

# AMERICAN WOMEN'S ART: GENDER FROM PRE-FEMINISM TO POST-FEMINISM

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## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the development of American women's art from the first decades of the 20th century through the 1990s. The first one is painter Georgia O'Keeffe, who became an early symbol of a female artist and a model to follow in treating gender issues during the second half of the century. Photographer Diane Arbus represents the pre-feminist generation of women who grew up in the postwar, while painter Judy Chicago emerged as a pioneer of what is known as Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s. Other artists defined as post-feminist artists since the 1980s, such as sculpture Maya Lin, Cindy Sherman, and photographer Sally Mann, have expressed a new set of gender sensibilities and exercised artistic practices that are different from those of previous generations.

KEY WORDS: United States, 20th-century women, artists, female art, feminism.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza la evolución del arte americano realizado por mujeres en un período que cubre desde las primeras décadas hasta el final del siglo xx. La primera artista que se estudia es Georgia O'Keefe, quien se convirtió en símbolo de la mujer artista y en un modelo a seguir por su relación con las cuestiones de género durante la segunda mitad de ese siglo. La fotógrafa Diane Arbus representa a la generación prefeminista que apareció tras las II Guerra Mundial, mientras que la pintora Judy Chicago fue una pionera de lo que se denominó como la Segunda Ola Feminista en los años sesenta. Otras artistas calificadas como postfeministas a partir de los años ochenta, como la escultora Maya Lin, Cindy Sherman y la fotógrafa Sally Mann, se han manifestado a través de nuevas sensibilidades en cuanto al género y han llevado a cabo prácticas artísticas diferentes a las generaciones anteriores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estados Unidos, mujeres, artistas del siglo xx, arte, feminismo.

As feminism and women's studies since the early 1970s has done to the disciplines of the humanities and most of the social sciences, the new vision of gender also shaken the foundations of to the analysis of the arts: the feminist paradigm has rejected the notion of neutrality in art history and art critique. In the

United States, those areas of scholarship and intellectual interest began to change as the ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement effected both female artists and academics. Their first concentrated effort was to expose the cultural and ideological biases that had gender differences and conflicts at their core. It took another decade for changes to incubate and, in the 1980s, new feminist art and art history emerged, rejecting paradigms on which art and its discourses had been based for centuries. The gender-oriented art scholarship now began to show how, historically, gender relations created art works and discourses that, although considered objectively and universally aesthetic and elevated above any non-artistic forces, reflected complex subtexts of sexuality and ideologies surrounding it.

Above all, feminists insist that art had exclusively been subjected to male standards of appreciation, which correspond to men's erotic pleasure and fantasies about women, as well as hatred toward, and superiority over them. With this wide-ranging argument, therefore, gender art historians and critics have revolutionized the interpretation of male-controlled art. Art critique from the gender perspective demonstrates the use of feminine stereotypes by artists and how such patterns of representation perpetuated the ideology of male domination. Women were depicted as beautiful, passive, resigned, silenced, nurturing, peaceful, pious, and anonymous. Women were also represented as hysteric, humiliated, or subjected to sadism and, represented by nude models, most frequently they were displayed as sexually available. By the male artist's "gaze" —the position from which the artist looks at the subject— women were positioned as sexually inviting: whether laying naked, carrying fruits and flowers as sexual symbols, or as prostitutes and waitresses in popular entertainment establishments. Females were also laboring and close to nature when painted with farm animals or kneeling on the soil. Privileged ladies were in the leisure realm in non-sexed protected public spaces: restaurants, gardens, theater. Women's images were often fetish or super-real, removed from the truths of their lives and emotions. All in all, artists perceived them as unimportant insofar as the central aspects of history are concerned —war, politics, urban affairs. The public realm was inhabited by men described as rational, free, energetic, virtuous, and in control of space and sexuality.

Feminist critics observed that although women were active as artists throughout history, the art profession was completely a male domain. Creativity, talent, and genius were defined as male ideals and described as magical and eruptive regardless of socio-cultural conditions. Women were perceived as talentless, prevented from respected artistic careers, and were unwelcome into men's artistic spaces, unless supportive males —fathers, husbands— stood firmly behind them. They were excluded from art schools and studios and were prohibited to paint nude models. They were prevented from training in perspective, anatomy, and other techniques of the craft, thus excluded from the main themes of art, forced to work on landscapes, portraits, still lives —fruits, flowers— and domestic and family scenes in small, closed private spaces. Because there were few women artists and those were limited in treating female sexuality, emotional interiors, struggles, and relationships, those meanings of the female subject remained practically absent from art for centuries.





The understanding of art by the a new generation of critical female scholars is never isolated from social and political gender contexts in which art is created and consumed. The totality of social relations—in their private and public levels—must be taken into account as influencing work of art. Art is not merely an object, but a social practice that involves training, production, stylistic influence, iconographic sources, patronage, criticism, consumption, exhibits, and art collecting. Such analysis locates gender elements and relates them to contexts in a way that eliminates the old idea of art as men's creation inspired by divinity. Feminism opened the way to a new kind of women's art, which creates representations that comment on, and subvert against the existing male dominance. In recent decades women artists have been finding artistic strategies that call attention to the problem of gender and respond to women's real experiences. Women's art deconstructs and in turn re-creates previous feminine stereotypes in ways women can legitimize and relate to as spectators, and men can understand in new ways.<sup>1</sup>

Let us look at several individual woman artists—painters, sculptures and photographers—and see how they illustrate some of the issues discussed above, and provide us with ideas about how women's art, work, and life can be analyzed by using gender concepts. The artists picked do not represent all women artists in the 20th-century U.S. "scientifically." I chose them because they became known and successful and they constitute good examples for discussing aspects in modern art in relationship to gender.

Throughout U.S. history, despite the difficulties they faced as women attempting to penetrate areas controlled by men and male culture, some female painters kept creating with remarkable success. Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) was one of the first female painters who critics seriously acknowledged for contributions to modernism in the 1920s and 1930s. She has been central for the understanding of women's role in establishing modernism as a mainstream current. As a woman painter, O'Keeffe has been mostly remembered by her numerous close-up, zoomed, large scale flowers in chromatic colors, entitled "Black Iris," "Pink Tulip," "Red Poppy," etc.<sup>2</sup> She examined them in details, fragments, and layers, building on flowers as an

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion on feminism and art is based on Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), and Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990). See also Griselda Pollock, "Fathers of Modern Arts, Mothers of Inversion," *Differences* (Fall 1992), and Germaine Greer, *The Obstinate Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power*, 91-3. O'Keeffe's New York urban subject matters were objected to by male critics as not representing her female sensibility and they usually refused to show them. See Susan Landauer, "Searching for Selfhood: Women Artists of Northern California," *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*, ed. Patricia Trenton (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 9-41. On women and Modernism, see also Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists and*

old symbol of female sexuality in men's art. The flowers almost self-evidently meant female genitalia. But as opposed to that theme when it was painted by men, in the context of O'Keeffe as a woman artist, the meaning changed as she appropriated an image of women's sensuality and recreated its meaning by expressing through it an authentic female reality.

Thus her historical contribution was introducing female sensibilities in ways hitherto absent in painting. In terms of comprehending the significance of O'Keeffe as a female artist in her historical times, it is important to discuss the fact that she was discovered and supported by her husband, an influential man in the New York art world: the photographer Alfred Stieglitz.<sup>3</sup> He first saw her work after frustrated O'Keeffe had left New York, where she had been studying art, moving to Texas with a decision to give up her art career. Considering the social conditions for women, which had caused her to fear rejection of her work, she might have never become known had not Stieglitz, unconventionally, believed in women's artistic capacity.<sup>4</sup> Not only he influenced critics to recognize the power of her paintings, but the relationship between Stieglitz and O'Keeffe itself exemplified an alternative marriage pattern, in which supportive husbands enabled the survival of artist wives.<sup>5</sup> Stieglitz and the critics understood O'Keeffe's work as distinctly female because it expressed female emotional and sexual energies and at the same time was "modernist" for conveying and universalizing women's unconscious psychological condition. The critics generalized her female particularity, thus legitimizing her art and adapting it to the emerging male modernism, even though they kept describing her work as emotional, innocent, and childish. And because it was different from men's art, O'Keeffe's work could still be excluded from the major themes of modernism. Stieglitz and his colleagues, for example, refused to show her New York urban paintings, claiming they lacked the female sensibility and were inappropriately in the domain of men's modernism.<sup>6</sup>

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*Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998), and Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between O'Keeffe and Stieglitz see Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991), and Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, *Two Lives: A Conversation in Paintings and Photographs* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). See also Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1986), and Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modernism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Stieglitz's photography studio had been also involved with the career of Isadora Duncan, who had been recognized as a modernist choreographer and dancer in early century. See, Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955), 172-3, 180, 183, and , and Patricia Briggs, "Alfred Stieglitz, Women Artists, and Modern Dance," *History of Photography* (Winter 1996): 335-336.

<sup>5</sup> Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996) 155. See also Whitney Chadwick & Isagbelle de Courtivron, eds. *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Landauer, "Searching for Selfhood" 23-25.

O’Keeffe agreed that most of her paintings were about women’s feelings: “A woman who has lived many things and who sees lines and colors as an expression of living —might say something that a man cant— I feel there is something unexplored about woman that only a woman can explore —Men have done all they can do about it.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, still a gendered product of Victorian America, she denied the eroticism assigned to her. O’Keeffe rejected feminine particularity and recognition as a “female painter.” She wished to be accepted as a serious artist by the male art establishment’s standards. Although there was an evolving alliance between feminism and modernism, which shared the liberation drive, O’Keeffe’s case confirmed that the relationship was ambivalent as modernism was defined by male potency. In order to become a successful modernist a women had to show masculine traits of power, directness, and simplicity.<sup>8</sup> To claim the rights of a man, therefore, O’Keeffe developed an androgynous, sexless, at times masculine public image by wearing men’s clothes and hair style. Significantly, she did that with the cooperation of Stieglitz who for years photographed her in that image, by which O’Keeffe became publicly identified. Considering that he also photographed her in nude, reflecting on her feminine sensuality, they together complicated O’Keeffe’s identity and representational personae. In fact, they commented on the gender complexity in both the art world and society.<sup>9</sup>

Another significant gender context in O’Keeffe’s life was provided by her stays since 1929 in the women’s art colony in Taos, New Mexico. She was first invited to go there, and then was influenced, by Mabel Dodge Luhan, a symbol of the New York sexually emancipated progressive “New Woman” of the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> As it was for other women artists, for O’Keeffe the Southwest meant freedom of movement, life in a “female sisterhood,” and relief from a dominant husband and from Eastern bourgeois social restraints. The region’s open landscapes also offered O’Keeffe a sense of power, conquest, and alternative for the small, private domestic spaces imposed by the traditional female art. O’Keeffe also further problematized her art and gender representation by incorporating into her own female identity what was considered masculine, undomesticated, anarchist notion of the West, while at the same time feminizing the masculine environment with a woman’s emotional approach. In her famous “Black Cross with Red Sky” (1929), a large cross as a civilization’s artifact in front of the open landscape stressed the impact of humanity on the wilderness.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Buhler, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics* 100.

<sup>8</sup> Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*.

<sup>9</sup> See photographs in O’Keeffe and Stieglitz, *Two Lives*, and Lynes, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, 47, 59, 81-2, 114, 145-6, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1998); Ellen Wiley Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> On O’Keeffe in New Mexico, see Sandra D’Emilio & Sharyn Udall, “Inner Voices, Outward Forms: Women Painters in New Mexico,” *Independent Spirits*, ed. Patricia Trenton, 153-182, esp. 153-57. See also Bran Dykstra, *Georgia O’Keeffe and the Eros of Place* (Princeton: Princeton



Due to O’Keeffe’s artistic expressions of the womanly and her independent life style, she became an icon for American women who since the late 1960s promoted “feminist art.” O’Keeffe disliked becoming a symbol for the emerging women’s art. “It is just that what I do seems to move people in a way I don’t understand at all,” she said.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding her rejection of the idea, in the Sixties a new kind of a feminist artist was created, best represented by Judy Chicago (1939-). Chicago’s life, work, and extensive biographical writing allow us to understand the essence of the connections among ideology, art, and the female gender in recent decades.<sup>13</sup>

Chicago is a product of the late 1960s and 1970s, especially in the context of the culmination of the women’s liberation movement in the West Coast. Yet, before feminist consciousness overtook her she adopted attitudes many accomplished women artists held in order to be recognized as equal to male colleagues: suppressing anything that would mark their work as done by a woman. She developed a minimal painting style behind which to hide, but beneath the surface left hints of femaleness and a sense of struggle against gender prejudice. Later on, the rise of feminist awareness helped her to fully recognize that being a woman did shape her entire experience.<sup>14</sup>

“Coming out” —admitting that gender was strongly present in her art— Chicago elaborated gender consciously. She applied to her abstract art shapes such as closed empty forms as references to the female organs. She allowed her woman’s sensibilities and fantasies to be expressed, although she was at first frightened by the powerful artistic results. Not only Chicago realized then how effective had repression of women’s expression been, but she learned that male viewers rejected work intimately connected to female experience. They denied it existed as they denied women may have a particular point of view, or that art by women could be of any importance. But, significantly, she understood it was easy to ignore female art as long as it was not direct enough and merely transposed into a subtle artistic language. Wondering if her own abstract creations revealed her female values, her work hereafter was propelled by the need to make them more transparent.<sup>15</sup>

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UP, 1998). On the idea of the West for women artists, see Virginia Scharff, “Introduction: Women Envision the West, 1890-1945,” *Independent Spirits*, ed. Patricia Trenton, 1-8, esp. 2-6.

<sup>12</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 155; Lynes, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics* 101. On O’Keeffe as a symbol, see Christopher Merrill & Ellen Bradbury, eds. *From Faraway Nearby: Georgia O’Keeffe as Icon* (Albuquerque: U of New México P, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See her two autobiographies: *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin, 1975), and *Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist* (New York: Viking, 1996). Chicago changed her paternal last marriage name, Gershowitz, in 1969 to Chicago, where she grew up, “as an act of identifying myself as an independent woman.” See Chicago, *Through the Flower* 63.

<sup>14</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 40-53; Gail Levin, “Judy Chicago in the 1960s,” *Impossible to Hold: Women and Culture in the 1960s*, ed. Avital H. Bloch & Lauri Umansky (New York: New York UP, 2005) 305-326.

<sup>15</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 55-56, 64-66, 129, 132, 138.

Chicago's activism in art reflected the politics of the emerging feminist ideology; "wedding feminism and art" was her goal. Fighting the repression of womanness in art, the feminism she believed in claimed that women have particularistic experiences, which they are obliged to express. That was the idea of "making the private public" —inhabiting not only the traditional female private sphere but the public sphere as well— by bringing women's deepest reality "out in the world" through art. Her artistic feminism maintained that by women expressing their distinctive perceptions of reality a new women's art would create "female audience," women critics, and women's control over the exhibition, consumption, and uses of their art. Art would change women themselves and then challenge society's dominant beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

Chicago implemented those ideas by founding in 1970 the Women's Program at the Fresno State College in California, where she moved to from Los Angeles. The purpose of that pioneering art studio was to shape women students' gender awareness through artistic expression. In a social organization of a "sisterhood," Chicago meant young women to learn to be assertive, strong, and serious about their work, while she herself served as a mixture of mother figure and a political-intellectual mentor. Chicago's endeavor led her to found the Womanhouse for female artists back in Los Angeles. In 1973 it was united with the Feminist Studio Workshop to soon after turn into the Women's Building, including a cooperative art gallery and the Sisterhood Bookstore. This institution was inspired by the period's communal ideas, central to the women's movement, of serving multiple functions in the members' lives and feminist politics.<sup>17</sup>

A significant shift in Chicago's painting had begun by consciously following O'Keeffe, whom she admired, by means of the flower as a symbol of femininity. Using colors that change gradually by a spraying technique, Chicago developed images in which the petals "are parting, and one can see an inviting but undefined space, the space beyond the confines of our femininity." The flowers, as they had been for O'Keeffe, suggested "her own femininity, through which the mysteries of life could be revealed." Chicago referred not only to the evident vaginal structure, but challenged its often despised and pornographic meaning among men —and women— by appropriating and reinventing it as a woman painter. The changing colors of the floral images also called to explore the deep, hidden, complex content of women's psyche and sexuality. They were, she wrote, "the first steps in being able to make clear, abstract images of my feelings as a woman."<sup>18</sup>

Throughout her career Chicago created various major gender-related works, but her best known work is *The Dinner Party*, created during 1974 and 1979. *The Birth Project* followed it.<sup>19</sup> *The Dinner Party* is an installation consisting of three

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<sup>16</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 130-136, 158-159, 179, 180-182, 188-190, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 95-117, 192-195, 200-204.

<sup>18</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 141-143, 157.

<sup>19</sup> See Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

long tables that are connected in their ends to form a complete triangle shape of a size of about 10 meter long of each of the three tables. The creation symbolizes the history of women in Western Civilization by using a total of 39 place settings on the tables—one setting for each woman, 13 on each side of the triangle. The work commemorates 999 historic women important for their historic contribution in all areas—leaders, writers, artists, goddesses. Their names are inscribed on “The Heritage floor,” the empty space inside the triangle, around which the tables are arranged.<sup>20</sup>

Inspired by the wish to legitimize female sensibilities, empower women, and advance change toward full acceptance of women in the patriarchal society, *The Dinner Party* constituted a feminist educational art project. The idea was that art can reach broad audiences and end the absence women from the public culture and fill the need for visual images from a female perspective. Believing that visual representations can reflect historical information, Chicago wanted to promote the mission of the emerging field of Women’s History: to include women in the record, convey their historical achievements and struggles in male dominated societies, and ultimately, break the anti-women cycle of history.<sup>21</sup>

The media used in *The Dinner Party* also bear a gender message about female identity. Traditionally female arts, crafts, and skills—ceramics and china-painting for the plates, needlework for place mats—were deliberately chosen to commemorate the historical woman by means of her creative accomplishments. By adopting those techniques Chicago elevated to high art what had been thought of as inferior feminine crafts. On the other hand, Chicago knew from her own experience the importance for a woman artist to learn how to use men’s tools and techniques ordinarily discouraged for women’s use. Learning early on how to apply male-dominated complex methods and erect large-size works allowed Chicago’s *Dinner Party* to reach the magnitude that was essential for her feminist message.<sup>22</sup>

As a creation whose immediate connotation is women’s role in the kitchen, Chicago artistically glorified that function by painting the plates on the place settings. Most of them carry the vulva-vaginal detailed flower motif, referring to an active female body experience, and the butterfly motif, an ancient liberation symbol. An additional element in the installation is the table’s closed triangle form, which refers to generational cycles of oppressed women. Chicago adopted a traditional cyclic representation traditionally attributed to women because of their merged-in-nature reproductive and renovating powers. Such artistic treatment was an example of a feminist intentional re-utilization of traditional particularistic ideas

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<sup>20</sup> On the process of creating *The Dinner Party* and its meanings, see Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 3-13. For more on this work, see Amelia Jones, “Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*,” *Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), and Nancy McCauley, “No Sexual Perversion in (Judy) Chicago,” *Bulletin of Art Documentation* (Winter 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 5-7.

<sup>22</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower* 32-33.

about women, but with the intention to give them a new meanings. ence, for example, the “M” shaped embroidery in the installation’s three corners signifies Millennium: future gender equality will finally break the oppressive cycle.<sup>23</sup> The collaborative nature of *The Dinner Party* itself signals an end to that cycle. The collective studio group which worked on the project —called “Through the Flower” — itself implemented the era’s feminist thinking of unity, equality, and cooperation among women.<sup>24</sup>

*The Dinner Party* was first shown in 1979 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The work’s radical feminist message, however, presented for a long time a difficult problem for the traditional art establishment. Exhibits in museums were practically impossible to realize, attesting to the institutional rejection of feminism. Therefore, the installation was exhibited in alternative spaces across the country, mostly for women who, as Chicago explained, were “hungry for images that affirmed women’s experience.” Proving the work’s significance for a gender shared identity, the shows often involved festivals and communal crafts projects.<sup>25</sup>

When *The Dinner Party* was finally showed in the Brooklyn Museum the mostly male New York art establishment rejected it. “Vaginas on plates,” was how one critic described it. Only in the late 1980s did the work overcome some of the resistance it began to be included in women’s art classes and books. Nevertheless, even the attempt in 1990 to donate it to the University of District of Columbia failed because conservatives in Congress fought that with the argument the work was pornographic, obscene, and offensive. They clearly feared its assertive female sexuality and ignored altogether its historical message and the fact that sexual images has been prevalent in men’s art.<sup>26</sup> Thus, although it was shown in 1996 at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the work was packed until it recently found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum’s Feminist Art Center. As Chicago has long known, *The Dinner Party*’s story proved again the importance of a women artist’s involvement in, and control over the consumption of their work after it leaves the studio.

The connections between recent women art, ideology, and institutions is also embodied in the work of sculpture Maya Lin (1959-). She designed *The Vietnam Veteran Memorial* in Washington, D.C., commonly known as *The Wall* (1982), her best known work; *The Civil Rights Memorial* in Montgomery Alabama (1989); and *The Women’s Table* (1993), a reminder of Chicago’s table, at her alma mater Yale University, commemorating its becoming co-educational.<sup>27</sup> These works deal with

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<sup>23</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 7-9.

<sup>25</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 13, 214-218.

<sup>26</sup> For the controversies over the work, see Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 213-226.

<sup>27</sup> See Lin’s work in print: Maya Lin, *Public, Private* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1994), and *Grounds for Remembering: Monuments, Memorials, Texts* (Berkeley: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, 1995).



issues of the 1960s and are politically contested.<sup>28</sup> Yet, unlike *The Dinner Party*, they were created by a post-1960s female artist who is not a member of the generation of the radical Women Liberation Movement. Although the gender political significations evoked in Lin's works are less conspicuous, they are nonetheless present.

Lin applied in the monuments she designed an idea of a "time line" — a chronological listing of events. *The Wall* lists service-men killed in Vietnam by alphabetically engraving their names in the long shiny mirror-like granite walls, along which the visitors walk— although initially Lin had meant to order the names according to the dates in which they were killed. The *Civil Rights Memorial* consists of a round granite table (about 2.50 meter in diameter) with dates and definitions of important events in the history of the movement engraved in lines read from the outside toward the circle's center. The Yale elliptical granite *Table* shines by the water flowing over its surface, where numbers, for dates, are engraved in a snail-shaped spiral that goes from the inside outward. Although Lin claimed the meanings of her works elated to the Sixties were transparent and neutral, and she declared they were deliberately a-political, the circle device presents her own political-historical narrative of the Sixties movements. The progressive and unfinished time line hints to the unresolved histories of the Vietnam War, women, African-Americans, and even the past history of her Chinese immigrant parents. The viewer is invited to interpret the events as if they may still have a positive continuation toward forgiving and a better future.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in the message regarding women, Lin interestingly followed Judy Chicago not only with the idea of a historical table to commemorate women's achievements, but also with the utopian notion of a better future: to signify the hope Lin used an open-ended line, while Chicago closed the tables' ends into a triangle.

Optimism may have a gender significance in Lin's designs that lead to a sense of conciliation and healing in regard to controversial events — capacities associated with women's role. This is done by engaging visitors to deal with the events personally. Lin talked about a private conversations between the work and people, which is a participatory concept of art. By *The Wall* people frequently leave flowers and other artifacts and they take part in a therapeutic act involving intimacy, crying, togetherness. The work spreads horizontally, in comparison to vertical male-related monuments of the Mall, close to earth and actually under the surface of the ground, which invokes female closeness to earth, the intimacy combined with safety and stability that it offers. *The Wall* provides the same feeling to the men visiting the site as well. Lin said: "When I looked at the sight I knew I wanted something horizontal that took you in, that make you feel safe... I just imagined opening up the earth."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Abramson, "Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Summer 1996): 679-707.

<sup>29</sup> Abramson, "Maya Lin" 693-703.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Campbell, "An Emotive Place Apart," *A.I.A. Journal* (May 1983): 150-151.

*The Women's Table* offers closeness to women by eating together, sitting on the granite bench that surrounds the slab. The bright surface that characterizes the monuments also have an appeasing purpose: the effect of the water that comes out of the stone and floats over the rock is soothing and the reflective surfaces invite new historical and emotional reflections on the debated histories.<sup>31</sup> *The Wall's* healing effect and Lin's pedagogical lessons indeed have motivated the project "Healing of Vietnam War Wounds": a copy model of the Wall rotates from city to city around the U.S. and artifacts left by mourners at the Washington site are exhibited alongside it. What proves the monument's feminization by female-associated pacifying powers and Lin's non-ideological optimistic objectives is the generated capacity of both sides of the debate over Vietnam —veterans and pacifists— to resolve past animosities and come to terms with a painful, controversial history.<sup>32</sup>

Lin's historical messages signal a certain conservative tendency to avoid disputes over such ideologically contested issues. She feminizes the monuments by traditional female sensibilities, which break down a gender division and successfully reach to soothe people of both sexes precisely for the non-political emotional forces. So even though, similarly to Chicago's feminist artistic mission, Lin conceived her projects as "teaching devices," they do not call for radical change. This is not surprising for a woman who is a product of the post-feminist 1980s, for whom the previous feminist identity has been mostly transformed. Usually not defined by subversive politics, it does not necessarily require bold gender images and may use abstract and silent artistic discourses. The post-feminist generation takes for granted, and builds upon earlier feminist achievements and can even afford to validate the status-quo. Lin herself, for example, was a Yale student thanks to her predecessors' struggle to accept women, which *The Table* celebrates. Her successes, precisely in projects that demand institutional approval, exemplify the changes in women artists' confidence and capacity to benefit from the existing order.<sup>33</sup>

Another woman artist who has enjoyed success in that post-feminist era is Cindy Sherman (1954-).<sup>34</sup> Sherman deals with issues of women's identity and condition, mainly the female body and psychology, she wishes to come to terms with her female identity, studying and finding solutions to herself by peeling off layers, shifting from the visible external to the internal, so as to arrive at some deep reali-

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<sup>31</sup> Abramson, "Maya Lin" 704-706. It was precisely this revolutionary feminized perception of a war monument that first ignited furious criticism against the work. See Jan C. Scruggs & Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veteran Memorial* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Marc Briendel, "War Memorial on Its Way to Berkeley," *Berkeley Voice* (January 30, 1997). On remembering and *The Wall*, see Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veteran Memorial* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> More on Lin see Maya Lin, *Boundaries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), and the documentary film by Firedea Lee Mock & Terry Sanders, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1995).

<sup>34</sup> See Sherman's work in Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) and *History Portraits* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990). See also Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

ties. Her medium is mainly photography and she takes pictures of herself, although the photographs are not autobiographical.<sup>35</sup> There, by using herself as a model Sherman emphasizes self-control over her own representation. The auto-modeling makes references to the unavailability of models to women artists in the past and to models being historically anonymous when they posed for men. By so appropriating the notion of the female model, Sherman subverts against the male artists' subjective control over women's images. Sherman creates gendered art once she represents herself as what embodies the realities of the female body and identity in general from a woman's point of view.

In her 1978 black-and-white series of film-stills, Sherman appears in B-movies' stereotypical female roles of the 1940s and 1950s, from a starlet to a prostitute. These self-portraits were characterized by a self-controlled cold gaze, emotional emptiness, and distance from viewer. The topics were role-playing and choosing identities, and the meanings of female identity when created by beauty and cloths.<sup>36</sup> Sherman was preoccupied by the questions of external and internal truth, disintegrated and impermanent realities, and the ways in which art can inquire into them in relationship to the female existence. Typical of post-feminism, she optimistically remarked on the freedom for contemporary women to define themselves.

In the early 1980s Sherman turned to "corporal art." She invites the viewer to explore the inner erotic and emotional meanings of womanhood by minimizing the background environment and zooming on her figure, which appears as either mutilated, raped, or in a form of a corpse. Sherman calls attention to the figure also by using glossy color and by wearing strange make up, costumes, and wigs. The bizarre and repulsive effects force the viewer to look into the frightening inside and thus re-create the meaning of the physical-sexual body. In other words, through the ugly and pornographic Sherman sends a gender-significant message: a woman's body is vulnerable to danger, and even death, and as a consequence her psyche is in turmoil and anxiety over the body.<sup>37</sup> In the early 1990s Sherman began using plastic and rubber dolls as images instead of herself. As her emphasis on the sexual body grew and she needs to take off the images's cloths and show enlarged hollow sex organs and body parts out of their places, she can no longer use herself. When the representations are no longer of her own body, the dolls metaphorize, publicize, and universalize even more the personal anguish and defenselessness as the existential fate of the entire gender.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Danielle Knafo, "Dressing Up and Other Games of Make-believe: The Function of Play in the Art of Cindy Sherman," *American Imago* 53 (Summer 1996): 139-164. See also Therese Lichtenstein, "Interview with Cindy Sherman," *Journal of Contemporary Art* (Fall 1992): 78, Eric McDonald, "Dis-seminating Cindy Sherman," *Art Criticism* (1989): 35.

<sup>36</sup> Knafo, "Dressing Up" 145-148.

<sup>37</sup> Sherman was recently asked to direct a horror movie called "Office Killer" that fits in with the images of her work. See "She Came from Soho," *New Yorker* (April 22, 1996): 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> Knafo, "Dressing Up" 147-158.



A good deal of what characterizes Sherman as an artist of the post-feminist generation is that she has refused to call either herself or her work “feminist.” She has avoided direct or public expressions of feminist politics and theory, and has rejected a didactic approach taken by Judy Chicago, for example. Some critics, indeed, tend to view the dolls as gender-free, beyond the female experience and identity they clearly represent, thus distance the work from feminism even more. Others cling to the gendered interpretation and feminist message despite the absence of any artist’s declared “intent.” The possible ambiguity in Sherman’s work generates such disagreements. They replicate the debate in current women’s art over who can and who cannot speak as a feminist artist or on her behalf, what it means to speak as a representative of gendered feminist art or to be politically silent. While feminist art of the 1970s emphasized women’s experience and authentic female identity, Sherman problematizes authenticity and stresses in its place the notion of constructed identities. Therefore, she and her art are neither feminist in the style of Chicago and her cohort, nor anti-feminist, but rather representations of a new meaning of feminism in the post-feminist age.<sup>39</sup>

A woman artist of Sherman’s age, and who goes in a similar direction regarding gender and corporal horrors, is Kiki Smith (1954-). She started out in politically active and noncommercial art spaces before she gained success in the New York gallery world.<sup>40</sup> Smith focuses on the physical body and the dangers it faces, the body’s functions, and the problems of individual control over them. She shows, for example, a row of large bottles full with bodily fluids and real-size sculptures of persons who lost control over their body fluids, such as a man hung while semen is leaking down his body. Those creations possibly refer to risks in the age of AIDS, while others, such as empty bodies, disconnected organs or organs removed from their base and their function in the body address the lack of self-command over it. She also exhibited a heart as a bloody mess, a diagram of nervous system, a realistic magnification of sperm, skin, hair, tears, and other body internal elements hitherto invisible in art.<sup>41</sup>

Smith deals with the body as both a gendered and genderless universal organism to which no sex signs are attached. Comparably to Sherman, whether gendered or ungendered, Smith’s interest in the body is not centered on its mere external aspects but on its failures and traumas. Smith investigates gender differences in the inner body, asking questions about the socio-cultural difference and sameness be-

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<sup>39</sup> On this debate, see Michelle Meagher, “Would the Real Cindy Sherman Stand Up? Encounters between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Art Theory,” *Women: A Cultural Review* (March 2002): 18-36

<sup>40</sup> For Smith’s work see: *Kiki Smith* (The Hague: Sdu, 1990), and *Kiki Smith: Sojourn in Santa Barbara* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Susan Tallman, “Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons,” *Art in America* (April 1992): 147-175, David Humphrey, “Stained Sheets/Holy Shroud,” *Arts Magazine* (December 1990): 58-62, Carlo McCormick, “Kiki Smith,” *Journal of Contemporary Art* (Spring 1991): 81-6, and Michael Boodro, “Blood Spit, And Beauty,” *Art News* (March 1, 1994): 124.

tween the sexes if some biological distinctions are ignored. In her discourse on the female reproductive organs and sexual differences, like Sherman—and unlike most male artists—she does not idealize nor romanticize the female body. She anchors it in its socio-moral context, that is, in the terror that may result to the body precisely from the sexual-biological differences. Smith expresses this idea in several works: one sculpture shows an empty figure of a pregnant women, cut into half all through; another work displays a woman, milk leaking from her breasts; and in a third work a woman's fetus is dropping down on the ground.<sup>42</sup> Smith generated a gender message also through choosing materials. Stained sheets she hung, for instance, may, because of closeness to the body, mark the female body through menstruation, loss of virginity, and childbirth—fundamental private events in women's lives but that are also of communal public significance.<sup>43</sup> Smith, then, evokes an idea that has become expected in the current discourse on gender: women's body and biology are socially re-created to embody "gender."

In comparison to painting, photography as a relatively new technology had been more restricted for penetration by women. The camera was perceived as a mechanism that signified "speed and science," and processing, as technologically demanding, primarily appropriate for men. There were, nevertheless, women photographers in the 20th century, but it seems that they began to be more widely accepted for their capacities since the 1950s. One of the those who emerged as an important innovator and whose photography was recognized as art was Diane Arbus (1923-1971).<sup>44</sup> Arbus was born in New York and lived and worked there until she committed suicide. She was part of the generation that grew up in the post-World War II era, but because her important work was done in the 1960s and echoed that historical era, Arbus may be considered as a Sixties artist.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps because her privileged background growing up in a wealthy family in a conformist period, Arbus was not a political person nor was she a feminist in the ordinary sense. Even if it did not occur to Arbus to stress gender as a subject, her work had gender significance because she interpreted her subjects through a woman's sensibilities.

Arbus began her photography career as a partner with her husband Allan Arbus in a fashion photography studio which worked mostly for *Glamour* and *Vogue* magazines. She became admired not so much for photographing fashion models as for, later on, photographing unique images of marginalized, physically and socially damaged, deviant, and outcast people: freaks, transvestites, nudists, dwarfs, circus

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<sup>42</sup> Tallman, "Kiki Smith" 147-175.

<sup>43</sup> Humphrey, "Stained Sheets" 59-60, 62.

<sup>44</sup> For Arbus's biography, see Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984). On women photographers, see Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (New York: Abbeville, 1994); Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in America* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> For Arbus's work, see *Diane Arbus* (New York: Aperture, 1972); *Diane Arbus: Magazine Work* (New York: Aperture, 1984); and *Untitled* (New York: Aperture, 1995), published posthumously.

performers, retarded, and the mentally ill. Although she photographed normal people too, in those subjects she touched on the secrets of the taboo, forbidden, and hidden world. Part of her achievement as a woman at the time was the courage to penetrate into, and document that sealed world. More important, however, was her female unpretentious gaze at those people. Her camera kept social distance from those defenseless people, yet no feeling of superiority over them is transmitted. Some of the retarded, for instance, are seen holding hands, symbolizing reciprocity and equality. Arbus's gender message, then, is of psychological insight, humane empathy with the weak, within a sense of equality with them through shared vulnerability, pain, and dependency—all emotions attributed to women more often than to men.<sup>46</sup>

The outcasts also symbolized the sense of alienation from the mainstream middle-class society that many young people felt in the 1960s. By documenting unfortunate persons Arbus brought them out from hiding into the world, closer to the view of the majority society. Thus, by uncovering the hidden life of the marginal alienated few, Arbus crossed over the boundaries between the private and the public and metaphorized a troubled larger society. Even in her photos of ordinary people, usually suburbanites and socialites, Arbus expressed the period's criticism on the bourgeois. She managed to penetrate into their less glamorous interiors, exposed their anxiety, and pointed to a suspicion that there was concealed darkness in their lives. Interestingly, Arbus echoed Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, which ignited feminism in the U.S. Both women exposed the ill and unstable conditions inside the idealized suburban home, especially their effect on women.<sup>47</sup>

In her personal life Arbus epitomized some of the postwar mother/wife ideal, expecting marriage stability and protection against financial and social threats. In 1947 photos in *Glamour*, Arbus herself was portrayed with her husband and little daughter as a model American family. Feeding the girl while impeccably dressed was a typical mystified domestic image during that period. But an image of domestic life in the Arbuses' work that indicated their inconformity with such idealism, was their contribution to the 1955 exhibit and book *The Family of Man*. It depicted a father and young son lying on a sofa, both reading the Sunday newspaper. While it was an image of an idyllic familial leisure time—the exhibit's general message was of contented families—the Arbuses subverted against the myth by positioning the father and son laying positioned in opposite to each other: father's head next to child's feet, hinting to how disconnected from one another they may be.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For a commentary on Arbus's work, see Janet Malcolm, "Aristocrats," *New York Review of Books* (February 1, 1996): 7-8, and "Good Pictures," *New York Review of Books* (January 15, 2004): 4-7; Arthur Lubow, "Arbus Reconsidered," *New Republic* (September 14, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).

<sup>48</sup> *Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 53. See also Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1998).

More in Arbus's professional and private life signified the importance of gender. Arbus revealed much of what used to be typical women professional insecurities. She looked at her husband Allan as the real professional whom she would always ask for assistance on technical practices, knowledge of which she felt she lacked. She associated with, and always looked up to the opinions of most of the influential male photographers of the era whom she knew were important in facilitating the acceptance of women in the arts. It was the separation from her husband, however, that finally made her an artist because she could be develop on her own. Still, Arbus was ambivalent about her success and she refused to be labeled as a "woman artist": "I am a *photographer*," she declared in rejection of a gender-specific definition, and shying away from identifying herself in the vocation of artist, long reserved for men.<sup>49</sup> Yet many difficulties Arbus encountered in her life originated from gender differences: the emotional problems created when it was revealed that she was the real talent in the couple and when Allen's divorced her, leaving her with grave economical problems to deal with. In addition, her vulnerability, the attempts to fulfill herself and become recognized as a serious artist independent of her husband and from the initial female assistant role in fashion photography, and her difficulties in the male-associated technical aspect of photography probably caused the deterioration of her emotional well-being and eventually brought her to suicide.

Since the 1960s more female photographers emerged as outstanding artists. One of the most important is Sally Mann (1951-).<sup>50</sup> Her works on children and women should certainly be viewed through the lenses of gender. Her collection *Immediate Family* (1994) consists entirely of black-and-white photographs of Mann's three young children, taken during seven years in and around the family house. Unlike ordinary photos of children, Mann shows them as either unclothed, dirty, bleeding, or otherwise miserable. Some critics attacked Mann for the improper use of her children in those images and called her to take care of them instead of photographing them. Such blames are dismissed by others who consider that Mann's models serve a higher artistic and critical purpose. She documents a sense of anxiety and disjunction in what is commonly believed to be an idyllic period of life: happy childhood, when children are neat, innocent, and protected. In a picture titled "The Wet Bed" her little daughter is laying in the dark on a stained sheet, naked and asleep with her legs open. The purity of the child is shadowed by an unwashable urine stain, referring to a loss of innocence with permanent effects. Mann demystifies the happy childhood ideal, saying that what is distressing for children —anger, confusion, insecurity, shame, fears— is, in fact, what children normally encounter.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Bosworth, *Diane Arbus* 298.

<sup>50</sup> For Mann's collections, see: *Second Sight: The Photographs of Sally Mann* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1983); *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women* (New York: Aperture, 1988); *Immediate Family* (New York: Aperture, 1992); *Still Time* (New York: Aperture, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm, "The Family of Mann" 7-8. See also Jane Jaffer, *At Home with Photography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York UP, 1998).

What Mann says about the threats to children as weak members of society reminds of the opinions Sherman and Smith express on the risks and unhappiness regarding the body. But Mann also deconstructs parenthood. More importantly, as a woman looking at her own children, and since women are burdened with the main responsibilities of child rearing, she dares to shake up the sacred of all: motherhood. Through her camera, even well meaning middle-class mothers like herself are frequently helpless in protecting their defenseless children. And from here, a critical interpretation of the notion of the perfect family arises as well.<sup>52</sup> Mann's camera touches on the private spaces of home and motherhood and as an artist she brings her mother-self and her family out of privacy so as to universalize the message.

Mann's earlier collection *At Twelve* examines the meanings of female youth.<sup>53</sup> The cover picture, for example, depicts an adolescent female in a relaxed position, wearing summer clothes, including tight shorts. Mann represents the body as radiating sexuality by focusing the camera on that woman's vulva, which is pressed on by the shorts. Such photographs are a product of an American culture impacted by feminism, where the term "girl" is practically rejected for females once they reach their post-puberty phase. It is replaced by "woman," virtually implying mature sexual beings in an early age. Out of the socio-cultural context, or taken by certain male photographers, the pictures might be suspected as pornographic, but from Mann's camera they are seen differently. Mann does not exploit these young women. Rather, her work discusses their sexual liberation and vast sexual knowledge; it stresses some of its disturbing consequences and the anxiety that young sexuality produce. As a woman artist Mann is capable of perceiving both the positive in the cultural changes that brought about women's sexual emancipation and the dangers young sexuality may involve.<sup>54</sup>

Those who blame Mann for the "Calvin Klein look" of female adolescents would prefer the innocent colorful "Benetton look" for young girls. The seduction and sexuality are disturbing to those critics who are, in fact, surprised a collection such as *At Twelve* is done by a woman artist at all. In their opinion, such images of female youngsters reinforce the mass media's stress on adolescent violence, shallowness, and boredom.<sup>55</sup> Such view may be more reflective of traditional feminists wishing to see positive portraits of women's lives and beauty. Instead, in this respect, one can observe a similarity between Mann's work and that of Smith and Sherman: not only they suspect sheer female beauty, but also point to the sexual dangers in women's life. Those artists reached adulthood when the sexual liberation credo of feminism had already been established. Yet they question the naive opti-

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<sup>52</sup> Malcolm's title, "The Family of Mann", is ironic. It plays on the contrast between the "Family of Man" exhibit and collection from 1953, which stresses happy families, and Mann's different message. See also Hirsch, *Family Frames*.

<sup>53</sup> Sally Mann, *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women* (New York: Aperture, 1988).

<sup>54</sup> Ann Beattie, "Introduction," in Mann, *At Twelve*.

<sup>55</sup> Elsa Dorfman, review of *At Twelve*, *Women's Review of Books* (March 1989).

mism, which those ideas advanced in the 1960s, in regard to women's sexuality and freedom. Those artists problematize these issues and turn them into gender issues by pointing to the inevitable difficulties a woman may encounter just by being a woman. Indeed, since the 1980s women's art has been questioning the utopianism of women's liberation artists typified by Judy Chicago. The feminism of the younger generation has been more sober and less political and radical, while the ideal of women's equality has been continuing to direct their gender-related work. They have not shied from expressing themselves boldly despite criticism. The successes of young female artists attest to the achievements of feminism in U.S. and to a reality where an artistic gender language can already be well received. Although working female artists point to fundamental hardships women still have to deal with, it is no longer necessary for those artists to wait for men's approval or hide behind a man. Certainly, they do not need to pretend being one.

