



carla

Issue 35



Mira Schor, *Goodbye CalArts (detail)* (1972).
Gouache on paper, 21.5 × 29.5 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Lyles & King, New York.

CalArts and the Rediscovery of the Feminist Art Program

The Feminist Art Program (1970–1975): Cycles of Collectivity, which recently closed at REDCAT (an art center run by CalArts), could easily have been called *Cycles of Rediscovery*. Documents laid out in the exhibition’s purple, waist-high vitrines detailed multiple attempts by CalArts students to revisit and restore the institutional memory of the Feminist Art Program (FAP), a short-lived 1970s experiment that took place at the art school. In 1998, for instance, three graduate students organized The Feminist Art Workshop. The workshop included a symposium, exhibition, and publication focused on the original FAP. Before the symposium, artists Karina Combs, Andrea Richards, and Catherine Hollander wrote to Miriam Schapiro, who co-led the FAP alongside artist Judy Chicago. “It was with great pleasure that I read your letter,” Schapiro responded. “You might say I have been waiting for it for 27 years.”¹ In 2000, a collective of queer grad students called the Toxic Titties was directly inspired by the FAP to organize Camp TT, encouraging intergenerational dialogue about art’s relation to life. Then, in 2007, a collective of students organized “Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions,” a workshop series, exhibition, and day-long symposium about feminism in art and life. Around the same time as this symposium, in 2007 and 2008, the landmark exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which

highlighted FAP artists, traveled from MOCA to MoMA PS1, and the FAP became more or less cemented in the art world’s narrative of West Coast feminist art history. Still, all of these rediscoveries by CalArts students, spread across four decades, suggest an institutional amnesia that persisted for an alarmingly long time.

Cycles of Collectivity, organized by a team of nine collaborators,² set out to acknowledge and tell the stories of “the many generations of women, trans, queer, and non-binary faculty, students, and artists who have stewarded” the histories of the FAP.³ It does this well enough through an academic-feeling installation that privileges archival documents over the sensual work made by many of the included artists—it’s the kind of exhibition that invites the comment “it should have been a book” (there is, sadly, no catalog). But its subtle institutional critique, traceable through didactics and documents, was its most interesting thread. In recording feminist activity at CalArts since the 1970s, the show ultimately demonstrated how little CalArts as an institution has historically supported its feminists, indirectly questioning the ability of such an institution—even one with as experimental a track record as CalArts—to ever truly sustain a viable alternative to its own education model.

The FAP, founded by Chicago, originally began at Fresno State College in 1970, soon after she was hired to teach there. The overall goal, she would later articulate, was the “establishment of an alternative structure that would allow women to take control of the entire artmaking process.”⁴ She imagined women teaching art history, curating exhibitions, and writing criticism. At first, the effort was scrappy, and something of a stealth operation. In her memoir, Chicago describes telling the dean that she wanted to help women emerge from school “into professional life,” but, because Fresno was outside an established art world, she felt that

“there was little real comprehension of the implications of [her] plan.”⁵ Like it would be at CalArts, at Fresno, the program was ground-up rather than top-down. Chicago recruited female students by posting leaflets around campus, and the class met at students’ houses until Chicago and her students found, rented, and fixed up an off-campus studio.⁶ Each student contributed \$25 per month toward rent and supplies.⁷

Halfway through the first year, Chicago reached out to Schapiro because she felt overwhelmed by the responsibility she’d hoisted on herself by taking these women under her wing and inviting them to question the patriarchy. She felt ill-equipped to process her students’ disappointments and emotions while also giving them feedback on their artwork. “I needed a woman, a mother figure, I guess,” Chicago writes, of her decision to invite Schapiro to visit Fresno.⁸ It was the first time Schapiro, who was 16 years older than Chicago, had been invited to lecture on her work, and she and Chicago began discussing the possibility of moving the FAP to CalArts, where Schapiro’s husband Paul Brach was Dean of the School of Art, and Chicago’s husband at the time, Lloyd Hamrol, was on faculty (“there was great interest at the school in husband-and-wife teams,” as Chicago put it).⁹ The FAP relocated to CalArts in 1971. There, the woman-only course would have its own specially-enrolled students, classroom space, and supplies, though it took the better part of a year for these institutional resources to materialize.¹⁰ In the meantime, Schapiro, Chicago, and their students turned a rambling East Hollywood teardown into an immersive, now-iconic, installation called *Womanhouse*, in which every room interrogated the patriarchal expectations of women (installations featured breast-shaped eggs on kitchen walls, and a bisected female mannequin inside the linen closet).

The FAP arrived during a fleeting period of freedom in the CalArts visual

art department. In the early 1950s, Walt Disney began financially backing the Chouinard Art Institute, and after Nelbert Chouinard retired in the ’60s, Disney began the process of rebranding the school and finding it a new home (initially, the plan was Hollywood, but city tax rates¹¹ and—as numerous Black artists in L.A. recount—Disney’s discomfort with the increasingly diverse student body that the school’s urban Westlake location encouraged, led him to look farther afield.)¹² After Disney’s death in 1966, the Disney family and other benefactors took this process over, renaming the school California Institute of the Arts and moving it from Westlake to Valencia. The benefactors paid most attention to the music and animation programs, from which they sourced their own future employees, leaving the School of Art largely unsupervised.¹³ Faculty and students practiced tai chi in the hallways;¹⁴ John Baldessari began the post-studio critique sessions for artists who did not work in conventional mediums.¹⁵ “It was just a grand melée of radical procedures,” Schapiro later recalled. “And our Feminist Art Program simply took its place.”¹⁶

The REDCAT exhibition devoted half of one long wall to the FAP’s CalArts history, showing documentation of the program’s more iconic artworks: *Womanhouse* and *Ablutions* (both 1972). The latter was a collaboration between Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani that involved recording women’s firsthand accounts of rape and then staging a sensual performance meant to approximate the experience of sexual violence. The exhibition also followed Chicago’s departure from the FAP before the program officially ended—she resigned in 1973, convinced that a true alternative wasn’t possible at CalArts (a place where she felt women still faced pressure to conform to patriarchal standards)¹⁷—tracing this departure through letters. “I know you feel that the nature of the institution impose [sic] constraints on the more radical parts of your program,” Brach wrote to Chicago, in a letter displayed in



*The Feminist Art Program (1970-1975):
Cycles of Collectivity* (installation views)
(2023). REDCAT, Los Angeles, 2023.
Images courtesy of the artists and REDCAT.
Photos: Yubo Dong, ofstudio.



Top: In-progress mural by Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCocq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Wilding for *Womanhouse: Dining Room* (1972). Image courtesy of California Institute of the Arts Library & Institute Archives.

Bottom: Artists Beverly O'Neill, Catherine Hollander, Andrea Richards, and Nancy Buchanan at *The F-Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement*, hosted by the Feminist Art Workshop. California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, October 3, 1998. Image courtesy of California Institute of the Arts Library & Institute Archives.

a vitrine. Schapiro continued to run the FAP within institutional confines for two more years, though it morphed and deradicalized, becoming more like an academic concentration. According to a 1973 supplement to the academic bulletin included in the REDCAT exhibition, CalArts would no “longer offer a program...in any non-professional-art study.” In this same supplement, Schapiro is the only female School of Art faculty member listed, a depressing reality to see recorded in such close proximity to images of possibility-filled artworks by FAP students. The exhibition commemorates the end of the CalArts program with a painting by FAP student Mira Schor titled *Goodbye CalArts* (1972). The painting conveys the student experience: A suburban landscape, reminiscent of Valencia, engulfs a self-portrait. Schor is half naked with a flower around her head, encircled by other students and faculty (she portrays her classmate Ross Bleckner facing away, and one professor, Stephan von Huene, appears as a penguin). Black vinyl lettering beneath the painting reads “CalArts Program Closes, 1975,” though in fact Schor made the work three years earlier.

When she made the work in 1972, Schor had already left the FAP (though she remained enrolled at CalArts). The program had just returned to the confines of the CalArts campus after the *Womanhouse* experiment, and once back in this academic environment, students began participating in formal critiques of each other’s work. Schor had been making intimate, autobiographical paintings, using her work to grapple with her coming-of-age struggles. She presented a painting that she’d made for critique, and recalled Schapiro calling it “smug, rigid, and boring” before other students chimed in. Schor, trying not to cry, said “I’m expecting a phone call from New York,” left the room, and never returned.¹⁸ Schor’s reasons for leaving the FAP—an aversion to the way the formalities of art school engulfed the alternative feminist model—coincided with

Chicago’s reasons and foreshadowed the program’s ultimate demise. Chicago tried to make the alternative she desired: When she resigned from CalArts in 1973, two other faculty members, designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and art historian Arlene Raven, resigned with her, and the three of them went on to found the Feminist Studio Workshop. At first, the workshop ran out of a rented building in MacArthur Park; then Chicago, Raven, and de Bretteville all helped open The Women’s Building on Spring Street in Downtown L.A. It was an imperfect project—Black female artists, including Senga Nengudi and Suzanne Jackson,¹⁹ never felt welcome—but it was a valid attempt at collectivity outside what Chicago called “male culture.”²⁰

One of the most telling inclusions in *Cycles of Collectivity* was a research project by artist Ekta Aggarwal documenting who has taught courses at CalArts from a feminist perspective since the FAP’s 1975 closure. Aggarwal assembled a spreadsheet of feminist courses and feminist faculty, and also collected syllabi, course descriptions, and email correspondence. These are printed on multicolored pages and organized into folders, which visitors to the show could thumb through while sitting on purple stools. These folders are noticeably unofficial, collected by Aggarwal mostly from individual instructors rather than from institutional records. Some former faculty provide paragraph-length first-person accounts of their courses; others provide multi-page syllabi. As the context for these courses, CalArts feels distant—less important than the strategies that these individual educators employed to introduce their students to more open, divergent perspectives on power and how our subjectivity influences art-making. Only three female faculty members are listed as teaching feminist courses between 1975 and 1980: Jo Ann Callis, Judy Fiskin, and Lynda Benglis. Five are listed between 1981 and 1990. The columns from 1991 onward become more populated and

increasingly expand to include more instructors of color as well as queer and trans artists. But the early dearth remains striking. It mirrors a larger cultural backlash against the progressive values that flourished in the late 1960s and also helps explain why students who passed through CalArts in the 1990s and 2000s had to work to rediscover the FAP's history for themselves.

When FAP organizers Combs, Richards, and Hollander began planning their event in 1998, the letter they sent to former FAP participants (included in a vitrine) cited the “scant archival documentation” available about the program. Two years later, according to an exhibition label, the Toxic Titties “found that the Feminist Art Program and feminist ideologies were not being addressed within the curriculum,” and when they set out to remedy this through their Camp TT programming, they received “very little institutional support.” The vitrine label about the 2007 “Exquisite Acts” conference stated that “students were once again surprised when they stumbled upon CalArts’ feminist history.” By this point, generations of students had felt like they were reinventing the wheel whenever they sought alternative education models that better reflected their own lived experiences. The institution repeatedly put the onus for change-making on the individual.

Unsurprisingly, *Cycles of Collectivity* is not the first exhibition about CalArts to be held at REDCAT, which was designed as an addendum to the Walt Disney Concert Hall in an effort to bring CalArts back to the urban center that the Disney corporation exiled it from decades earlier.²¹ In 2020, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of CalArts and the 100th anniversary of Chouinard, REDCAT hosted one exhibition celebrating the iconic posters CalArts faculty and students designed over the years and another exhibition of editions made by alumni to help fund scholarships for students. At the time, current CalArts students had been protesting

board meetings, frustrated by the school's increasing unaffordability, and had even shown up to disrupt the REDCAT Gala in 2019.²² The 2020 exhibition of editions felt like a response to this reality, though the press release did not acknowledge the petitions and protests. Even if it never outright addressed institutional shortcomings either, *Cycles of Collectivity* avoided centering CalArts, instead foregrounding programs organized at and around the school. Like the syllabi that Aggarwal collected, many of the documents in the vitrines came from individual alumni (as the credits at the bottom of the press release acknowledge), and it was clear that the legacy of the FAP has been reanimated and reimagined most effectively by those who valued alternatives to art school models, even if they worked from within CalArts.

The exhibition reminded me of the critic Barbara T. Christian's argument that “constructs like the center and the periphery reveal that tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal.”²³ From this perspective, it is perhaps not even helpful to think of the FAP and the programs it influenced as “alternatives.” Continuing to do so reinforces the power of a “central” model—the institution—that has already proven itself unable to support the kind of experimenting and reimagining that its students and faculty not only need, but have already begun to build for themselves and others. At its best, *Cycles of Collectivity* offered evidence that this world-building has been an ongoing (and often individual) effort, though it offered no generative blueprint for bridging the rift between the institution and these individual change-makers—a telling omission.

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

1. Schapiro dated this letter, which was included in the exhibition, September 2, 1998.
2. The curatorial team included Daniela Lieja Quintanar, Talia Heiman, Lucia Fabio, and Ekta Aggarwal, with research support from Ana Briz, Julia Raphaella Aguila, Arantza Vilchis-Zarate, and Yishan Xin. Janet Sarbanes served as a curatorial advisor.
3. REDCAT, "The Feminist Art Program (1970–1975): Cycles of Collectivity," press release, September 2023, <https://www.redcat.org/events/2023/the-feminist-art-program>.
4. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975; reis. iUniverse, 2006), 187.
5. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 70.
6. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 83.
7. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 70–1.
8. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 82.
9. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 84.
10. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 103.
11. Thomas Lawson, "A CalArts Story," *East of Borneo*, September 7, 2021, <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/a-calarts-story/>.
12. Getty Research Institute, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: Gallery 32 conversation and oral history interviews, 2009," The Getty Research Institute Modern Art in Los Angeles 2003–2011, https://primo.getty.edu/permalink/f/ihvagg/GETTY_ALMA21140322960001551.
13. "Oral history interview with Miriam Schapiro, 1989 September 10," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-miriam-schapiro-11695>.
14. "Oral history interview with Miriam Schapiro."
15. Richard Hertz, *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (Ojai, CA: Minneola Press, 2011), 60.
16. "Oral history interview with Miriam Schapiro."
17. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 187.
18. Charlotte Kent, "Feminist Interview Project: Mira Schor in Conversation with Charlotte Kent," *Art Journal*, October 26, 2023, <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=18551>.
19. "Interview of Suzanne Jackson," interview by Karen Anne Mason, A TEI Project, UCLA Library Digital Collections, Oral History Collections, African American Artists of Los Angeles, August 1992, released September 23, 2011, <https://static.library.ucla.edu/oralhistory/text/masters/21198-zz0008zszs-3-master.html>.
20. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 185.
21. "Our Story & Spaces," REDCAT, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.redcat.org/story>.
22. Renée Reizman, "Faced with Rising Tuition, CalArts Students Are Working to Raise Money," *Hyperallergic*, March 22, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/491270/calarts-students-raise-money-redcat-gala/>.
23. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 51–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>.