

# NOTES

one

1. The first part of the book is a collection of notes on the history of the word "one". It starts with a list of words that are related to "one" in various languages, including Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. The author then discusses the evolution of the word "one" in English, from its Old English roots to its modern usage. The notes are presented in a chronological order, showing how the word has changed over time and in different contexts.

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# Singing Songs: Revisiting Feminism and the Politics of Memory

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*Yes, I am Black and Radiant (Dyptich), from *Voices from the Song of Songs**

© Judy Chicago, 1999

Heliorelief, lithography and hand coloring, 40" x 24"

Photo © Donald Woodman

## “My History as a Woman”: An interview between William J. Simmons and Judy Chicago

*WS: Do you see your legacy in the work of contemporary feminist artists, and what still needs  
to be done to achieve gender equity in the arts, and in American society generally?*

JC: I'm dividing this question into two parts. The first is a question for historians and art  
historians, though I can see that younger artists (both male and female) can work freely  
out of their experiences, which was not the case when I was young, when women art-  
ists and artists of color, gays and lesbians, had to hide their identities behind a seeming

‘universality’ which was actually a type of art making that had been forged primarily by white men. But the white male experience was taken as both the universal and the norm. Fortunately, this has changed at least for young artists, and feminist art has spread all over the world.

Despite these changes, institutions have not changed sufficiently in that education is still male centered, and in major art museums, the statistics are disheartening: only 3%-5% of permanent collections in major museums around the world are made up of women artists and, for example, at the Tate Modern in London between 2000-2005, only 2% of their major exhibitions were women artists. Art history is shaped by permanent collections, major exhibitions and solo publications. In 1970, only 1.7% of solo art publications were devoted to women; today, over 40 years later, it is only 2.5%, so we are a long way from gender equity.

As for American society, young women are going to be faced with having to repeat the struggle for reproductive rights all over again. As the women’s historian Gerda Lerner stated: “Women are trapped in a tragic repetition in which they have to repeat and repeat struggles that have been won, only to be lost, and then they have to struggle all over again.” It is this repetition that *The Dinner Party* recounts and is aimed at overcoming.

*WS: Harvard University’s Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America has acquired many of your papers, and a wide variety of scholars have certainly benefited from your donation to the University. What advice do you have for students hoping to utilize your work in his or her chosen discipline, be it education, the visual arts, or gender/sexuality studies?*

JC: As you mention, my papers are at the Schlesinger Library, while my art education archive has been recently acquired by Penn State, which will maintain *The Dinner Party* curriculum online in perpetuity. In addition, *The Dinner Party* is at the Brooklyn Museum; my work in tapestry is going to the Museum of Art and Design in New York, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts has a number of my works. Together, these provide the possibility for extensive research into my life, pedagogical methods and art making.

I am often asked how I survived the often-vitriolic criticism of my work; my answer is always the same. I learned my history as a woman. I studied the work of my predecessors and came to understand the obstacles they had to overcome in order to achieve their goals. Knowing, for example, that when Elizabeth Blackwell was in medical school (the first woman doctor), no one spoke to her for two years and women spat on her in the streets (women can often be the most unkind). I was able to say to myself: “If she could do it, so can I.” So my advice is simple; avail oneself of all these materials. They are there for you.

I was interning at a youth development organization in New York City when I first saw *The Dinner Party*. I always dreaded Sundays. I would wake up in the morning to an empty dorm, tasked with the overwhelming responsibility of finding something to do in the absence of my roommate, who spent weekends with his girlfriend. It was on one of these melancholic Sundays that I decided to take the train downtown to see *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum. I had of course heard of the icon of feminist art, but I had never been able to visit it in person. It is very easy to think of images as comparable to the work of art itself; in reality, a picture is far removed from the palpable feeling of art's physical presence. When I entered the large room that housed the famed piece, I understood the incredible potency of experiencing art first-hand. It is in this moment of discovery, of intimacy, that one can become a part of a grander narrative, specifically, the historically-mediated connection between the artist and the audience.

The triangular table filled the room with a subtle, ephemeral light that produced a dance of shadow and brilliant light upon the wall. The glittering air lightly touched the place settings, delicately painted markers of history that conjure memories of women past and present. A powerful story told and a rich tapestry woven, *The Dinner Party* seems to extend in perpetuity. Its borders are never sure, and its interaction with the viewer's own space and individual experiences blends the personal with the collective. Each place at the table implies the presence of a body that is in an unsure state between materialization and dissipation, remembrance and loss. Every woman, living and gone, memorialized by *The Dinner Party* is equally cherished, and we, too, are invited to dine, to get lost in the multiplicity of names on the tiled floor.

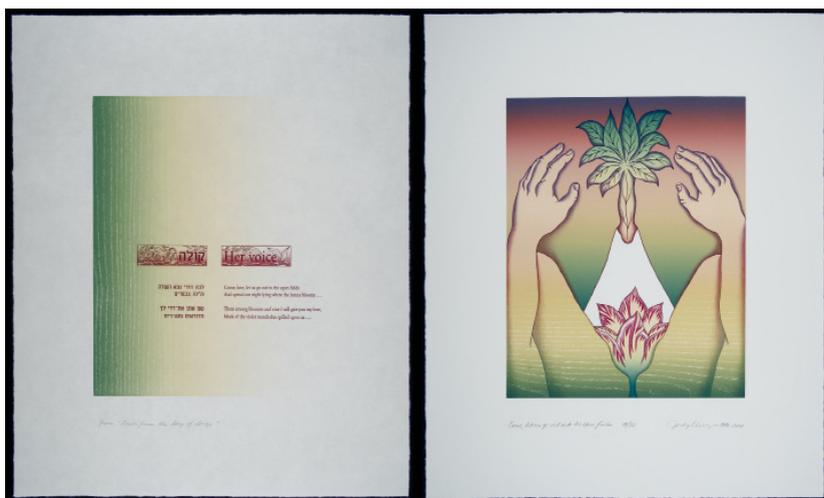
It is not merely for the purpose of self-indulgence that I present this story. I am removed from the context in which *The Dinner Party* was made. I can only study it in books and attempt to write about it as cogently as possible. Nonetheless, a palpable reaction emerged within me even as the walls of several decades repelled it, and I understood that history, though perhaps submerged at times in contemporary debates, could not be buried. According to the historian Joan Scott, history reverberates. It sends tactile, yet distant and patchy, echoes that shake our core, irrespective of the distance spanned or time passed.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her career, Chicago has put history at the forefront of contemporary feminist debates. Indeed, she reminds us of the tensions and joys inherent in celebrating the community of women – past and present alike.

## The Rhetoric of Post-Feminism

Still, as Chicago indicates in her responses, her work has run into criticism for its particular viewpoint on womanhood. It could be said that *The Dinner Party* embodies the urge to unite women under an unstable category of femininity. In its celebration of the body in connection with women's history, *The Dinner Party* presents a unified vision of Woman, which produces not only a corporeal connection among all female-bodied people, but also the conflation of personal stories into a constructed narrative. Some critics have considered this type of feminist expression to be an erasure, an essentialist vision of womanhood that is tied to the perceived shortcomings of Second Wave Feminism. In this way, the celebration of physicality and collectivity as women has been derided as an imperfect platform from which to advocate for women's rights.

Central to the criticism of Chicago's work is the concept of gender and sex as culturally-produced and ultimately unsustainable products of constructed knowledge. For instance, the now canonical article by Anne-Marie Slaughter in *The Atlantic* tells women that feminism itself perpetuates quixotic hopes for the chance to successfully manage personal, professional, and familial duties.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Jennie Bristow of *The Huffington Post* tells us that feminism is antiquated, and that a new focus should be placed on parents' rights rather than women's rights. According to Bristow, "feminism has had it's day."<sup>3</sup> These sentiments represent a trend in academic and activist discourse in the United States. Any talk of gender-based coalitions became associated with an underdeveloped, exclusionary notion of feminism, and analyses based on similarities among women as a group is almost immediately rejected as insubstantial and reductive. Women are constantly being described in terms of their unity with respect to various social and political issues, yet, with increasing prominence, they are being told that the bonds that hold them together are based upon a dangerous lie. Even as women unite around policies, both gendered and non-gendered, that are directly relevant to their lives, they are told that "feminism" is no longer a viable basis for identity formation or political action.

It is important to look at the limitations of feminism as it has come to us today, especially with regard to race and sexuality. Many voices have been left out of the Second Wave legacy, and the attempt to complicate that narrative is part of the revolutionary task of expanding discussions of identity politics. But post-feminism erects a new set of boundaries by disqualifying "womanhood" and "femininity" as acceptable categories for self-identification. Moreover, it posits that the call for equality advanced by feminism is now irrelevant, that the problem is either solved already or too big to solve at all. What about women whose self-definition as women is as dear as life itself, and what can be said for continued discrimination against women, as women, as female-bodied,



*Come Let Us Go Out into the Open Fields* (Dyptich), from *Voices from the Song of Songs*  
1999

*Heliorelief, lithography, and hand coloring, 40" x 24"*

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Photo © Donald Woodman

feminine individuals? It could be that, in rejecting unity based on gender or physical sex, one forecloses the possibility of meaningful connections produced by a celebration of womanhood as a personal, daily, physical joy. Freedom to appreciate one's gender as such has been traditionally denied to women. Chicago removes that barrier and provides the inspiration for a unifying, though deeply individual, experience that rests upon a vision of Woman as an inclusive web of interconnected memories and passions.

### Feminism Sings Anew – *Song of Songs*

Where, then, is the line between the feminism of “the past” and “contemporary” feminism? Is Chicago’s art and that of her contemporaries no longer relevant in an increasingly (and necessarily) complicated society that resists an association with the alleged shortsightedness of feminism’s Second Wave? What are we to make of the progress we have made, and how can we incorporate feminism into “postmodern” notions of gender and sexuality? Chicago addresses the implications of this debate in her *Song of Songs* series, a set of prints that illustrates the Biblical tale of love and eroticism. She visually retells the story of desire using a new translation that uses both male and female voices. What defines *Song of Songs* is the sexual indeterminacy of the images. Though they are arranged by the gender of the speaker, the bodies that Chicago represents are decidedly unsexed, and there is no discernable hierarchy. What results is

a process of linguistic subversion, an unabashed refusal to stabilize either the objects or subjects of desire.

Chicago thus recounts the history of the feminist tradition of critique that has made so many indispensable gains, despite a contemporary urge to abandon, rather than expand and rethink, the tenets that produced such progress. She acknowledges the process of sexual differentiation that defined Second Wave Feminism in the gendered voices of the Biblical speakers, even as she affirms the development of new conceptions of gender and sexuality in the indeterminate figures. *Song of Songs* is the reenactment of the historical debates that plague women in this polemical age, and it brings together the binary-based concerns of earlier decades with the expanded discourses of the present, without discounting the viability of either.

Judy Chicago's work will be on view in numerous international venues in 2014, including the Brooklyn Museum, the New Mexico Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Her book, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*, is forthcoming in March from The Monacelli Press.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, Joan Wallach. *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. See "Feminist Reverberations."

<sup>2</sup> Slaughter, Anne-Marie. "Why women still can't have it all." *The Atlantic Magazine*. July/August 2012. < <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/1/>>

<sup>3</sup> Bristow, Jennie. "Why we need a parents' liberation movement." *Spiked*. No. 14, June 2008.

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