On Tuesday, March 10, 1914, suffragist Mary Richardson brought a cleaver into London’s National Gallery and slashed Diego Velázquez’s *The Toilet of Venus* (1647–51) (known colloquially as *The Rokeby Venus*) seven times. The painting was, and still is, considered a masterpiece of erotic art (created by men), and the outrage at Richardson’s protest was swift. The next day, she told *The Times*, “I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas.” It has been widely noted that Richardson was protesting the imprisonment of fellow activist Emmeline Pankhurst, but what has not been attended to is the fact that Richardson did not damage *The Rokeby Venus* because it is a *nude per se*, but rather as a formalist gesture connecting the beauty of painting and the body to the beauty of activism. This approaches the politicized aesthetics we see in Judy Chicago’s erotica and her epochal *The Dinner Party*.

Looking at the slashed detail of *The Rokeby Venus*, one can see that Richardson destroyed the canvas even as she created something new. The cuts grow in intensity from left to right, as if she became more confident with each stab. Unsettlingly graceful, the diagonal marks tentatively frame the body by creating an upward swath of motion that nearly mirrors the Venus’s curvature, with the final, deepest wound in the center of Venus’s shoulders. The marks are reminiscent, perhaps, of Chicago’s *AnimalLike Hands (Fragments from the Delta of Venus)* (2002; p. 104), in which the protagonist’s vulva has moved to her heart. What if we were to consider Richardson’s act not as destruction, or even, conversely, some kind of perverse postmodern “improvement,” but rather as an allusion to feminist erotics? Richardson’s cuts caress the Venus’s body, as if to affirm its agency, as if to say that the Venus itself is not at fault for her place within a sexist history. Richardson opens up Venus, and her orgasm resonates infinitely. Her contents spill onto the gallery floor; she weeps and she lubricates.

By breaking the unity of the canvas, Richardson’s intervention becomes a part of the feminist investigation of erotics across the centuries. Venus has been unthethered from her masculinist origins by Richardson, and, even though she was “repaired” by the National Gallery, she blissfully anticipates history and passion. She becomes a living, breathing representation of ecstasy in its truest definition, and who is to say that Velázquez’s vision is truer than the Venus’s own *jouissance* as revealed by an early feminist activist? As Julia Kristeva says in her homage to Saint Teresa of Avila, “What is truth? A cataract of metamorphic fictions telling of the perceptions anchored in the touched and touching body, which thrill the flesh like a ‘delightful tempest’ (*tempestad sobrosa*)?” The act generates an erotic connection between a seventeenth-century painting, a twentieth-century feminist activist, and Judy Chicago.

Decades later, Chicago made her mark alongside Richardson, Venus, and Saint Teresa of Avila in this historical tapestry, what feminist historian Joan Scott has called a “fantasy echo.” Chicago reminds us that, as with Richardson’s complex understanding of her protest, erotica need not always explicitly depict sex or sexual themes. It instead speaks to erotics, to the fluctuating definitions of sexuality and sexual difference across the modern era. Of course sex is a component of erotics, but Chicago’s work combines sexuality with something much wider—a tactile unity of all women, a skin as huge as history itself, which unites generations with its touch.

The *Pasadena Lifesavers* (1969–70; pp. 44–47), for instance, are inseparable from *Sex From the Inside Out* (1974–75; pp. 80–81), not only because they both exhibit vulva-like imagery, as critics and historians often claim,
but also because they are part of Chicago’s career-long discussion of sexuality in all its forms—gloriously abstract or lewdly immediate. After all, the sexual and political dynamics of minimalism have always negated feminist/feminine desires. As Anna Chave has noted, “Now, as in the 1960s, the dominant accounts of Minimalism do not portray it as an instrument of social change, but, on the contrary, as art that somehow generated and occupied a special sphere, aloof from politics and commerce and above personal feeling.” Feminist art requires that personal feeling be an inexorable part of the conversation.

Returning to Chicago’s more explicitly representational images, normative critics and historians might be surprised by their combination of rigor, passion, and an expanded view of feminism. For instance, many of Chicago’s erotic works could in fact represent queer relationships of all genders and sexualities, as in her androgynous Six Erotic Cookies on an Edible Plate (1967; fig. 2). Even those that prominently feature the penis (which in itself may be a surprise, even for Chicago acolytes like myself) maintain a brilliant indeterminacy. In Like Some Marvelous Fruit (Fragments from the Delta of Venus) (2001; p. 104), the penis becomes flora; it shifts from culture to nature in a reversal of masculinist ontologies, and thereby becomes “feminized” itself. Chicago celebrates sexual difference and femininity even as she insists on the multitude of sexual possibilities available for representation. She moreover suggests that intimacy is both a revolutionary and mundane act, and that one’s relationship with one’s cats, for instance, is as important as any other love. Intimacy, empathy, sex, caregiving, intellectual communication, and unapologetic lust come together to form the sexualities Chicago presents—in that vast range, we can all find something with which to identify. Chicago, like Richardson, has exposed the multitudes in an otherwise closed, male erotic space.

Like Richardson’s slashing, The Dinner Party condenses the history of erotic activism into a bracing corrective. In her monumental, but tenderly poetic, bringing together of female radicals throughout history in The Dinner Party (pp. 84–101), Chicago created an erotic archive. It is a lineage of desire that unites 1,038 women (39 with place settings, and 999 others on the tiled floor) in the communion of sharing food, a gesture literalized by Chicago and her female and male volunteers alike, as they dined and worked together through consciousness-raising (see p. 23, fig. 6). This is a statement that had never been made in the history of art. The exhibition of The Dinner Party was lyrical to some, and strident to others, which led to censorship by both feminists and non-feminists, despite its enormous popularity. That some considered The Dinner Party pornographic might seem quaint today, but the fact of its censorship illustrates its sexual radicalism.

Chicago and Richardson therefore form a cross-generational feminist network in their relationship to erotics and to the politics of sexuality and the body—both beautiful and discomfiting. The claims made by an early twentieth-century activist in England and a postwar American artist are certainly different. Chicago did not violently attack masculinist imagery like Richardson did, but instead created her own feminist iconography, not unlike the pioneers of abstraction. However, as Chicago insists in her great ode to feministic erotics, The Dinner Party, there is a connection among all progressive women across time that begins with the fleshy and tactile relationship among bodies. Imagine the many hands that came together, touching each other over the course of the making, in order to manifest The Dinner Party—men and women from across the country united in flesh, needlework, and porcelain.

The Dinner Party therefore brings together masculine and feminine discourses in a transhistorical monument to women’s creativity. Its imagery is feminist, but it has roots in all iterations of gender, and people of all identities can enjoy the touch that resonates from Chicago’s...
work. The Dinner Party, as well as Chicago’s earlier work, evinces that the erotic is more than the enunciation of personal pleasure—it is the musculature of history that spreads throughout bodies, uniting disparate lives but never collapsing them into an essentialist history. From Richardson’s slashing to Chicago’s wide-ranging erotica and The Dinner Party, which simultaneously plumbed and made history, women are known, named, and connected in an erotic tapestry. Chicago honors these women’s desire to touch history, to touch others’ histories, to touch others’ bodies and their own, to touch their lust and their activism. This is the root of feminist art—to not only fill a space that has heretofore excluded women but also to pioneer the formal and representational strategies that allow female-identified artists to grasp the fabric of art history itself, to feel the grounding and pleasure provided by context and community. In fact, Chicago’s work shows us that history is not an abstract concept removed from us, but rather a web of desiring bodies, whose hopes, triumphs, failures, anger, and love provide the ground from which history itself springs. After all, according to a recent profile by Sasha Weiss, “(Chicago) has always felt out of step with the present,” but in history she has found countless willing dance partners.”

1 Julia Kristeva, Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila: A Novel, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 98. I would like to thank Katherine Manthorne for her encouragement to pursue this project in her seminar on the nude at the Graduate Center, CUNY, fall 2016. Thanks also to the faculty of the Committee on Degrees in Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Harvard University and the undergraduate fellowship program of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, especially Alice Jardine and Elise Adib. Support for my research on Judy Chicago was provided by the Harvard University Department of History of Art and Architecture and the Harvard Gender and Sexuality Caucus. I also appreciate feedback from Susanna Berger on an early version of this paper that I presented at the 2018 SECAC conference.


6 Anna C. Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” Arts Magazine 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44–43; italics are mine.


Fig. 2 Six Erotic Cookies on an Edible Plate, 1967; Painting on plaster, overall 10 × 13 in. (25.4 × 33 cm); Collection of Sylvia Sherwood

Fig. 3 Studio volunteers working on a Virginia Woolf plate for The Dinner Party, 1977; Courtesy of the Judy Chicago Visual Archive, Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 4 Judy Chicago works on a Virginia Woolf test plate, ca. 1978; Courtesy of the Judy Chicago Visual Archive, Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

"TO TELL OF TOUCH, TO TOUCH BY TELLING": THE EROTICS OF THE DINNER PARTY 69
Women’s History, Erotica, and The Dinner Party

Marie Antoinette, from the series Great Ladies, 1973; Sprayed acrylic on canvas, 40 × 40 in. (101.6 × 101.6 cm); Collection of Elizabeth A. Sackler