

ArtReview

Womanhouse

Lauren Elkin Features 04 May 2018 ArtReview



Sandra Orgel, Ironing from Womanhouse, 1972. AR April 2018 Feature

When the studio space promised by Cal Arts to the newly founded Feminist Art Program wasn't ready at the start of the 1971–72 academic year, the teachers and students on the program decided to improvise. Between November and January, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and the young artists on their course took over a dilapidated Hollywood mansion, restored it and turned it into a collaborative workshop and gallery. The space they named Womanhouse opened to the public at end of January and was visited by 10,000 people over the next four weeks.

Womanhouse was the subject of much condescending coverage in the press, with the *LA Times* calling it 'cheerful and disarming as a pack of laughing schoolgirls under a porcelain sky'. It is difficult to reconcile that verdict with documentary images of the exhibition: in Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom*, a bin overflowed with bloody tampons; in the house's theatre, the living room, two women bearing a giant cock and oversize cunt argued over whose job it was to do the dishes ('Stu-upid, your cunt/pussy/gash/hole or

whatever it is, is round like a dish. Therefore it's only right for you to wash dishes'). In one of two works collectively titled *Maintenance*, Sandra Orgel very slowly ironed a large sheet; later in the night Chris Rush would come out and scrub the floor. There was a 'Womb Room' (officially titled *Crocheted Environment*), filled with Faith Wilding's massive web of rope and yarn, and a kitchen by Robin Weltsch and Vicki Hodgetts whose walls and ceilings were dotted with stencilled fried eggs, suggestively titled *Eggs to Breasts*.

This combination of site-specific work, performance and installation unabashedly made women's experiences the subject of art. It was also an ambitious attempt to democratise art education and artmaking, a utopian feminist project now the inspiration for an exhibition titled *Women House* (perhaps to skirt the pesky accusations of essentialism that have dogged criticism of the original project), which opened at the Monnaie de Paris in late 2017 and transferred to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, in March. But there were flaws in the conception of the original project that led to friction between its participants, and from today's perspective it functions as a case study of the relationship between individual artist and the collective, and of feminist collectives more generally.

'Art is social', the sociologist Howard Becker reminds us, 'a form of collective action'. This applies even in the case of artists who sign their work individually but are supported by other artists (in the form of apprentices or assistants). It is built into the very transmission of art: the workshop was for a long time the dominant educational model for young artists, in which to triumph was to make work that the older artist would sign. That history continues in the studio practice of artists such as Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, though whether these more closely resemble educational institutions or factories is moot. The trainee artist's individual labour was understood as contributing not only to his personal advancement or the success of his master but to the renown of the atelier. Art has historically been social, and gendered: the master artist was always a *he*, as were his students; women were barred from the apprenticeship system. Womanhouse was an attempt to pioneer a new pedagogy: collaborative, nonhierarchical, feminist.

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Yet the power relations structuring the interactions within a collaborative are highly charged, and there was a fair amount of friction within Womanhouse. Some of the participants thought Chicago and Schapiro were imposing their own agenda on them; these students had come to Cal Arts to do their own work, and instead found themselves learning to use power tools to restore a house. The work was all-consuming: eight hours a day painting, plastering and wallpapering, fixing broken windows, restoring floors, building partitions. One participant, Mira Shor, would later call it 'a boot camp of feminism' in an interview with Paula Harper, the art historian who had first proposed to Chicago and Schapiro that they rent a space and turn it into a women's art project. Wilding recalled having to 'get there at 8am, work until lunch, then a meeting or CR [consciousness raising] or a big fight over lunch, then work again until everybody had to go home'. At night they would reconvene to work on the performances or to 'sew pillows for the performance space or to work on bread dough for the dining room food piece. I was never home for three months – that was Womanhouse.'

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Chicago would write some of her students off as overprivileged, with no sense of the sheer manual labour it takes to be an artist or the importance of collaboration for female artists at a time when women were just starting to claim a space in the artworld. She wanted to instil a work ethic in these young artists, to disabuse them of the notion that the artist enters her studio and creates masterpieces by the light of the muse. She wanted, in a word, to give her students a community. 'A model based on work and professional learning', she said to Harper, 'can transcend the personal, which is where many women's groups get bogged down.' Where her own project got 'bogged down', she claimed, was in issues of class. Where her students in the women-only programme that Chicago had led at Fresno State College the year before were mainly working- and middle-class, the new girls, students at a private art institution, 'resented' the work they were being asked to do. 'They didn't think they should have to work regular hours. They wanted to just work when they wanted to. And they resented me. And they resented Mimi [Schapiro]. And there was a whole lot of struggle. But some of it was creative struggle.' Yet Chicago doesn't address the conflicts of interest the project provoked; a school cannot become a collective as easily as that.

For all of these frictions, Womanhouse generated important pedagogical techniques and processes that constitute valuable contributions to art education. Brainstorming took place as a group, by 'going round the circle' to build on an idea, an image, a story. The ideas for the rooms were generated this way, as the women opened up about their experiences with domesticity. The texts for the performances were drafted as a group, and while some students had their own rooms to 'decorate', others collaborated in such a way that it was not clear who had contributed what.

Chicago and Schapiro were not alone in believing it was crucially important for female artists to band together: groups like Women Artists in Revolution and the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists organised protests against their exclusion from group shows. Given that women have not been afforded the same opportunities for self-expression in the visual arts – that they have not been fostered or recognised as artists in the way that men have – they wanted to provide students with the kind of positive reinforcement and support that would enable their creativity to 'flow'.

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For all that it was politically inflected and content-driven, the work has attracted more than a few charges of essentialism; given its emphasis on middle-class domesticity, Womanhouse reflected the cultural fetishisation of a particular kind of woman (probably white, probably heterosexual); it did not represent a model for *all* womankind. Such a project would truly be utopian; there is no one place that could ever be all homes to all women. Instead, Womanhouse employed manual labour usually coded as male in order to problematise ideas of women's labour, within the larger context of a radical art programme empowering female artists to problematise the idea of who can be an artist. So many hurdles to women's declaring themselves artists derive from the cultural assumption that they should be at home, performing (unpaid) domestic labour. Womanhouse calls this into question, not through propaganda, but through the process by which it came into being.

Far from promoting an essentialist vision of the kind of art that women make, Chicago and Schapiro built a programme that instead recognised the importance of giving women a space in which to develop a sense of themselves as artists. Schapiro wrote of hoping to teach the 'ego strength [the students] will need in order to survive as artists in our society' in a 1971 issue of *Everywoman*. But in this case they were asked to forego their egos in the service of the larger project, and it is understandable that the collective seemed

threatening to young artists trying to define themselves in a hostile professional environment. It points to a key feminist dilemma: do women want to be accepted on the same terms as men – terms set by men themselves – or do they want to scramble the rules and create a new game? For untried, untested undergraduates, the former seemed a safer bet.

According to those who took part in it, the Feminist Art Program was trying to break down the hierarchies of traditional art pedagogy, from the atelier to the academy, and the whole value system it kept in place: in terms of professionalism, the elevation of art over craft, the distinction between popular culture and high art. But the problem with building this kind of collective in the context of an art school is that no matter how experimental the pedagogy, the teachers are still there because they have some expertise to impart to the students, who pay for the privilege. The school cannot be a true collective as long this imbalance of power exists, based on the payment of money in exchange for services.

The touring *Women House* exhibition, which I visited at the Monnaie de Paris, is more curator-driven than collective, featuring the work of established names like Louise Bourgeois, Nikki de Saint Phalle and Claude Cahun. Still, as I walked through it, I thought that perhaps the power of the Womanhouse concept lies not only in its collective roots, but in the interchangeability of the women who occupy it. The house itself is a potential space that women can occupy politely, the way they've been groomed to, or they can get out their power tools and rebuild it from the ground up. There's a whole history of women's artwork across media using domestic space to challenge the way we inhabit it, and the way we think about habitation in general: Francesca Woodman's *Space²* (1975–78), Nil Yalter's *Topak Ev* (1973) or Monica Bonvicini's *Hausfrau Swinging* (1997).

According to the descriptions on the Womanhouse website, it was the dining room that 'represented a greater collaborative effort than any other room in the house'. Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq, Robin Mitchell, Schapiro and Wilding came together to create it, sewing, painting, baking, and building a table. It seems appropriate that the most collaborative work in this collective experiment was a room celebrating conviviality, the joys of the flesh and the breaking of bread. Chicago is not credited as having been involved in this room, yet it seems a precursor to her *Dinner Party* (1974–79): a feast laid for a phantom group of historically important women who haven't shown up yet, but still might.

***Women House* is on view at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, through 28 May; work by Miriam Schapiro is included in *Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro* at The Museum of Arts and Design, New York, through 9 September 2018**

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