

## Foreword: Going Around in Circles

Lucy R. Lippard

My own memories of the Woman's Building mainly are exhilarating. On my first visit, in 1974, I was impressed and moved deeply that a bunch of women could claim space on such a scale—that they could renovate a big building (with pink tools), then furnish it with daring new art and ideas. I was dazzled by the school, design program, graphic center, women-owned and women-run galleries, bookstore, thrift shop, theater, coffeehouse, and eventually the video center and various offices, including the magazine *Chrysalis*. I later described my experience as “immediate intimacy with women who were—but were not—strangers.” It seemed, as Sondra Hale puts it, “a house large enough for everyone.”

And I was envious. There was nothing like this full-fledged woman's community in New York, where our branch of the feminist art movement was too often preoccupied with fending off or competing with the male-dominated mainstream art scene. Los Angeles, by virtue of its relative isolation at the time, was freer to innovate than we were in the art capital. For almost two decades, I kept up with many of the participants and activities, visited, wrote about and for the Building, spoke at the 1992 Vesta Awards, and was probably more influenced by West Coast feminism than most of my East Coast sisters (thanks in part to a friendship with Judy Chicago that goes back to the 1950s). But the day-to-day workings of this elaborately participatory institution were distant. The essays in this e-book—mostly by insiders, by women with profound connections to the space, the place, the principles, and the people—reveal that while externally the Building epitomized separatism, internally it was varied and contested. The honesty and from-the-gut analysis of their recollections is all the more compelling today, when such straight talk is in short supply.

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the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

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The Woman's Building was the capital of cultural feminism, where the spiritual and the political met and rowdily merged. It was an off-center center, defying the marginalization of women's lives and arts. In 1973, when it was founded, a women's community was something new and very appealing. To visit the Woman's Building then was like vacationing at a wonderful, healing resort. To live there was obviously a lot more demanding. (Bernice Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock once observed, "If you're in a coalition and you're comfortable, your coalition isn't big enough."<sup>1</sup>) It provided not a room of one's own but of our own, and sharing did not always come easily to all the fledgling egos occupying it. As the Building became "home," the community was also "family" — a situation that was at once comforting and threatening. Leaders—though there weren't supposed to be any, and no one wanted to replicate the psychological tensions of the mother/daughter relationship—encouraged ego-expanding ambition along with community, and the two were not always compatible.

For artists in particular, collisions of self and community could be wrenching. (Having organized politically with artists most of my life, I recognize the often painful push/pull from studio to organizing and back again.) It was also obvious that just as there were different kinds of feminism, there were different kinds of communities, and most women belonged to several simultaneously. As Theresa Chavez writes in her essay in this volume "Unburying Histories: the Futures of Feminist Art," "I am someone who is connected to and surrounded by many histories, all of which are buried, misunderstood, or romanticized."

From an East Coast vantage point, Los Angeles women sometimes seemed more outspoken, more soul-searching (embarrassingly so for a Yankee), and less conventionally "intellectual" than New Yorkers. "High theory" was seen as linear, male and elite; many of us aspired to the circular, female and egalitarian. I recognized my own brand of "organic intellectual" — a reaction against what Griselda Pollock has called "the structural sexism of most academic disciplines."<sup>2</sup> As on the Left, the theory being created on the ground from practice was mostly disregarded in the ivory towers, which led to a kind of mutual distancing by the 1980s. As Hale notes in her essay herein, the notion of women's culture — "one of the most potentially dynamic concepts within feminism, faltered from theoretical neglect."

On the other hand, the C-R (Consciousness-Raising) and Crit-Self-Crit (Criticism/Self Criticism), the warmth and curiosity, the ideology tempered by humor and intelligence, the impassioned debates, were all very familiar from my New York feminist world, based in the Heresies Collective and journal. Collectivity defined feminism for me and many oth-

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ers. Art was important because, as one of the the editors of this volume declares, “Women could represent themselves through their creative work.” The Woman’s Building’s focus on an independent pedagogy rooted in dialogical process was unique and changed the lives of many participants. Taboos such as incest, rape, menstruation and sexuality were blown into the public eye. Each of the Woman’s Building’s founders—Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and Arlene Raven—had a somewhat different vision for the building, but they managed, for the most part, to weave their goals into a singularly effective feminist institution.

While artist Chicago’s and art historian Raven’s work at the Feminist Studio Workshop has received more attention, de Bretteville’s design program was equally significant—the source of many pioneering concepts (paralleling what Susana Torre and others were doing for architecture on the East Coast). Called “Pinkie” by her students because she took up the challenge of re-investing that much-maligned color with a new strength and social significance in the famous gridded “Pink” poster, de Bretteville was determined to create a political and cultural bridge or a fluid membrane between public and private spheres. Space itself was a “precious commodity” in an era when alternative institutions were every activist’s goals. It is no coincidence that performance art—action within and transforming space, and by extension, society—was the favored medium of the Woman’s Building and the core of student-then-teacher Suzanne Lacy’s ongoing innovations in the field. As Hale writes, “Space is not a given. It is not a container or a void which is filled up; it is created just as gender is created, as part of culture.”

Media Art, rarely perceived as a feminist forte, and experimental video were also explored early in this context. (In her essay, “Stories from a Generation: Video Art at the Woman’s Building,” Cecilia Dougherty points out that the mainstream obsession with individual artists precluded attention to feminist collaborative enterprises.) Similarly, much mainstream art and theory based on body and desire, touted as “new” in the postmodern period, is clearly the offspring of feminist art from the 70s, when a threatened public was forced to confront notions of the cunt itself as space. By 1980, we knew the body as agency, beyond narcissism (“Your Body is a Battleground” a la Barbara Kruger), but the reception of Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* in 1979 proved that female genitalia, even offered as metaphor, remained beyond the pale, outside of history.

It is often said that feminist art is about content and communication. Lived experience and autobiography, which are not same thing, were at the core of that content, which arrived at the gates of the art world during a period when American Art critic

Clement Greenberg was still railing against “literary art.” Feminism gave all artists permission to consider what Cheri Gaulke called in her interview with Betty Ann Brown, included in Brown’s essay, “Feminist Art Education at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building,” the “unleashing of self,” as a preface to social change. Reading the unflinching essays that make up this book, I regained my admiration for the truism that opened so many eyes: “the personal is political.” This modest phrase was the baseline for “cultural,” “radical” and “socialist” feminisms, with emphases differently placed in each branch. It remains a living and dynamic proposition, a brilliant way to translate lived experience—positive and negative—into political action.

“The political is personal” is not the opposite of “the personal is political,” but its other half. When we understand who we are in historical sense we are better able to understand what other cultural groups are experiencing within a time and place we all share. Given the fact that many of us came from the factionalized Left, women’s groups had to simultaneously transcend and reinvent our own experiences of political organizing. The egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, often anarchic spirit of 1970s and 1980s feminism sometimes descended into chaos, while those who accepted community leadership were often disgruntled by their own lack of power.

One of the most engrossing aspects of the Woman’s Building’s history is the evolution of the lesbian community and its art. Terry Wolverton’s exhilarating description of the Natalie Barney Collective, the Lesbian Art Project (LAP) and the *Great American Lesbian Art Show* (GALAS) conveys the wacky and indomitable spirit of the early years. It also exposes the familiar contradictions of exclusion and outreach that plagued the initially white women’s movement. Ethnic, class and sexual differences loomed large in feminist lives in the 1970s and 1980s, as we struggled with ourselves and others to be as just, tolerant, fair and revolutionary as our ideals. Identity politics did not turn out to be a unifying force. Bia Lowe remarks in her e-mail exchange with founder de Bretteville, captured herein, on “an American rage for identity that seems nearly non-existent elsewhere. Feminism in the U.S. seems at times narcissistic and isolationist, like the culture . . . .” The token integration of women of color into largely white feminist organizations did not go well on either coast. (“Add a woman of color and stir,” commented one sarcastic critic of tokenism.) This remains the great failure of “second-wave feminism.” Good intentions were rampant, but so was ignorance and sometimes arrogance. Despite a lot of hard work (but too little, too late), conscious and unconscious racism plagued the Woman’s Building as it did virtually every other American feminist organization.

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Today the notion of feminist community is far less powerful, more splintered—in part because of right-wing ascendancies, in part because post-colonial theory has highlighted the weaknesses of earlier “multiculturalism,” and in part because the women’s movement did succeed in integrating women artists into the mainstream, a double-edged sword evident in the reactionary 1980s, when populist activism was overwhelmed by less accessible (and less dangerous) theory. The Woman’s Building came to be seen as the proud epitome of dreaded “essentialism.” Yet even today, I suspect that few women, no matter how “post feminist,” no matter how emancipated from “old-fashioned women’s liberation,” would deny that women’s experiences—social, sexual, biological—differ from those of men, though debates continue about their social and/or innate construction. Some of us struggled to maintain a balance of power. Believing that feminism should eschew “either/or,” I wrote optimistically about “Both Sides Now.”

The utopian foundations of the Woman’s Building, its conscious and strategic marginalization from the mainstream and its valorization of femaleness in the face of overwhelming odds has met with backlash and disdain in the intervening decades. But it was necessary at the time and may well be necessary soon again. If the first wave of feminism in the U.S. was the early 20th-century Suffragist movement, and the second wave was the Women’s Liberation Movement from the late 1960s, where are we now? Are we sunk in a trough? Should we be looking forward to a third wave? (It has been almost forty years.) Despite cultural amnesia and the fear of erasure common to all progressive movements, the exuberant optimism of vintage feminist art is attracting more attention these days. A New York symposium on feminist art at the Museum of Modern Art (in early 2007) was sold out months ahead of time. Chicago’s *Dinner Party* has found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum. We are still asking, as essayist Michele Kort recalls: “What do you want to say? What’s the form that will hold it?” And we are still advising each other, “Don’t be limited by the forms [or institutions] that exist.” And we are also seeing new ramifications in past work, realizing that, as essayist Jennie Klein argues, “the meaning of the image often exceeds the stated intentions of its maker . . . .”

Judy Chicago is quoted by Betty Ann Brown in this book as remarking (with a certain amazement) that as one goes around the circle “one discovers that the strangest people know the ‘right’ answer.” As we recall these histories, we are still going around in circles—an image not of futility but of a future in which the work we have done will be useful for the next generations of women, providing a scaffolding for the next Woman’s Building. This book is one of the tools with which it will be built—perhaps virtually, perhaps once again in real space.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls* (New York: Kitchen Table Press 1983), 358.

<sup>2</sup> Gridelda Pollack, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective," in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.

**Lucy R. Lippard** is a writer and activist, author of twenty books (including one novel) on contemporary art and cultural criticism. She is the co-founder of a number of activist artists' groups including *Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee* and *Heresies* (collective and journal), *PAD/D* (*Political Art Documentation/Distribution*) and *Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America*. She is also co-founder of the New York artists' bookstore, *Printed Matter*. Her books include *From the Center*, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*, *Mixed Blessings*, and most recently, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place*. She lives in Galisteo, New Mexico, where for ten years she has edited the community newsletter.