience. She explains:

> The marginalization of the art world’s others has been no less a consequence of the myopia of critics, myself included, who while defining themselves as feminists, as proponents of oppositional postmodernism, were nonetheless blind to the claims of those very differences our critical apparatuses ritualistically invoked. This systemic, if unwitting practice of omission and exclusion demonstrates as clearly as anything where the burden of reparation must fall. Furthermore, any engagement with the issues raised around multiculturalism and identity in the visual arts reminds us that the “political” is by no means a circumscribed property of those artists who openly claim it as a foundation of their art making, but even more fundamentally, is an inescapable condition of our activities in the institutional and discursive spaces of culture.\(^{118}\)

Solomon–Godeau’s word “reparation” suggests political inclusion, recognizing the lack of representation of the marginal and working to correct this shortcoming in exhibitions of work that has not had sufficient consideration. What is most important for my argument, in Solomon-Godeau’s recommendation, is that she sees curatorial framing and the visitor experience as the site of the politics.\(^{119}\) It is the responsibility of the exhibition as a whole to ‘repair’ while the individual works within the exhibition are

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\(^{118}\) Ibid., 30-31.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 30. In *Mistaken Identities*, organized by Constance Llewellyn and Abigail Solomon-Godeau for the University Art Museum University of California Santa Barbara, Solomon-Godeau assembles a diverse group of 15 contemporary artists who use their artwork as a vehicle to understand their identities. Solomon-Godeau said that the artwork in this exhibition was not concerned with “representational reparations” that are celebratory images of the Other meant to replace the misrepresentations created by dominant power structure.
allowed their often-contradictory natures. With this implication of the exhibition and the institution in change, differentiation between the aims of the artwork and the actions of the exhibition are accepted as part of the process. I see in Solomon-Godeau’s statement the need to move beyond the recognition of diversity as a concept, to explore the ways in which diversity and difference are negotiated in accordance with the dominant power in its specific and local manifestations.

The goal of Chapter One: Exhibiting The Dinner Party has been to elaborate on some of the critical categories of the Sexual Politics exhibition illustrated in the Christopher Knight review, by looking through the review, to see the history of the criticisms of The Dinner Party as they are rehearsed in the Sexual Politics exhibition. The focus on specific thematic groupings and the promotions of the curator’s perspective in the exhibition indicate a format that supports an interrogation of institutional power in contrast to the broad strokes of the women’s survey.

The next two chapters explore the museum as a site of feminist intervention and body art as a feminist subject in exhibition inspiring a reevaluation of feminism. To answer the question: Is The Dinner Party exhibition inherently monumental? ... static icon of commemoration? Or, as Joan Scott asks, is it possible to rethink its monumentality through “the possibility of difference without hierarchical ordering?” I look to the museum’s changing position in society, from assumptive truth-teller to a more free-form learning environment that embraces a myriad of perspectives. I ask whether the exhibition can critically evaluate The Dinner Party’s position in feminist art history without championing the artwork, confirming it as successful despite problems identified in past criticisms.
In Chapter Three, I suggest a way to understand a return to the corporeal as a necessary extension of the connection of theory of the subject and the politics of identity in material experience—a corporeal complicated by the social—and promote re-readings of body art in exhibition as a way by which feminist art history can have more comprehensive access to its own history.
Chapter Two: Transitions: Reading the Museum Space for Feminist Potential

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths. It also means the power to define and rank people..."\textsuperscript{120}

Sexual Politics benefited from a museum identity still in process, which allowed the feminist discourse within the exhibition an opportunity to spill over and contribute to a changing museum identity. The exhibition’s use of feminist methodologies to question its own discourse through analysis of exclusions and allowance for relevant contradictions extended beyond just a renewed engagement with The Dinner Party imagery to encourage an assessment of the role the museum through its particular effect on the artwork.

The decade of the 1990s represented a time of reflection and change for the American art museum where postmodernist questionings of the power of the social institution, coupled with a need to address multiculturalist and feminist awareness of its constituency, moved to the forefront of the minds of exhibition organizers. Two major conference papers (which have subsequently been published as books) at the beginning and at the end of the 1990s considered that the exhibition inspired audiences to engage in the discourse, rather than just accept the display of objects as immutable. In 1988, Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp prescribed this engagement for the 1990s, in a presentation for the Poetics and Politics of Representation conference at the Smithsonian:

\textit{In the United States at this historical moment, especially given the heightened worldwide interest in multicultural and intercultural issues, the inherent contestability of museum exhibitions is bound to open choices made}

in those exhibitions to heated debate. Groups attempting to establish and maintain a sense of community and to assert their social, political and economic claims in the larger world challenge the right of established institutions to control the presentations of their cultures. 121

Robert Storr, then Senior Curator in Painting and Sculpture for the Museum of Modern Art, alluded to this idea of building ‘contestable’ art exhibitions when he addressed his colleagues at the Curating Now: Imaginative Practice, Public Responsibility conference in 2000. Storr admitted that in his ten-year role he steered the meaning of artwork at MOMA:

The fact is, I have been responsible for having “framed” or contextualized art in ways that subtly, albeit unintentionally, altered its meaning or diminished its impact. As a practicing curator, one has to be straightforward not only about the potential for but the likelihood of doing this in a given circumstance. 122

Storr’s call for frank discussion of curatorial ‘framing’ and Karp and Lavine’s ‘contestable exhibitions’ suggested an organizational trend in exhibition-making, even in the nation’s largest and most popular institutions, toward the promotion of a transparent process in museum exhibitions and an active role on the part of the viewer to question the mechanisms of the exhibition.

In the 1990s museum identity was subject to both the scrutiny of hierarchies of power and an increased diversification of audiences. I explore how the self-reflexive initiative was a search for a secure identity for the museum, rooted in a desire to connect to the material experience of the racially, ethically, gendered visitor. This period of the museum-in-transition resulted from changes in the early 1970s. At that time, new initiatives assessing institutional missions and operations identified a need to better service the museum audience. These objectives developed into lasting standardized

122 Marincola and Initiative., "How We Do What We Do. And How We Don't", 5.
operational principles that served as the groundwork for a continued attention to understanding the audience as integral to the definition of a successful museum, and proved fruitful as the audiences in the 1980s and 1990s diversified. In Chapter Three: Dinner and Dancing I relate concepts outlined here to the Sexual Politics exhibition to consider how the status of the museum affected the exhibition thesis itself, tracing how differing institutional roles from the time of The Dinner Party’s original solo configurations to the Sexual Politics’ installation change the understanding of the artwork.

**Audience Concern**

Stephen Weil characterized the trend towards valuing the visitor in his 1988 speech, *The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?* at the Canadian Association of Museums conference as being part of a new museology that promoted a social role for the museum.\(^{123}\) He described this role as a move away from the comforts of a seemingly neutral museum function (i.e. collection care, cataloging and maintenance) to the more challenging step of examining the viewer and how the museum engages in social, political and moral issues with that viewer.\(^{124}\) Weil moved away from the dictionary definition of a curator—as custodian of a collection—to ask curators to consider how best to interact with the other aspects of the museum and how to convey knowledge to the audiences. He remarked in a follow-up essay, *Rethinking the Museum: An Emerging New Paradigm* (1990), that a key characteristic of the new paradigm for museums is a pronounced educational role that is bound to the curatorial presentation of objects, so much so that the duties in many institutions between


\(^{124}\) Ibid.
education and curatorial departments overlap. Standardization practices and museum theory focused on enhancing functionality of the museum through the development of organizational models. The American Association of Museum’s accreditation program, unveiled in 1970, and the essays The Museum Manifesto (1970) by Joseph Veach Noble and Duncan Cameron’s Museum: Temple or Forum? (1971) focused formerly scattered institutions under one umbrella, and helped develop a common vocabulary to address the need for new directions for the museum.

Cameron’s theory sustained throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Former Director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Cameron noticed that museums were trying to be more like hands-on science centers and community centers in order to attract broader audiences. In trying to become more like entertainment centers to counter the sense of elitism and restriction, Cameron felt museums were sacrificing their essential qualities, losing sight of their inherent ability to highlight the visual experience, resulting in an “identity crisis for the museum.” He called for a shedding of elitism, not by diluting the nature of the institution but by striving for an expanded educational role that works within the museum’s visual strengths, by making the collections relevant to a diversified audience. To counter a befuddled identity that moves outside of the museum’ purview to compete with other establishments, Cameron offered museum professionals two institutional types, the temple and the forum, in order to help clarify institutional missions. Cameron attributed to the temple the characteristics of reverence and, to the forum, experimentation.

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125 Ibid., 57-65.
128 Ibid., 61.
The traditional museum as temple represented a space that is a site to worship objects of the culture. This model vets objects through accepted standards of excellence. Historically this model was most common for major city museums whose collections have evolved through the cultivation of patron donations. As previously private collections, these objects reaffirmed the taste and knowledge of the most influential figures in their respective cities. Therefore, the shift from collection as private focus to democratic museum did not always address the desires of diverse audiences. Cameron distinguishes the museum-as-temple as a place of “proved excellence,” collections and exhibitions of objects that stand the test of time rather than appear as trend. 130

In the forum model, the institution Cameron conceives of is more a ‘center’ than a museum. Innovation and experimentation are encouraged in this center, which serves the public as a location where debate is encouraged. More of a “something for everyone” atmosphere, the forum is emboldened to be up-to minute with social issues through absolution from the responsibility to maintain a collection of “time-tested quality.” 131 Cameron describes his forum as an environment that accepts “…without reservation the most radical innovations in art forms, the most controversial interpretation of history, of our own society, of the nature of man, or for that matter, of the nature of the world.” 132 Cameron’s theory makes clear that the forum should be distinct from the museum. 133 Best suited for the Kunsthalle or art center, the forum model is possible because an art center does not have to satisfy demands for collection cohesiveness. That is, the forum is freer to adopt exhibitions that challenge institutional value or topical art exhibitions.

130 Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 67.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 68-9.
133 Ibid., 69.
unrelated to any collecting mission. Also the forum is virtually unable to retreat to what Weil described as the seemingly “neutral aspects of museum function such as collections care.”

Cameron’s models have sustained the test of time offering inspiration for institutional mission making. The temple/forum models set up a dichotomy of audience behavior between reverence and participation. This temple/forum system was still prevalent in the 1990s, except that Cameron’s institutional distinction, that the forum be separate from the museum, was not embraced; rather, a temple-to-forum phenomenon inside museums was evident. When Kathy Halbreich, Walker Art Center Director, discussed her museum’s expansion, at the *Curating Now* conference in the year 2000, she recapped how the extensive visitor surveys and demographic analysis would aid in the museum’s move away from the temple model:

> The Walker Art Center’s emerging plan for an expanded facility and expanded engagement strategies will make visible the fact that we are more than a museum, recognizing the word “center” suggests a focal point of activity and conversation. We want to change the metaphor for a museum from temple to town square. We aim to magnify the ways in which visitors to the Walker can become more active participants in a series of memorable experiences a based on discovering the links between art and life, as well as among multiple visitors.134

Karp and Lavine are also decidedly pro-forum in their *Exhibiting Cultures* introduction. Without acknowledging Cameron’s distinction between museum and non-museum institutions, they recommend the forum model as a direction for emerging multicultural museums.135 They perceive forum innovation and experimentation as advantageous for the museum and not only advocate this move as positive for multicultural awareness in

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art and audience, but also suggest that no serious institution would consider the otherwise retrograde temple stance.\textsuperscript{136}

Cameron warned against incorporating the forum into the museum because it dilutes each mission, limits the experimentation of the forum, and overextends the focus of the collection and exhibition programs.\textsuperscript{137} His distinction between institutional models gets lost on Karp and Lavine and on Halbreich with the misunderstanding that it is only the forum that incorporates an expanded audience. Cameron stresses non-elitist treatments of presentation in both organizational models. Despite his concern that the museum’s inherent ability to highlight the visual may be overshadowed by too much attention lavished on the museum as activity center, he does not advocate a retrenchment to the reverence of the temple. He is committed to reforming the temple model so it reflects a “creation of an equality of cultural opportunity.”\textsuperscript{138} In reforming the museum’s focus to better serve its audience, he suggests presentations that highlight the objects in such a way that viewers are able to relate the information to contemporary society.\textsuperscript{139} However, Cameron’s reformed temple does not go far enough to address the makeup of the audience.

Cameron’s organizational models are designed to encourage museums to clarify their missions with the significant side effect of setting up oppositional thinking between quality and experimentation, between vetting artwork through time-tested standards of excellence and allowing revisionist perspectives to influence decisions. When Karp and Lavine simply ‘flip’ the hierarchal ordering of the dichotomy to favor the forum over the temple, without considering how the increasing of voices and debates inside the museum operates, we are left with an institution that is speaking for many others, rather

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{137} Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 69.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 67.
than for an elite few, but not necessarily speaking with those others. This flip ignores Cameron’s plea for separate institutions that preserve experimentation of the forum as politically uninhibited. Karp and Lavine’s contemporary museum expands its audiences without any real overhaul of the process of access, a condition where the multicultural imperative winds up appearing as mere pluralism.

If Cameron’s institutional distinction is disregarded, then museums wishing to incorporate the qualities of both models are left to develop quality parameters in the museum that speak to both “time-tested” artwork and emerging art pushed to be reviewed with the same set of criteria. Gail Anderson in the introduction to her anthology Reinventing the Museum (2004) suggested that in the 1990s, museums were able to choose both models, unlike the period in which Cameron wrote his essay.\textsuperscript{140} I suggest that far from concretely accepting both stances under one roof, the negotiation of the multiple views sent museum identity in the 1990s into a state of flux: a transitional time where neither the “reversal” of the dichotomy nor acceptance of “both” stances is fully resolved. My goal is to show that because both, the “reformed temple” and the forum have limitations, integration of the dichotomy is necessary in order to move forward with a fully formed museum identity.

I read the move from temple to forum as also complicit in maintaining hierarchical order by appearing to represent others and limiting impact. Flipping the hierarchical ordering from traditional temple to forum does not do away with the original canonical parameters of quality. The inclusion of both models in the museum prognosticates similar under-achievement because it most often appears in additional programs, separate projects in the institution not truly affecting one another. Examples of forum initiative inside the traditional temple museum appear as small focus galleries that are

\textsuperscript{140} Anderson, Introduction: Reinventing the Museum, 11.

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experimental spaces earmarked for emerging artists and curators such as at the Whitney or the Hammer in the form of completely separate programming.\textsuperscript{141} This separateness limits effect or participation by the institution as a whole; rather the special programs are momentary interventions that do not interfere with the larger scale exhibitions.

Cameron’s museum models focused new attention on serving a larger constituency, but he relied on traditional markers of museum quality, which uphold the exclusionary practices of collecting and exhibiting. Cameron maintained an allegiance to the word ‘quality’, not an interrogation of it for determining museum identity. This hegemonic value system insists on “time-tested” art always already a reflection of a community’s values.\textsuperscript{142} For example, if the museum is known for its Pop Art collection, an art movement dominated by white American men, it creates a collecting focus that requires continued research and further acquisition within this focus with better and better “museum-quality” works, so finite resources tend to be devoted to areas of the collection that have already been established. Breaking down the dichotomy of institutional models, under feminist and multiculturalist discourse, to allow for questioning of each model would approach delimiting the institutions in order to revamp their exhibition and collection policies. To resolve the temple/forum dichotomy is to expose its hierarchical structure, to undermine the organizational either/or distinction, overcoming a simplified solution or “corrective” in a reversal of hierarchies.


\textsuperscript{142} Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 67.
Svetlana Alpers’s concept of “museum effect” and Carol Duncan’s notion of “secular ritual in liminal space,” descriptions of the museum’s inherent ability to highlight the visual and isolate the object, may be used as tools for the re-assessment of museum practice. As the institutional models prove suspect the concepts of museum-effect and secular ritual become examples of counter-intuitive temple qualities that disrupt assumptions regarding the forum. Svetlana Alpers, in the essay “The Museum as a Way of Seeing” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, identified the “museum effect” as a process by which an object moves into a privileged realm of the visual.\(^\text{143}\) Alpers argued for engaging this museum quality of turning all cultural objects into art as a way to understand how exhibitions shape the objects they choose to highlight.\(^\text{144}\) She pointed to circumstances where the museum obscures “seeing” a work of art in curatorial choices such as hanging mechanisms, lighting, and even in deciding the arrangement style. Overall her essay suggested that all of these elements contribute to how the viewer “sees or not” the products of our culture. The “museum effect” on the objects points to an active role on the part of the museum in affecting the way in which the viewer receives a work of art.

Carol Duncan in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* employs a similarly museum-transforming effect in her use of Arnold van Genep’s “liminality.” In this case, the transformation does not take place in the object but in the audience. Duncan describes the liminal as a transforming mode of consciousness—suspension of daily life for the visitor to the museum.\(^\text{145}\) This quality of museum experience is best expressed in the reverential but reformed temple model, to define active roles for both the museum and audience in an otherwise seemingly passive process of highlighting the visual. The visitor’s behavior manifests a series of anticipated, ritualistic actions encountering


\(^{144}\) Ibid., 27.

objects in an unfolding narrative of history supplied by the museum. However, Carol
Duncan disrupts passive temple enactment by changing the expected pattern of
behavior to uncover the museum’s position of power in society. To better characterize
the museum’s engagement with the visitor, Carol Duncan evokes the concept of ritual to
encompass both active and contemplative behaviors within museum experience. 146

My reading benefits from Duncan’s imagining of ritual for its potential to disrupt
implied museum objectivity.147 Duncan describes the museum as ritual in two senses:
first, as a space that is rehearsed through recognizable qualities of architecture and
social arrangement as purveyor of science and objective truth; and second, as
performance where prescribed behaviors of the visitors order the knowledge gained:

*These are: first, the achievement of a marked-off “liminal” zone of time and
space in which visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical
lives, open themselves to a different quality of experience; and second, the
organization of the museum setting as a kind of script or scenario which
visitors perform. I have also argued that western concepts of the aesthetic
experience, generally taken as the art museum’s raison d’ être, match up
rather closely to the kind of rationales often given for traditional rituals
(enlightenment, revelation, spiritual equilibrium, or rejuvenation).*148

The contemplation implied in museum-as-temple can be an opportunity to separate from
the everyday environment in order to access the underlying mechanisms of power. Amid
this heightened awareness for how the gendered museum space functions, Duncan’s
ritual breaks the unquestioned objectivity of the museum, playing with the reverential
nature to promote questioning of the authority of museum knowledge. Duncan does not
make a distinction between temple and forum stances; she sees these ritual behaviors
enacted in most modern museums. Her theory of the museum as ritual space takes on
heightened awareness in active visual engagement with the object and allows for a

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., 8-9.
148 Ibid., 20.
rethinking of the process to create a new set of meanings. Duncan’s ritual uses the visitor to explore the museum’s myth making through prescribed patterns of behavior. Duncan reads the space and arrangement of objects as interrupting an unquestioned association of the museum with objectivity and truth. She explains that since the Enlightenment a religious/secular dichotomy has informed the way in which Western societies understand truth, and she supposes that social institutions have been in the process of ordering along this dichotomy, with mosques, temples and churches on one side of the dichotomy and courthouses, museums, and state capitals on the secular side. Duncan writes:

> Each kind of site is associated with an opposite kind of truth and assigned to one or the other side of the religious/secular dichotomy. That dichotomy, which structures so much of the modern public world and now seems so natural, has its own history. It provided the ideological foundation for the Enlightenment’s project of breaking the power of influence of the church.

Duncan opened the possibility for a reading of the museum as subjective by breaking the normative connection of the museum with the secular side of the dichotomy, creating an opportunity to see the standards of quality, considered objective, for their underlying hierarchical structure. I see Duncan’s conceptions of ritual enacted in the museum experience as subverting truth by envisioning knowledge learned in the museum setting as personal and performative rather than universal and fixed. Just as Duncan evokes the ritual to disrupt the museum’s association with scientific objectivity, I disrupt the unquestioned move towards the forum to expose the seemingly “politically correct” espousal of inclusiveness of the forum as false. Dislocating museum knowledge from its false pretense to universality disrupts a truth that inherently contains traditional assertions of patriarchal power. The museum is gendered space; I see this gendering in

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149 Ibid., 8-9.
150 Ibid., 8.
151 Ibid., 7.
the prescribed processional route through Western Art History. This patri-linear approach highlights the male geniuses while, often separating women’s art into tangents from the singular route of Art historical progress. By veering from the typical processional route, the gendered visitor takes a role in determining the truths.

The viewer controls the speed, depth, and order of the receipt of materials. Elaine Heumann Gurian in the essay, *Noodling around with Exhibition Opportunities* writes:

*Museum exhibitions are certainly not school classrooms, which enforce incremental, cumulative learning through authoritarian leadership over rigidly defined, constant social units…. Exhibitions are places of free choice. Try as we might, the public continually thwarts our attempts to teach incrementally in an exhibition. They come when they want, leave when they want and look at what they want while they are there.*

Although I do not agree with Heumann Gurian, that an exhibition experience is entirely free choice, it is this decision-making within the exhibition (a non-linear, time-variable learning) coupled with the heightened sense of the museum ritual that interrupts normative hierarchies of gendered practice.

For the art museum to open itself fully to multiple readings, it must embrace irregular reconfigurations of space, juxtapositions of seemingly disparate elements, and inclusion of works not considered to be traditional “museum-quality,” that is, works by women artists, not as tokenism or as corrective, but with acceptance in order to highlight the very understanding of museum-quality. This will jar the visitor out of the typical ritual.

The feminist exhibition is in a prime position to complete these actions, for the methodologies encourage non-linear configurations of artwork, along with the inclusion of extensive contextual resources such as didactics and reference materials. The

inclusion of additional programming such as video, symposia and workshops can also promote institutional critique that lends the exhibition to a new transparency.

As the museum shifts from the functional collection’s care to a viewer centered educational role, a new paradigm offers a potential bridge between academic and popular forms of feminism due to the museum’s unique position from which to frame arguments. It is the museum that is both education and entertainment, serving both the general and academic publics. I suggest that feminist approaches aid moves toward a reconciliation of the museum temple/forum dichotomy. By advocating exposure of seemingly neutral concepts of arrangement style for how they can shape museum knowledge. Feminism can use this move towards the visitor importance and the dissolution of the organizational dichotomy of temple/forum for its own political agenda. Thereby further expose the power structure as patriarchal, and the canon as excluding women.

Dinner Party and Sexual Politics in the Transitional Museum

Remember The Dinner Party’s relationship to the museum exhibition, Chicago sought acceptance under existing museum standards of excellence, with the same accolades ascribed to her work as to the work of her male contemporaries, yet her mode of work contributed to an alternative history for women.\textsuperscript{153} Chicago preferred the museum showing (that reverential museum ritual) to the alternative space, but was wary of relying on traditional museum audiences.\textsuperscript{154} She targeted new audiences in an independent marketing campaign, of seeking woman that had not been regular museum visitors, who were thus less equipped to enact the ritual. In this way, Chicago recreated

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 13, 214.
the museum audience for her artwork rather than adapting an existing audience. In so doing she began disruption of the very secular ritual she coveted for her work.

The contradictory nature of Chicago’s actions for *The Dinner Party* mimicked some of the temple to forum discord evident in the mixed messages, trying to carve out space for challenging museum orthodoxy while simultaneously seeking artworld acceptance or legitimacy by showing in the museum. Chapter Three explores the way in which the contradictory nature of *The Dinner Party* exhibits possibilities for feminism’s future, as *Sexual Politics* carves out feminist space amid the temple/forum identity flux.
Chapter Three: Dinner and Dancing at the Sexual Politics Exhibition

If people behave as if they’re not in a museum, I’ll be happy.  

In 2000 Katy Deepwell, editor of the online art journal *n. paradoxa*, invited some of her artist, critic and curator colleagues to respond to the following questions as part of an issue entitled *Defining Experiences: Feminist Exhibition in the 1990s*: What is your most memorable experience of a feminist/women’s art exhibition in the past 10 years and why? Did it challenge or change your understanding of feminism? Article respondent, Amelia Jones recounted her experience curating *Sexual Politics*. Jones wrote:

*This experience of organizing Sexual Politics both challenged and changed my understanding of feminism in that I received such hostile responses from many feminists before and after the show opened and catalogue was published. While I would have welcomed judicious criticism of the show itself, which was certainly flawed, these responses were generally (in the case where I heard from people before the show opened) from women who had not spoken to me or seen the checklist or, after the show had opened, had not seen the exhibition itself. In other words, the hostility was free-ranging and apparently had more to do with old histories (old antagonisms with Chicago herself, primarily) and rumor than with the ideas I was attempting to explore.*

*The most disappointing part of this for me was the tendency to try to silence me: I was overtly told in several public fora that one was not allowed or supposed to take Chicago’s work seriously in any way. This negative evaluation (which apparently was by 1996 to be taken as fixed in stone) had already been decided; I was admonished, by the series of essays in the 1970s that panned her work as essentialist. To make a long story short, this experience disillusioned me vis-à-vis feminism, pointing to its limitations as a shared discourse of liberation and equality and the tendency (even, or*

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perhaps especially?) for feminists to resort to the same rhetorical weapons of silencing and exclusion that I had thought we were joined in fighting against. We’re only human after all. But we could be a little more self-aware!

I quote Jones’ *n.paradoxa* contribution at length here, not only as a chance to hear frank impressions of her relations with feminist colleagues, but also more importantly as a way to refocus attention on the difficulties in her curatorial project. Jones’s recapitulation of her exhibition experience in this public forum indicates a continuation of her desire for transparent access to the exhibition—a feminist revisionist perspective, moving the monument away from static commemoration. I read this internal awareness as a postmodern dance where the self-reflexive nature of the process becomes part of the reception of the exhibition itself, embracing contradictory or double meanings in exhibition as an integral part of the promotion of further dialogue.

The exhibition assembled feminist artwork that utilized the female body in ways that generated discussion to be taken ‘seriously.’ The essentialism debate was not revived in this exhibition in order to be finalized, rather the exhibition assembled work of similar and differing styles to mobilize feminist politics again to provide access to works of material experience. The *Sexual Politics* exhibition evoked body images that are not inherently meaningful, but time and place contingent. That is, they utilized material experience as a way to access the social construction of femininity. The works evoke postmodern political strategies for exposing the space between intention and reception. They disrupt automatic and singular readings, some by showing marginalized women in confrontational pictures that mimic stereotypes, others by objectifying patriarchal language through textural inquiries and/or the use of incongruent words and images.

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In her essay *Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics*, Janet Wolff recounts a story from the *Guardian* newspaper on the emergence of a topless woman protestor from the water at a male only bathing area at Sandy Cove, in Dublin, Ireland. The scantily clad sunbather used her body as the site for demonstration against the exclusionary practices of the beach that limited access based on gender. Wolff discusses this demonstration as a limited example of feminist body politics that is co-optable by the male gaze on two fronts: in the personal interaction with the male bathers and in the subsequent representations of the incident for a general public in the *Guardian*. In this latter documentation of the incident, the photograph, although accompanied by the story in the newspaper, takes on a character of its own, distanced from the original political impetus. The photograph can appear tabloid-esque, losing political poignancy. Wolff uses this story to demonstrate that feminist body politics are open to counter readings. As the Dublin protest reached an audience beyond the male-only beach in the form of photographic representation, this secondary framing of the political act shifted attention away from the immediate protest and exposed the imagery to a more general objectification. Despite such risk Wolff announced in *Reinstating Corporeality* that the naked female body is a vital platform for the future of feminist politics, because “The body has been systematically repressed and marginalized in western culture with specific practices, ideologies, and discourses controlling and defining the female body.” She suggested embracing a body politics that addresses the social construction of femininity in the tensions between the normative and feminist

readings. She makes space for a new feminist body art that renders its particular time
and place apparent, deconstructs the social construction of femininity and its material
affects on woman of diverse races, classes and ethnicities, to anchor theoretical
investigations of gender, rather than wading in a sea of unstable identities.\footnote{160}

Wolff reiterated the importance of Pollock and Parker’s deconstructive
approach—to view femininity as a social construction of patriarchy, not as fixed
biological determinant—but discourages avoiding the use of the body based on the
essentialism charge alone.\footnote{161} Wolff cites dance because it is a medium based on the
body, as a good example of a subversive space in which “reinstating corporeality” for
feminist art is possible.\footnote{162} Picturing the female body for feminist art, Wolff professed,
must function within the discourse of the social construction of femininity.\footnote{163} Her
“solution,” or at least avenue, for this is a deconstructed dance that “lays bare the
medium” to expose its inner workings: “What this means’ Wolf elaborates, “is that dance
can only be subversive when it questions and exposes the construction of the body in
culture. In doing so, it necessarily draws attention to itself as dance.”\footnote{164}

Wolff’s vision of a reinstatement of corporeality in the medium of dance borrows
ideas of a feminist potential of postmodern dance from Elizabeth Dempster’s essay
\textit{Woman Writing the Body}.\footnote{165} Dempster described divergences in feminist potential in
dance from classical to modern and postmodern. Modern dance developed strategic
movements that appear to come from the center of the body and erupt outward,
representing an interiority of the subject, a natural weighty expression of the body, at

\footnote{160} Ibid., 138.
\footnote{161} Ibid., 128, 35.
\footnote{162} Ibid., 136.
\footnote{163} Ibid., 137.
\footnote{164} Ibid.
times appearing as tension between the interior and exterior of the body in contracting and rhythmic fluctuations.\textsuperscript{166} The representation of truth sought in modern dance through expressions of interiority celebrated the ‘natural’ movements and countered the classical ballerina’s traditional training and ethereal pictorial ideal.\textsuperscript{167} In modern dance expression of interior truths repeats the essentialist feminine by celebrating the woman dancer as being close to nature, a reiteration of the gendered nature/culture dichotomy.\textsuperscript{168}

Postmodern dance, however, divorces the expressive movements of modern dance from truth, using the character of modern dance to expose the process of dance as a medium.\textsuperscript{169}

Postmodern dance can appear fractured because is not a codified set of movements, the arbitrary nature of uncommon actions are subject to a conditional time and place.\textsuperscript{170} Dempster described qualities of postmodern dance, writing:

\begin{quote}
The postmodern is not a newly defined dance language but a strategy and a method of inquiry which challenge and interrogate the process of representation itself. Once the relation between movement and its referent is questioned, the representational codes and conventions of dance are opened to investigation. Analysis, questioning and manipulation of the codes and conventions which inscribe the body in dance are distinguishing features of the postmodern mode.\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

She championed postmodern dance as a site for feminist activity in its challenge to the notion of the natural in performance of the female body. Meaning for postmodern dance movement refuses to be settled in any one reading. Dempster cited these strategies in the disparate actions of Trisha Brown speaking and dancing simultaneously but not
coherently and in Yvonne Rainer’s non-idealized, non-conformist overweight body that draws attention to itself as being outside normalized parameters for a dancer.\textsuperscript{172}

Following Elizabeth Dempster’s discussion of dance, Wolff expounded upon the types of body movements that highlight a denial of difference in the stylized, controlled movements of classical dance versus the irregular and individual movements of modern dance and the disruptive uncertain movements with self-reflexive posturing of postmodern dance.\textsuperscript{173} Wolff specifically identifies space for ‘reinstating corporeality’ to feminism in postmodern dance that incorporates both professional and non-professional dancers in tandem, extending to the viewer a glimpse of the medium creating tension through juxtaposition of the various dancers.\textsuperscript{174} Wolff sees dance as a natural space for the subversion of normative constructions of the body, given the centrality of the body and the marginalization of the medium in general. Wolff also encourages a ‘reinstatement of corporeality’ in other visual arts:

\textit{Any body politics, therefore must speak about the body, stressing its materiality, and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation. Feminist artists and critics have suggested strategies of this kind of intervention, including ironic quotation of works by men, juxtaposition of text and image which challenge representation, addressing the construction of femininity in the work itself, incorporating the self-reflexive commentary on the mode of representation employed, and what Mary Kelly has called the ‘deappropriation’ of the image.}\textsuperscript{175}

Along the same lines as Wolff, Lynda Nead, in the chapter, “Redrawing the Lines,” in her book \textit{The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality}, suggests a possibility for feminist body art in the 1990s. Nead identifies contemporary feminist photography as a potential site of contemporary feminist body art. She notes women photographers, Mary Duffy and Jo Spence (fig.24 & 25), who have incorporated images of their own nude

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 47-48.
\textsuperscript{173} Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," 136.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
bodies to explore positions outside the normative parameters of desire by exposing their
own disabled and ill bodies.\textsuperscript{176} Nead recognized a potential—for showing the body—of
artists that picture woman on the periphery of the gaze to expose the parameters of
Universal beauty.\textsuperscript{177}

Like Wolff, Lynda Nead is suspicious of a complete avoidance of the nude for
feminism; her proposal to continue to explore feminist art of the body involves a second
look at the condemnation of early feminist body art. In the chapter, \textit{Breaking Open the
Boundaries}, Nead looks back to 1970s feminist art for inspiration. She writes:

\begin{quote}
\textit{It seems a little too easy now, with the advantages of hindsight, to dispatch
women’s art based on female sexual imagery, but the problems of
essentialism should not obscure the radical intervention that this work made
in the 1970s. At times, it was able to unmask in quite unprecedented ways
the contradictions within the dominant codes of aesthetic permissibility and
the representation of the female body}.\textsuperscript{178}
\end{quote}

Lynda Nead and Janet Wolff proposed the diverse subject located in specific historical,
racial, and economic position as the potentially political feminist body, functioning
outside essentialist confines to overturn patriarchal value systems. Understanding that
the risk is always there for patriarchal re-appropriation (as in the example of the
\textit{Guardian} photograph) there should be an interrogation in the space between the
intention, encounter and the reception of the art object, noting that the intervening
environment—the specific time and place--must be part of the interrogation. I consider
the secondary framing of the nude female body in protest in the newspaper as a similar
condition to the framing that occurs in the process of exhibiting feminist body works of
art in a museum. The museum metaphorically reframes the feminist artworks to uphold,
counter and posit completely new readings under the rubric of an exhibition name.

\textsuperscript{176} Nead, \textit{The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality}, 72.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 66.
Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggested, while organizing her *Mistaken Identities* exhibition that the awareness of the museum as a ‘privileged site of power’ should carry with it a responsibility to “correct” the lack of diversity, by organizing exhibitions that interrogate normative gender and racial hierarchies that determine museum acceptance.¹⁷⁹ This responsibility comes at a time where the postmodern museum’s identity is in formation.

Postmodernism looks at truth not as set in stone but reiterated in language, so much so that it appears to be constant. I borrow two concepts of postmodern performativity to understand the conditions of 1990s museum identity formation. First, I look to Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performative. Butler supposed gender practices to be only apparent through the language used to describe them, rather than linked directly to biology. She asserted that the social construction of femininity informs and reiterates its gender, implicating a patriarchal hierarchical structure that reinforces a power over women in ritualistic acts of gender socialization.¹⁸⁰ Uncovering the process of gendering knowledge, then, potentially avails opportunity to disrupt normative gender confines. Secondly, I reference Jean-François Lyotard’s general sense of postmodern performative knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard argues that in postmodernism there is no discourse that dictates truth; there is dissolution of a totality of meaning. According to Lyotard, a system of performative knowledge based on efficiency replaced truth.¹⁸¹ This move away from metanarratives to a decentered system of performativity of local narratives creates opportunity for nonhierarchical forms of knowledge. I apply this ‘postmodern condition’ of multiple narratives to the museum, with museum-derived knowledge no longer standing as de facto Truth. The museum no longer can function unwittingly as a traditional temple.

Lyotard’s postmodern unsettling of the objectivity of truth coincides with Duncan’s disruption of the museum’s secular ritual, in that both concepts break the normative construct of the museum as site of objective scientific truth. Furthermore, there is a connection to Lyotard’s description of postmodern knowledge imbedded in both of Cameron’s organizational models—reformed temple and forum—through their connection to audience, calling for an understanding of objects, requiring an ability on the part of curators to relate objects to contemporary society in order to efficiently carry forth knowledge.

Given this postmodern environment, I read the central thesis of the Sexual Politics exhibition as “successful” for feminism by offering the concept of postmodern multiple narratives as a way to re-establish a context for The Dinner Party that sidesteps both its iconic stature and essentialist nature in order to explain its contradictory qualities. The Dinner Party, with other artworks, environment and audience can be thought of as participating in a postmodern dance that interrupts the Classical dance of traditional museum ritual. Elizabeth Dempster’s dynamic of postmodernist dance between the dancer and audience influences my reading of the exhibition:

In contrast, [to the Classical Ballerina] dancing located in the space opened by postmodernist practice demands not a forgetting but a heightened awareness of the commonality of all bodies and the particularity of each. This dance which plays across, puts on and takes off a variety of modes of symbolic discourse, is written through a pedestrian body. It is a dancing which stresses the materiality, the fleshliness – and therefore the vulnerability and mortality – of all bodies: the dancer’s and, by a reflexive action, the spectator’s. 182

This postmodern dance has the capacity to disrupt the dominant codes for watching women. For the male audience postmodern strategies can upset the automatic co-optation of the body, by using images and actions outside expected parameters. For the

182 Dempster, "Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances," 49.
female audience the postmodern dance has an opportunity to bridge the gap between performer and viewer by connecting the audience to material experience. Unlike the ethereal body of the classical ballerina the postmodern dancer can be a ‘mundane body’ and thus one that can be empathized, creating a scenario where each audience relates and each audience creates a set of meanings—an open-ended space of intention and reception.\(^{183}\)

Applying Wolff’s potential of postmodern dance for feminism, I view the museum exhibition as a performance where viewers actuate the artworks (“the dancers”) through curatorial direction (“choreography”) in the museum (“the set”). In this scenario, the visitor controls the rate of the performance and ultimately directs various readings. The museum ritual in this scenario moves from processional to dance. Seen specifically in the re-imagined encounter with the Dinner Party, I read Sexual Politics as analogous to postmodern dance for reinstatement of corporeality for feminist art. As Wolff requires for feminist corporeal dance, Sexual Politics incorporates mechanisms that “lay bare the medium” in order to expose where the artwork accepts this exhibition’s re-signification and resists the exhibition’s aims. Sexual Politics uses the much-publicized controversy of The Dinner Party’s essentialist charge to review how feminist art utilized the body both historically and in contemporary treatments, self-reflexively turning the feminist methodology into a subject itself, to expose how the limitations on body art functioned for feminism.

\(^{183}\) Ibid.
Sexual Politics and the Museum Effect

Just as Christopher Knight missed the point of the exhibition—contextualization of the Dinner Party by assembling artwork to re-constitute its history—Jones overlooked her use of the museum as a large part of her success. In Sexual Politics, the re-assessment of the body for feminist art created an environment that synergistically affects the institutional structure of the museum and the feminist historical project. Sexual Politics participated in a rethinking of museum identity. If the museum is to be a dynamic center with multiple voices heard, as in the desired museum as forum, it need not abandon a museum’s inherent practice of to cordon-off the objects, as in the museum-as-temple, in order to accommodate a postmodern audience. Rather like the premise of Sexual Politics—that The Dinner Party’s position can be reconciled by interrogating the space between competing viewpoints, the museum, too, must interrogate multiple views for hidden hierarchal distinctions. Jones concluded her introduction essay by suggesting the exhibition format opens up feminist art history to reappraisal:

...I hope that this show will contribute to the historicization of feminist art. Positioning the Dinner Party within the complex history of its reception and placing its for the first time among other feminist works, the exhibition attempts to reopen now-reified debates about feminist practice.¹⁸⁴

Jones acknowledged that museum scholarship could enhance feminist theory just as easily as it could be affected by it, but she stops short of explaining why the museum might be conducive to the reappraisal. The Dinner Party strikes to the heart of some of

the most central questions of museum power, by focusing on the legitimation of the artwork through museum acceptance, while trying to subvert the existing set of standards that have obscured woman’s achievements.

Jones and Hammer Museum director Henry Hopkins chose the exhibition format to explore the Dinner Party’s position in art history. But without an extended discussion of the value of its placement in the museum again (i.e. Chicago’s original desire for museum validation or to retool museum audiences) in the catalog or didactics, Jones’s thesis does come out looking, as Knight criticizes, like “an illustrated lecture on feminist theory.” It suggests a theoretical exercise that rather misses the potential of its own medium: to employ the medium’s characteristics for creating cross-generational, cross-cultural, cross-thematic arrangements not completely in the control of the organizers, and existing in the space between the academy and popular culture. 185

Sexual Politics was a single venue exhibition organized by the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center in Los Angeles California, which then director Hopkins noted as a means to resituate an artwork produced in Los Angeles, but never exhibited there. 186 Occidental Petroleum entrepreneur Armand Hammer founded the museum in 1990, as a monument to the corporation. The museum struggled to complete its new building (constructed next door to the company headquarters) and remain viable following their founder’s death just three weeks after the museum’s grand opening. 187 In 1994, the University of California Los Angeles assumed responsibility for the museum and merged its Wight Art Gallery and Grunwald Center for Graphic Arts with the

185 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'," 4.
Hammer Museum.\textsuperscript{188} The creation of this full scale Los Angeles museum shaped by Hammer’s private collection of 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} Century painting and prints and a University gallery, was just two years prior to the opening of Sexual Politics. The Hammer museum was positioned to bridge the divide between popular culture and academics with traditional roots as private/corporate collection turned public. Current director of the Hammer Museum, Ann Philbin promotes this connection on the museum’s website:

\begin{quote}
The museum is positioned—both physically and metaphorically—at the gateway between the city of Los Angeles and the University of California Los, Angeles (UCLA). The Museum is the entry through which the general public can gain access to the diverse riches of the University community.\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

In The Dinner Party’s original solo exhibition, Chicago recognized a need to reach a non-artworld or academic public for the success of her feminist artwork. Effort to design her own audience beyond the typical museum patron foreshadows The Hammer Museum goals and mirrors Cameron’s promotion for audiences to understand art as it relates to contemporary society. In conflict with Chicago’s desire to redefine the audience for the museum is her reliance on the traditional museum ritual. She looked to the museum for validation of her work. This paradoxical situation, that the Dinner Party can harbor a postmodern sense of tailoring the audience to the specific work while reiterating the exclusionary system which it disrupts by seeking museum validation, is not resolved in the Sexual Politics showing of the artwork; instead, a new understanding of the process by which the museum functions to reinforce existing standards accompanied the readings. As in Janet Wolff’s story of the Dublin protestors, there is tension between intention and reception in a political action.

The placement of The Dinner Party in Sexual Politics questions its monumental nature. Jones set out to recontextualize this work among the work of Chicago’s feminist

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
peers and within the community in which it was created; however, the installation tells a competing story. For in the most pragmatic of reasons when staging the exhibition, *The Dinner Party*, because of its sheer scale, commanded a floor unto itself at the Hammer Museum, in a gallery space separated from the rest of the exhibition. The exhibition signage (fig. 26) placed outside the gallery has a logo and title font consistent with the *Sexual Politics* catalog cover. However the individual signs read: “Part I: *The Dinner Party*” and “Part II.” The numeric distinction creates a didactic separation of the *Dinner Party* from the rest of the artwork, whereas the exhibition catalog integrates the two parts. *The Dinner Party* also resists continuity between itself and the rest of the exhibition through contrasting treatment of the gallery spaces. The dimly lit space of *The Dinner Party* draws the visitor to the center, turning attention away from its housing. In contrast, the rest of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition was light, all the walls were white, rooms were punctuated with movable walls, and two-dimensional wall art predominated the sculptural work. Exterior light entered the space, reconnecting the visitor to the outside world. From this standpoint, *The Dinner Party* resists re-signification as “part of an immediate community.” The monolithic stature of *The Dinner Party* appears to be “built in” when highlighted in the stark contrast of installation styles. Jones attempted to counteract this separation by including a large number of Chicago’s studies for *The Dinner Party* within the main *Sexual Politics* exhibition, carrying forward the themes addressed in *The Dinner Party* into the main hall.  

One of the thematic groupings in *Sexual Politics*, “A Woman’s Place is in the Home”: *Politicizing the Domestic Sphere* juxtaposed four of Chicago’s china plates from the *Butterfly Goddesses and Other Specimens* series (1974) (fig. 27) with Mierle

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190 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'." Knight faulted Jones for this heavy emphasis on Chicago, given that there is already the overwhelming presence of *The Dinner Party*.
Laderman Ukeles' *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, from the *Maintenance Art Performance Series* (1969-1977) (fig.28). The domestic element of *The Dinner Party*, its selection of the museum, as the environment in which the domestic can be “elevated” to a higher level of importance in patriarchal culture, is a more particularized facet when viewed in juxtaposition with the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Chicago’s *Butterfly Goddesses and Other Specimens* series highlights the feminine domestic domain to “elevate” the importance of craft. Chicago’s early china painting functions as a portal to the discussion of the celebrating the domestic sphere in *The Dinner Party*. Ukeles, in her *Transfer: The Maintenance of an Art Object*, drew a more direct connection between museum work and the domestic sphere. In *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) (fig. 29) Ukeles defined domestic chores as art. Her artwork would no longer be separate from her everyday life, and Ukeles stated she would complete her household duties on view at a museum to highlight the amount of care and time it takes to maintain a household, elevating these activities to a distinguished level of art. To demonstrate her manifesto Ukeles completed a series of performance pieces, entitled *Maintenance Art Performance Series* (1969-77), where she lived, cooked and cleaned in the museum. In the *Transfer: The Maintenance of an Art Object* documentation photograph of a performance at The Wadsworth Athenaeum Ukeles upturned her own series by working with museum preparators on their chores, cleaning and preparing art objects on display. *Transfer* highlights how similar activities, when taken into the context of the museum, change their gendered identities: where the household chores are associated as woman’s work, similar duties completed at the museum, but predominantly by men, have a more professional appearance. This connection with the everyday relocates the ritual as a distancing mechanism, removes the disconnection with the everyday, and marks the museum as a gendered space. Ukeles demonstrated the gendering of duties
as their environment encodes them. She blurred boundaries between artist and audience, heightening a sense of the ritual of the everyday in both the museum and beyond. Her photographs and manifesto expose a similar level of care but along a hierarchical division between the care of museum collections and the care of one’s home. Ukeles insisted that the maintenance in household chores or in the care of the museum collection could become the art rather than impede the production of her art. For *Sexual Politics*, Ukeles elevated the domestic task to the level of art more explicitly than Chicago did. Ukeles interrogated the “museum effect” more directly in her manifesto, to demonstrate the domestic as art. In each case, though, the value is at the point at which the museum intervenes to disrupt the domestic sphere’s hierarchy of art. Ukeles and Chicago alike are relocating the ritual of the domestic sphere to the arena of the museum; the presence of Ukeles’ work lends a more in depth understanding of the aims of *The Dinner Party* regarding museums and domesticity.

*Sexual Politics* held an interesting, contradictory position concerning chronological organization of the artwork. On the one hand, Jones’s thematic groupings disrupted the notion of linear progress for a more synchronic model of feminism. On the other hand, in her exhibition catalog, she relies heavily on chronology. Jones through this curatorial juxtaposition that there are overlaps in generational differences and distinctions to show that the ‘stages’ of feminist theory never cleanly apply to feminist visual arts. Jones exhibited several artworks completed in 1979: *Post Partum Document, The Dinner Party*, as well as Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still #35* (fig. 30), all utilizing very different approaches to politicizing the domestic and maternal sphere for feminist art. This conglomeration dispelled the assumption that 1970s feminism can be wholly represented in Chicago’s approach. The stylistic comparisons of Hannah Wilke’s late 1960s ambiguous vaginal sculptures and the untitled vulvar “portraits” (1994) of Judie
Bamber (fig. 31) dispel this myth in the “Politics of Cunt Art” grouping. This comparison foils the notion that *The Dinner Party* originated or foreclosed use of such quintessentially 1970s strategies of feminist work. This confluence of thematic issues informing the organization of the exhibition refers to a disruption of patri-linear thinking that is, as Nanette Salomon writes, a refusal of the father-son relationship of art history:

*The play set in motion here is a perpetual one, between submission to established authority and innovation within its preset terms. Artists thereby may ‘change the history of art’ insofar as they can be located within this father/son logic. It is critical to analyze some of the practices that situate woman outside this logic.*

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In addition, it suggests a reading that undermines one of the main critiques of *The Dinner Party*: its retention of the patriarchal notion of history and the desire to write “great woman artists” into that history without interrogating the process by which they gain this acceptance. The thematic groupings in this sense interrogated how the traditional art museum was organized. Generally museums rely on chronological organization by region and, then again, by artistic movements; *Sexual Politics* more readily accepted a cross-contamination, playing off a sense of bricolage against the scientific categorization of culture of in the traditional museum in spatial suppositions. The thematic groupings create exhibition arrangements that are less circumscribed and more free form with exciting juxtapositions, rather than strict adherences to the chronological, media-oriented or avant-garde formats. In a contradictory move, Jones embraced chronology in her catalog essay by opening and closing the exhibition catalog with dates important in woman’s history: written in red script for the flyleaves, announcing, in the front of the catalog, “1920,” the year the 19th Amendment was

passed; and in the back of the catalog the same red script depicts “1996” as the year the California Board of Regents upheld a ruling dismantling affirmative action at the University. These flyleaves in effect assure the placement of the exhibition on a timeline.  

For chronological comparison, Jones invited five Chicago contemporaries of to be included in the Sexual Politics exhibition: Joyce Kozloff, Nancy Spero, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Snyder and Mary Beth Edelson. Jones, in the body of her introductory essay, states her disappointment with her inability to secure loans of artwork from five prominent feminist artists who were all working in New York at the time of The Dinner Party. In an endnote, Jones elaborates on their absence by stating that some who rejected the exhibition did so because they did not want to be complicit in a perceived heroicization of Chicago. Although their absence made a contextual comparison of feminists from Chicago’s generation and notoriety more difficult, it allowed Jones an unpredicted approach by calling attention to the isolation of The Dinner Party from its cultural context through unwillingness on the part of feminists to engage in any new dialogue concerning Chicago. Jones seized the opportunity to address this organizing experience in exhibition catalog essays, placing the curator inside the text, qualifying her position and admitting that the pragmatic conditions of the medium do affect her theoretical practice. Letting the audience “go behind the scenes,” Jones’s airing of organizational obstacles in the introductory essay contributed to a transparent museum practice.

192 Jones, Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History. Also included in the catalog is “A Feminist Chronology 1945-95” compiled by Laura Meyer, this chronology marks important dates affecting woman's history, it covers historical, political, and cultural moments in order to couch feminist visual arts in a broader context of feminist history.


194 Ibid., 38.
Disconnections between the catalog and exhibition continue when it is discerned that the absence of the work of artists Schapiro and Edelson from the gallery—because they did not want their artwork recast as a vehicle for reconsideration of the Dinner Party—did not condition their absence from the exhibition altogether. Not only were the artist refusals highlighted in the exhibition catalog essay, but they also appeared as part of the exhibition anyway through prominent quotations throughout the catalog. Twice, Schapiro, and once, Edelson, is quoted, on pages separating sections of color plates (in-between the catalog essays). Their thoughts on essentialism and constructionism are in large white script on red background (see example in fig. 32). This resituates these artists within the exhibition, reminding the viewer that the museum exhibition and the catalog are not interchangeable for relaying the exhibition thesis. In this case, there is more difficulty in recasting The Dinner Party in the physical encounter. The monumentality of the work or, as Kay Larson has described, its forcing of viewers against the wall, is only enacted by the visitor as she encounters the artwork in the actual space.

195 Jones, Cottingham, and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center., Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History. The quotations are listed as follows: "How do you identify an artist? What does an artist look like? When I grew up an artist was defined by a Rembrandt self-portrait. There would be his smock and his beret, velvet usually, and his palette in one hand, his brushes in the other, and these were the symbols of the outward appearance of an artist. So then I say to myself, but I'm a woman, how do I fit into that? Not only that, but I'm a middle-class woman. Not only that, but I'm a Jewish woman. Not only that, I'm not particularly beautiful. In fact you probably wouldn't pick me out of a crowd. So how would I identify myself as an artist?"- Miriam Schapiro page 75. "By saying that domesticity is the locus of art, I do not mean that domesticity is so great...It has the stench of slavery about it. What I'm saying is that those women were so great...Despite the stench of slavery and the need to do four million other chores, they still made art."-Miriam Schapiro page 119. "Uncovering the lost mysteries and womenhistories of the Matriarchy ...[we] enrich our present by increasing the threads of continuity with our ancient sisters. To know and understand our foremothers is to give us more insight into our circumstances, enhance our self-image, and provide a firmer ground in which to restore a woman to her rightful place."- Marybeth Edelson page 201
In Chapter One: *Exhibiting The Dinner Party* I mentioned Knight’s criticism of Jones’s curatorial practice, which he described as a gallery overwhelmed with “reams of text” in heavy-handed didactic labels. To opt for its opposite would be something more along the lines of modern art museum minimal labeling of the works of art that limits information to just names and dates (colloquially known as ‘tombstone’ labeling). This format does not offer many opportunities to relate the objects to contemporary society, and it relies on ‘trained’ visitors that already have an expectation of authoritarian museum knowledge, visitors who can readily enact the traditional museum ritual of processional through artworks by “geniuses” unfolding in a series of Western art movements that are organized in the Western art canon in terms of linear progress. Carol Duncan describes this progress in modern art, particularly in the first two-thirds of the 20th century, as a move towards greater abstraction effectively separating art and artist from the objective world. The modern art museum ritual participates in this move away from reminders of daily life and context to focus on the inner self of the artist, by paring down the gallery to white walls, minimal text, and artwork spaced significantly apart so as to not compete with one another’s experience. To change the ritual of the visit, the ritual cues must change; and Jones achieved by upsetting the expected pared down gallery space, providing extensive text explaining her exhibition thesis. Jones’s does the opposite of what Knight accuses her of—limiting the visitor to “proper” viewing of the art. Jones’ messages provided enough information to invite the viewer to move past traditional expectations of a series of singular heroic geniuses. Also, the extensive reading room for *Sexual Politics* served as a physical declaration that the curator’s voice is not the only one to consider on this subject. The reading room (figs. 33 and 9)

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196 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'."
198 Ibid.
included computer access to the Womanhouse archive (an installation artwork project created by the Cal State Feminist Art Program under the tutelage of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro), the International Quilting Bee (project instituted by Chicago on the original exhibition tour of The Dinner Party), a program of video art, and reference materials. Jones may be leading the dance, but as a partner, rather than a puppeteer.

It is hard to see Knight’s complaint of a word-cluttered exhibition realized in the museum installation. Neither the installation (example in figs. 12, 19, and 22) nor text panels (fig. 34), indicate the feeling Knight described of text overtaking the artwork. The intimate nature of many of these works is an interesting juxtaposition to the gigantic Dinner Party. Some of the text panels did outsize the artwork in Sexual Politics, but overall I see a balance. Knight’s complaint of the presence of too much text is not so much an actual overcrowding of the gallery space, as it is an attack on baring the theoretical impetus for the exhibition forthrightly. Knight’s complaint appears as a personal attack on the exhibition curator when he claims she ‘misuses’ art. 199 Donald Preziosi’s conclusion in a rebuttal of the LA Times review discussed Knight’s characterization of Jones:

Even a passing familiarity with the history of art should lead to an appreciation that artistic practices of the past 200 years have never been separate from critical and theoretical discourse and debate. Knight would have us believe that the (young, female) curator, in organizing an exhibition that is historically, aesthetically, and critically responsible is therefore an ‘ideologist’ who ‘misuses’ and trivializes art. 200

The nature of the curatorial practice is to champion specific works by inclusion and recast the work in a secondary frame that is not always in direct correlation with the artistic intent. Sexual Politics is problematic because, with The Dinner Party’s

199 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'."
overwhelming presence, Jones appears to be favoring the work; while at the same time, in essay, her theoretical treatments attempt a more balanced opinion. Knight finds fault with Jones for embracing the contradictions regarding *The Dinner Party*. Knight said she “wants it both ways” where “Chicago is and is not the center of the exhibition.”

Jones’s argument was that the exclusion of *The Dinner Party* from ‘serious’ discussion of feminist body art has skewed the essentialist debate, and established a mythic status for *The Dinner Party*. In his treatment the double speak was a negative; but to me, ‘wanting it both ways’ indicates the exhibition working as a postmodern dance, where the exhibition environment potentially causes new behaviors.

Through the favoring of many performance documentation photographs and contemporary portraiture Chicago’s work can be understood to be inspiring for postmodern corporeal feminist art. Ukeles’ performance documentation photographs of *Maintenance Art* circumvents the essentialist distinction and can be linked in certain ways to the postmodernist strategies that link the material body to the social construction of gender, as in 1990s photography portraits and self-portraits included in *Sexual Politics* such as: Laura Aguilar’s *In Sandy’s Room (Self-Portrait)*, (1991) (fig. 35), Catherine Opie’s *Dyke* (1992) (fig. 23), Renee Cox, *Yo Mama* (1993) (fig.18) and Hannah Wilke *Intra-Venus* (1994) (fig.36) where the corporeal is reignited in feminist art. While Jones was being admonished to not take Chicago seriously, the photographic portraiture and self-portraiture of the 1990s included in *Sexual Politics* took issue with the notion of seriously considering the female body through ironic presentations. This is represented by artwork such as Renee Cox’s *Yo Mama*, Laura Aguilar’s *In Sandy’s Room*, Wilke’s *Intra-Venus*, and Carrie Mae Weems’ *Mirror, Mirror* (1986-87) (fig. 37).

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201 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed ‘Dinner Party’ Undermines ‘Sexual Politics’.

202 Deepwell, *Defining Experiences: Feminist Exhibitions in the 1990s*.
Each becomes an emblem for this renewed site of the body as a critique of stereotypic roles of the feminine—some incorporate nudity, some text; all are ironic (as part of a self-reflexive practice). Given the medium’s historic use for scientific documentation, it has a tenuous relationship to the truth; always parading as evidence of an event. The feminist photography in Sexual Politics upturns notions of truth as the artists perform outside stereotypic sexualized roles. The re-introduction of the corporeal to the art of feminism in Sexual Politics crosses all of Jones’ thematic groupings. These photographs relate to the performance art documentation photographs of the Maintenance Art Performances (1969-77) by Ukeles and Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece (1964) (fig. 38), also included in the exhibition: unlike Chicago, the authors of the photographs and performances incorporated irony as a distancing mechanism to avoid the ostentatious overtones in the representation of Universal essence.

In Yo Mama (fig. 18) the mother wearing nothing but black pumps and carrying a smiling baby ironically re-imagines images of Madonna and Child. The monumental photograph assertively greets the gallery visitor. Yo Mama’s prominent placement in the gallery resists marginalization. This woman has an identity separate from the child. Renee Cox as Yo Mama is not nostalgic, her strong stance and confrontational stare seem to analyze feminism from within, refusing to hide behind text or surrogate. Yo Mama refutes the celebratory with her poignant stare and disregard of the voyeur. She is ironic as the casual, maybe flippant, sideways position of a child in her arms disrupts the heightened sexualized nature of this naked high-heeled woman. Her ambiguous role as sexpot and mother destabilizes the viewer. In Sandy’s Room (Self-Portrait) (fig. 35) Laura Aquilar presents herself as relaxed and open. The audience enters In Sandy’s Room through an informal snapshot style photograph. There is no celebration of the body, nor is there shame; the average setting of the room leads to an indifference.
towards the figure. She does not shock, horrify or celebrate, yet our presence in the room is charged with voyeuristic shame because the viewer is uninvited and not acknowledged by the artist who lies naked and relaxed with her eyes closed and her guard down. In her Sexual Politics’ catalog essay, Eating from the Dinner Party Plates, Laura Cottingham takes the position of Aguilar In Sandy’s Room to be not one of relaxation or of contentment but of “diminished expectations.” Cottingham’s reading incorporates the struggle for acceptance of lesbian artists in the mainstream artworld beyond tokenism as inscribed into the pose of Aguilar In Sandy’s Room.

In Intra-Venus (fig. 36), Hannah Wilke continues her career-long interrogation of ‘pin-up girl’ poses of women by mimicking the sexualized poses, but in her own environments. In Intra-Venus, Wilke’s environment is a hospital bed. She adopts centerfold-like sprawling poses, with a bloated body and a gauze-covered abdomen that indicate signs of treatment for her cancer. The suggestive poses ironically draw a parallel to the objectification of women and the de-humanizing experience of a terminally ill cancer patient. The objectification inscribed in the pose is disrupted: Wilke gazes back to confront the viewer. Her image does not command pity, just witness.

Carrie Mae Weems in Mirror, Mirror (fig. 37) presents a turnabout of the Snow White fairy tale by showing an African American woman gazing into a mirror greeted by a shrouded woman holding a magic wand on the other side. The text below the photograph reads: “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all? The Mirror says, Snow White, you Black bitch, and don’t you forget it!’” Weems references the original fairy tale line but includes a disturbingly racist retort. Weems disrupts the typical expectation of the fairy tale in order

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to expose how people, influenced early in childhood, are trained to think that normative beauty is of a young white woman. The text alongside her farcical reenactment of the fairy tale exposes the racial and gender stereotypes. She does not offer a blatantly counter celebratory statement for the black woman; rather Weems’s confrontational composition subverts the power of the stereotype through exposure of unspoken sentiments in Western society.

As the performance narratives of Aquilar, Wilke, Cox and Weems suggest, corporeal women’s bodies that are momentary and specific can counter the ‘ethereal’ non-material renditions of Woman, as in a classical nude. The 1990s feminist photography referenced tactics employed in early feminist performance art, represented in *Sexual Politics* with *Cut Piece* (fig.38). The photograph of the performance shows a headless man in a business suit (presumably an anonymous audience member) wielding a pair of scissors. He is tugging at a large swath of fabric worn by Ono preparing to cut it from her body. Ono kneels on the floor eyes closed. The work accentuates the surrender to an act of sexualized violence. This performance dissolves boundaries between art and audience as Ono invited the audience to participate in the act. I highlight the link between the feminist photography from the 1990s in *Sexual Politics* and the earlier performance pieces to show that 1970s feminist body art informed contemporary practice, taking new form that equally reconnects the body to feminism.

*Sexual Politics* was able to disrupt the museum rituals in self-reflexive evaluations of the exhibition for the audience. These interventions promote an approach that utilized the more traditional setting of the temple organizational model to recognize hierarchal distinctions of quality and presentation; it works to unsettle a comfort zone regarding audience participation in museums that have adopted a forum-like model. The
feminist intervention insists on an awareness of meaning made in both models, declaring a necessity to continually assess the audience-museum relationship. The feminist intervention can take advantage of the identity crisis of the museum because truth is thought of as performative rather than fixed and therefore intervene-able. Rather than see hope for feminist exhibitions in only one institutional model, I see the logic of my argument encouraging feminist interventions in all art museums, regardless of the stage of political transformation, suggesting that corrective exhibitions are necessary as long as hierarchical distinctions remain in organizational styles.

*Sexual Politics* employed the tactics of recognizing the specific author, recognizing exclusions, and allowing for contradictions within the exhibition thesis to inform the subject for feminist art history. This one-venue exhibition is worth considering again for feminist exhibition practice because of the noted story of its organization in the feminist artists’ refusal to participate, the re-evaluation of feminism’s debate of essentialism through an assembly of body imagery and textual art comparisons, as well as the *LA Times* panning the exhibition and claiming the curator was an ‘ideologist’ who trivializes art.204

The performance of the corporeal body is always already in conflict for feminism. The body protests its objectification as it reveals itself. The adaptation of postmodern dance, reading the museum exhibition as an activated body, is a way to bring the body back into focus for feminist visual art; using the corporeal as a means to show the reconnection with feminism’s theoretical loss of the body. Consideration of the environment and the audience along with the artwork adds an additional layer of meaning propelling *Sexual Politics* into the discourse as a historicization rather than an ahistorical grab bag of artwork.

204 Knight, "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'."
Jones evoked the word historicization as a stated goal for her exhibition of *The Dinner Party*, I believe, to indicate history as an opportunity for reinterpretation. The term historicization in this context implies the ability to continually investigate feminist art history, benefiting from new views on seemingly settled debates and rendering the process by which feminism, the methodology, and the political agenda become the feminist historical project. The historicization process begins with *Sexual Politics* rethinking the monumental *The Dinner Party*, opening up conclusions that have this artwork contained in a set of meanings as essentialist and isolationist. The historicization of *The Dinner Party* does not ignore the essentialism critique but allows for contradictory and transmuted readings informed by a sense of history beyond initial conclusions. The revisionist reading showed a generational continuum with the body across multiple platforms, resisting a fractured sense of feminism. *Sexual Politics* was not an ahistorical grouping of stylistically similar objects that just happen to be housed in a museum; rather it offered a sense of feminist political history through visual art. Choosing the historicization in the museum is a result and reflection of a rethinking the institutional monument. This is actuated in feminist interventions that exhibit a readiness to put their own interrogation methods on trial (test in exhibition) in order to continually revise history.

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Conclusion

It is often said that without a sense of the past, we cannot envisage the future. The reverse is also true: without a vision of the future, we cannot construct and access a usable past. Art museums are at the center of this process in which past and future intersect; above all, they are spaces in which communities can work out the values that identify them as communities.²⁰⁶

The effectiveness of Sexual Politics is questioned when an exhibition of this nature does not travel to other venues. The Henry Hopkins, Elizabeth Shepherd from UCLA Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center at Los Angeles engaged Amelia Jones with the idea of showing The Dinner Party in southern California as a way to bring the work full circle, for a real-time encounter with an artwork whose reputation had grown even larger than its monumental stature. Showing The Dinner Party amongst works of feminist colleagues enabled feminists to test both new ideas and reconsider long-held assumptions, and in so doing participate in discussion of how to best represent their history.

Despite heightened “backlash” against the women’s movement, in the mid-1990s, feminism was relevant and effectual in the art museum. Academic theory melded with political practice to address identity politics, shifting away from universalizing characterizations to the local and the specific. Feminist ideas guided several mid-1990s exhibitions, not just Sexual Politics but also Mistaken Identities (UC Santa Barbara, 1991), Sense and Sensibility (MOMA, 1994) Bad Girls and Bad Girls West (New Museum, and UCLA, 1994), Division Of Labor (Brooklyn Museum, 1995), and Inside the

visible: an elliptical traverse of twentieth century art in, of, and from the feminine (ICA, Boston, 1996), all of which occurred within five years of Sexual Politics. Although very different in scope, each of these exhibitions in the mid-1990s was openly identified with feminism. Yet, this preponderance dissipated in the later part of the 1990s, when artists began to co-opt feminist methodology and incorporate gender issues into their art without articulating as such.

I think two occurrences contributed to a more indirect engagement with feminism: the rise of the term “postfeminism,” to describe artists and curators working within a poststructuralist feminist position; and the exhaustion of the term ‘identity politics’ in art exhibitions. Each of these developments furthered a rift between generations of feminist visual artists, curators and historians and their public by again divorcing the body form the culturally constructed identity. The “postfeminist” terminology, marking the adoption of poststructuralism by feminists as a separate moment from other areas of feminism, set feminists apart from their history in the women’s movement, creating an estrangement from a spatial sense of feminist history that inadvertently reasserted patri-linear time by insisting on a break and progression in feminist methods. The viewer in a postfeminist exhibition regressed to the processional, losing the freedom of the spatial suppositions, gained in the dance with a history of feminist art.

Secondly, by the late 1990s, ‘identity politics’ was an overly used catch phrase for mainstream exhibitions and audiences, by then were immune to the multicultural political act of naming the specific author, artist, and organizer. As a way to combat what Razia Aziz called the “cul-de-sac” of identity politics, exhibitions such as Ultrabaroque (2000) and Free Style (2001) moved away from identity politics by suggesting

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terminology such as “post-identity” and “post-black.” This “post-identity” framework that strives to transcend label limitations separates the body from identity politics and also removes visual art and politics from a feminist articulation. Feminist tools of inquiry used to evaluate objects on display for their indication of the larger institutional authority include recognition of the author’s specific perspective, recognition of other perspectives as equally informing, recognition of exclusions, embracing discussion of their absence, and allowance for contradictions to remain relevant without disrupting the impetus for exhibition. These tools were absorbed into other methodologies, obscuring a distinct feminist historical project.

At the same time there remained a willingness to preserve the museum as a point of interrogation, such as in Kynaston McShine’s Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect exhibition (MOMA, 1999) where artists from many different places and points of view (some openly feminist, as in the case of Zoë Leonard) assembled to deconstruct and inspire museum identity from within the exhibition format. Museum exhibitions should remain an important part of this struggle between articulation and absorption because, by their nature, they are the bridge between academics and the public. Museum based knowledge requires connection with the corporeal, visitors gaining knowledge by interacting with the space. The free-form learning environment encourages spatial suppositions unlike any art historical textbook or lecture. Museum identity linked directly to the audience is forever in transition, yet clear articulations of how audience interacts with authorial presence can prevent a crisis or state of flux.

I would like to suggest that the museum of the future should be a platform for feminist discourse, as the space in which entertainment, and politics meld with the educational. I suggest my reading of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition as a contribution to the reinstatement of an articulated feminist voice, as the museum identity continues to work through its temple past and forum future. As *The Dinner Party* soon finds permanent exhibition space gallery at the future Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (construction completion expected 2007) as part of the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s collection, it remains to be seen: Will permanent installation promote free-form learning like challenging the appropriateness of *The Dinner Party* presentation as in *Sexual Politics*? or will separation of the work from the rest of the museum repeat the limiting effect of the forum inside the temple? I propose a return to a prevalence of openly articulated feminist voices in exhibition in order to promote ongoing refinement of the historical project, with the added benefit of recognition of the museum’s power position in society whether in a temple or forum configuration, or as I hope in a reconciliation of the models in order to exploit each model’s most beneficial qualities and dissolve hierarchical distinction altogether.
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**Essays**


Appendix A: Illustrations

Figure 1  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) *The Dinner Party* (1979); mixed media, 36 in. x 48 ft., Collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 2   Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History
exhibition (1996) installation detail: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) The Dinner
Party (detail of table and Heritage Floor), (1979); mixed media, 36 in. x 48 ft, Collection
of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los
Angeles, California.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 3    Judy Chicago (American, born 1939), Female Rejection Drawing, from the Rejection Quintet (1974), prismacolor pencil on rag paper, 30 x 24 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Tracy O’Kates.
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Figure 4  Mary Kelly (American, born 1941), *Documentation I, II, and III* (details) from *Post Partum Document* (1976-80) mixed media, various dimensions, Collection of the Artist.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 5 Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) The Dinner Party (table detail), mixed media, 36 in. x 48 ft., Collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 6  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) The Dinner Party (Tapestry Banners), executed by the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop; tapestry-woven wool, (6) 72 x 48 in. each, Collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 8    Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History
exhibition (1996) installation detail: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) detail: Various
courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 9  Judy Chicago (American, born 1939), *Through the Flower* (1973) sprayed acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in., The Museum Educational Trust, Elizabeth A. Sackler Trustee.
Figure 10  Hannah Wilke (American, 1940-1993) Seven Untitled Vaginal-Phallic and Excremental Sculptures (1960-63), mixed media, various dimensions, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.
Figure 11  from Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Female Imagery* Published in *Womanspace Journal* 1 (Summer 1973).
Figure 12  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: left, Marlene McCarty (American, 1957), Untitled (CUNT) (1990), iron-on heat transfer, 25 x 25 in. Private Collection; center, Hannah Wilke (American, 1940-1993), Seven Untitled Vaginal-Phallic and Excremental Sculptures (1960-63) various media and dimensions, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts; right, Judy Chicago (American, born 1939), Through the Flower (1973) sprayed acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in, The Museum Educational Trust, Elizabeth A. Sackler, Trustee. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 13   Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail Lauren Lesko, Fur Lips (1993) fur collar, 12 x 6 x 1 ½ in. approx., Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 18  Renee Cox (American, born 1958), Yo Mama (1993), gelatin silver print; 99 ½ x 63 ½ in., Collection of the artist.
Figure 20  Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts, *Birth Trilogy* (1972) Photograph documenting a performance at *Womanhouse*, Los Angeles, 20 x 16 in., Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Sante Fe, New Mexico.
Figure 21  Mary Kelly (American, born 1941), *Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary, and Diagram from Post-Partum Document* (detail), (1974-1979), mixed media (8) 11 x 14 in. each, Kunsthause, Zurich, Vereinigung Zurcher Kunstfreunde, Gruppe junge Kunst.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 24  Mary Duffy (British, born 1961), Untitled, from Cutting the Ties that Bind (1987) color photograph.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 25 Jo Spence (British, 1934-1992) in collaboration with Tim Sheard, *Exiled*, from *Narratives of Dis-ease*, photograph.
Figure 26  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: signage. Photograph courtesy of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 27  Judy Chicago (American, born 1939) *Entering the Mystery through the Blue Rock Cunt* from the *Butterfly Goddesses and Other Specimens Series* (1974), china paint on porcelain, 6 x 6 x 2 in., Collection of the artist.
Figure 28  Mierle Laderman Ukeles (American, born 1939) *Transfer: The Maintenance of an Art Object*, from the *Maintenance Performance Series* (detail), (1973) five black and white photographs documenting a performance at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford 16 x 20 in. each, Collection of the artist, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 29  Mierle Laderman Ukeles (American, born 1939) Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969) typewritten and handwritten text on paper, (4) 11 x 8 ½ in. each, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery.
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Figure 30  Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #35* (1979) gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in. The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 31  Judie Bamber, *Untitled #1* (1994) oil on wood; 6 ½ x 1 ¾ in., Collection of the artist, Courtesy of Richard Telles Fine Art.
"How do you identify an artist? What does an artist look like? When I grew up an artist was defined by a Rembrandt self-portrait. There would be his smock and his beret, velvet usually, and his palette in one hand, his brushes in the other, and these were the symbols of the outward appearance of an artist. So then I say to myself, but I'm a woman, how do I fit into that? Not only that, but I'm a middle-class woman. Not only that, but I'm a Jewish woman. Not only that, I'm not particularly beautiful. In fact, you probably wouldn't pick me out of a crowd. So how would I identify myself as an artist?"

—Miriam Schapiro

Figure 33  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: reading room. Photograph courtesy of the Hammer Museum.
Figure 34  Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History exhibition (1996) installation detail: text panels. Photograph courtesy of the Hammer Museum.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 35  Laura Aguilar (American, born 1959), *In Sandy’s Room (Self-Portrait)*, (1991) black and white photograph, 16 x 20 in., Collection of the Artist.
Figure 36     Hannah Wilke (America, 1940-1993) *Intra-Venus* (detail), (1992-93) chromogenic supergloss prints, edition 1/3; (3) 26 x 39 1/3 in. each, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.
Appendix A: Illustrations cont’d

Figure 37  Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953), Mirror, Mirror (1986-87) black and white, photograph with text, 20 x 16 in., Private Collection, courtesy of P.P.O.W.
Figure 38  Yoko Ono (Japanese, born 1933), *Cut Piece* (1964) photograph documenting a performance at Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto, Japan, 16 x 20 in., Collection of the artist, Courtesy Studio One.