



Art as a tribute and recognition to the struggle of women. About the exhibition *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), by Judy Chicago.

El arte como tributo y reconocimiento a la lucha de las mujeres. Sobre la exposición *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), de Judy Chicago.

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ABSTRACT

This text is a description of the largest feminist installation of the last decades: *The Dinner party*, by the artist and activist Judy Chicago. Its objective is to present and describe the author's intentions, as well as to point out the value that it has in areas such as the social and the intellectual, insofar as her proposal corresponds to and understands the practices of postmodernity.

Keywords: Feminism. Postmodernity. Recognition. Tribute. Women.

RESUMEN

El presente texto consiste una descripción de la instalación feminista más grande de las últimas décadas: *The Dinner party*, de la artista y activista Judy Chicago. Tiene como objetivo, presentar y describir las intenciones de la autora, así como señalar el valor que tiene en



ámbitos como el social y el intelectual, en la medida en la que su propuesta se corresponde y comprende con las prácticas de la posmodernidad.

Palabras Clave: Feminismo. Posmodernidad. Reconocimiento. Tributo. Mujeres.

From 1974 to 1979, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum hosted Judy Chicago's exhibition, *entitled: The Dinner Party: The Banquet*. This exhibition consists, as Bloch (2003) describes, of an installation of "three long tables that are connected at their ends to create a complete triangular shape (about 10 meters per side)." (p. 98). The intention of this installation is to represent the history of women, from 39 cutlery, 13 in each of the tables, which builds a triangle in which the contributions of all women in different areas of culture converge. As Adela Marín (2016, p. 225) describes, it is an exhibition that:

[...] involves a representation of different important women in history, going to stylizations of female genitalia on plates served at a table, with the glass or chalice re-signified next to a visual jargon that also looks towards archetypal representations.

The complete installation of *El Banquete* consists of a series of Entrance Flags, the ceremonial table representing 39 important historical female figures, the Heritage Panels, which elucidate the contributions of the 999 women on Heritage *Floor*, women who like Chicago herself (surname she adopts in honor of the city where she was born after her divorce), they had excelled in fields as diverse as politics, science, literature and even art itself; in addition to the recognition panels that identify the attendees and collaborators of Judy Chicago for the achievement of this immense proposal.

They are not just "*vaginas on plates*", as one art critic might have described (Bloch, 2003, p. 100); when referring to ceramics in which representations of the female genitalia are drawn and molded in various ways, since all these elements together celebrate aspects of the history of all humanity and the contributions of women to our society.



The installation was exhibited in 16 spaces in 6 countries, across 3 continents and with an influx of attendees of more than one million people. On this work, in particular, books and articles have been made in which the impact and influence of such a different proposal with respect to the canons and hegemony of masculinity and the cultural industry in an area such as the artistic one is highlighted and that, without a doubt, have transcended to other areas, mainly with regard to the discourses of gender deconstruction and women's liberation.

Chicago's work can fall into the category of how *abject*, no doubt, it is: "that which disturbs an identity, a system, an order. That which does not respect limits, places, rules, complicity, the ambiguous, the mixed" (Mandel, 2013, p.11); since it is not limited to the reproduction of techniques or objects of representation of traditional art, but directly seeks the impact on its viewers, provoking and giving them a new opportunity to rethink sexuality and femininity from art.

One might think that the representation of the genitals would be an excess on the part of the artist, a proposal that borders between the vulgar and the pornographic; however, it is also true that *The Dinner Party* is the largest feminist installation in the world, so we should place the gaze and judgment with caution.

About the installation, it is worth noting that the distribution corresponds to a chronological order; in the first wing of this triangular table are the most influential women from the stage of prehistory and until the days of the Roman Empire, including the goddesses of the pre-patriarchal period, such as Ishtar, Kali, the Amazons and Sofia, the representative of female wisdom that appears both on her plate and on her tablecloth with an iconography of flower and petals inspired by the drawing of Dante Alighieri. On the ground are named the greatest Greek heroines in history as: Arachne, Circe, Helen of Troy, Antigone and Pandora. It also includes Judith, legendary Jewish heroine (and at her feet Eve, Lilith, Sarah and Esther). In addition, there is also Aspasia of Athens, philosopher, and the poet Sappho of Lesbos.

The second wing of the table pays tribute to the women who stood out in the period that begins after the foundation of Christianity and until the Reformation. In this wing of the large triangular table are the founders of the convents, which are significant because they were the spaces



in which women could access education. In this second wing are represented the women who influenced the creation of the laws of her time, such as Theodora, emperor of the Byzantine Empire who instituted the death penalty for anyone who raped a woman or Anna van Schurman, fighter for equal rights for women and the dispossessed; in addition to other women who made their way in the field of the arts, such as Artemis Gentileschi in medicine, and in literature as well, such as Christine de Pisan, the first professional writer in France. In addition, there are on the table (and under it) women who were accused of witches and heretics, such as Joan of Arc, and who died burned for their devotion to non-Christian beliefs or simply for being independent. And also represented are those outstanding women of the Renaissance, such as: Isabella d'Este, Maria Medici and Caterina Sforzi, who served as authority figures at a time when they were expected to be modest and obedient.

The third wing of the table is the place where Judy Chicago pays tribute to the brave and powerful women of the period between the American Revolution and the consolidation of the women's revolution. Here are the women of America, the victims of European colonization: Sacajawea, the Malinche, Pocahontas; including also the women who promoted female education in America (among them, the Chilean Isabel Le Brun Pinochet) such as the writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

There are also women who worked in science, astronomy and medicine, such as Marie Lavoisier or Mary Lamb. On this side of the table tribute is paid to Mary Wollstonecraft, the philosopher who wrote *La vindicación de los derechos de la mujer* (1792) and at her feet, the famous Salonists who made political opposition to Napoleon. Of course, the daughter of the founder of the feminist movement also appears: Mary Shelley.

Added to these women are those who fought against the double discrimination of black women, the most important leaders of the international movement for women's rights, Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes of the world, and all those who had to make their way in spaces dominated by men, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, Marie Curie, Amelia Earhart and the mathematician Sofia Kovalevskaya.



Under the plate that commemorates the life and contributions of Emily Dickinson, there are the writers, who highlighted the problems of women and stressed the importance of their access to education, such as: Jane Austen, Emily Jane Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett, Maria Edgeworth, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, among others. There are also the names of the music, such as: Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schuman and also the artists dedicated to plastic arts, such as painting, and who broke molds and gender stereotypes, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Mary Cassatt and Frida Kahlo. And, finally, the policies, along with those who worked for the reproductive rights of women, feminists, lesbians, women like Natalie Barney, having at their feet the writer Djuna Barnes, the courtesan Ninon de L'Enclos, Mata Hari and Gertrude Stein, among others.

The tribute to Virginia Woolf stands out, since she corresponds to the largest ceramic vulva among all the dishes of the exhibition, and under it all the writers who became known for creating their own literary language and standing out among men: Hanna Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Willa Carter, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Anaïs Nin and Gabriela Mistral.

This exhibition, beyond political intentions, is also a brief but fruitful effort to recognize the immense contribution of women throughout history.

In the event that the means of representation exceed the ordinary and established categories for the art world, perhaps this type of expression can be considered in the light of its historical, geographical and ideological context, so it would be fundamental to resort to postmodern theory to recognize not only the intentions, but the messages of this type of proposal.

Andrea Geat (2015) argues that proposals such as that of Judy Chicago contain the features, objects and motifs that are symbols of the first feminist manifestations, in which the representation of "menstrual blood, clitoric images and non-idealized pregnancy" is resorted to (p. 222); very particular manifestations from the sixties and seventies in the United States, as a consequence of both female sexual liberation and the beginning of awareness of feminist groups.

On the use of these symbols or means of representation in the field of the arts, characters of conservative affiliation in the US Congress fought to prevent the exhibition of these works by considering them pornographic, obscene and even offensive, which is problematic and complex if we



take into account that: "sexual images have been prevalent in male art" (Bloch, 2003, p. 100), precisely as Avital Bloch points out in his analysis of feminist works of art, so it can be understood that even art has been a means of culture for the oppression of the female gender and its exploitation and subordination is obvious in the industry, also, of consumption.

This is why Judy Chicago's artistic production is understood not only as a tribute to the contributions of women, but as an activism for the repossession of the corporeity and femininity of women, since it is they alone and exclusively who can and should express these particular experiences. Whether through plastic, literature or legislation, since the world of women has been invisible and that is why a proposal, although radical as the work of Chicago could be, is significant for the construction of a sense of the feminine.

Thus, while men represented women as sexually palatable, naked and willing, as symbols of sexual pleasure or a means for reproduction, in spaces and attitudes of serenity or impotence, art criticism, from a gender perspective shows that there is a perpetuation of male domination over women: "Women were depicted as beautiful, passive, resigned, silenced, servants, peaceful, blessed and anonymous. Women were also painted as hysterical, humiliated or subjected to sadistic acts and personified by nude models and often depicted as sexually available" (Bloch, 2003. p. 92). For all the above, it is considered unheard of for a woman to show, autonomously and her own, these and other realities of her own body and her experience.

As a parenthesis, it is worth mentioning the provocative constancy of Chicago through art. One of his works, called *Red Flag*, consists of a photograph in which a woman removes a tampon from the vagina, in the foreground and that, very despite the fact that the composition of the image is in gray tones, the red color contained in the cotton of the hygiene item stands out. This work is understood as a clear message: the intention to show that the biological processes of women are natural and should not be considered as a taboo subject. Menstruation is one of the most constant themes in feminist discourses, both because it determines a biological difference with respect to men and its consequences in the construction of gender, and because it is considered as a clear example of the vital capacity of women of reproductive age and unequivocal symbol of original sin.



For this reason, along with other artists such as Miriam Shapiro, Chicago becomes a fundamental and representative part of these daring exponents who explore the relationship with their own body from a diversity of biological phenomena and gender situations, such as: domestic violence, cosmetic surgeries, pregnancy, eating disorders, menstruation, etc.

In this way, even in the light of marginality, these expressions are consecrated as a valuable reference for the feminist movement. As Melissa Margarita Enríquez and Mely del Rosario González Aróstegui explain:

The feminist debate around the history of art had its genesis in the 70s, a period in which the assumptions around women began to be dismantled and importance was given to academic studies focused on deconstructing hegemonic paradigms (2020, p. 5).

Which is invaluable for movement and theory, if we take into account, as María Teresa Zubiaurre-Wagner (1997, p. 84) argues, that every aesthetic manifestation contains that telltale germ that demands a critical review and a careful reconstruction of the text that, in the case of the work and proposal of Judy Chicago, remains that of the female body.

While it is true that feminist art is composed of characteristics that are constant and even obvious, such as floral reproduction in O'Keeffe's work, as a symbol to represent female genitality, it is also true that feminist theory has been able to nourish itself with the recognition of diversity, establishing alliances and valuable coincidences with postmodern thought, to the extent that criticism of systems makes problems visible and allows more and more constantly the achievement of women's liberation, with which this type of proposal becomes conditions of possibility of future social, political, sexual and economic equality.

If in truth it is viable what Avital Bloch proposes, that: "Postmodern feminism raises in general the need to create central and determining ruptures with Western, masculine, modern, phallogocentric and dominant thought, which has been present in the development of *humanidad*" (2003, p. 43); then, the artistic work of Judy Chicago is essential for this, since she not only comes to pay tribute to



the influence and value of women's contributions in history, but also makes a particular representation of the woman's body, questioning, provoking and incommodating the spectators.

As a vindication act, The Dinner party is, in the words of Judy Chicago herself: "an attempt to reinterpret the Last Supper from the point of view of the people who have always prepared the food" (Quoted in: Marin, 2016, p. 22). With what is discovered that, despite "belonging" to an invisible space, women are also able to make history.

On feminist art, Luz del Carmen Magaña points out that:

[...] the value of feminist art is not in time, nor in the context of it, but specifically in what each of the women, individually and autonomously, wants to express and claim from their environment, their gender, life in general and their life in particular, knowing that each one as a woman has a completely different history and that there are also minorities within minorities, like black, Muslim, Latin women, taking at this time the banner of Mary Magdalene and vindicating women, in general, through their history and their context of life and with these performative actions, also vindicating the judgment that has been imposed on the iconographic image of Mary Magdalene over the centuries where she is seen as a prostitute and a repentant sinner. (2014, p. 346)

So it is interesting that Chicago has recognized the women of history, including Indians, Latinas, blacks, lesbians and even bourgeois women as part of these great achievements for culture.

Postmodernity could be the phase of corporeality. Theory and practice converge in pointing out and demanding the liberation of bodies, from the eradication of practices of exploitation and abuse, to the decree of individual freedoms in which the body is the objective of such reflection. The capitalist system wears down and consumes the lives of the workers, the institutions suppress the powers of the body, society subjects it to dynamics of efficiency...

Art, however, becomes this possibility to rethink the repression and domination that female bodies have suffered under the gaze of masculinity, in the letters of writers, of men of letters. Art and thought can engage in a joint project that seeks the liberation of the bodies of individuals through



the deconstruction of gender, provocation, the unfolding of margins and the recognition of differences.

It is urgent to break with stereotypes and prejudices about gender and the female body and that is why a proposal like that of Judy Chicago is valuable, even when it uses irony to invite reflection, even when it seems transgressive, even if they overlook or suppress the standards and categories of aesthetics and good customs.

As a conclusion we can admit, as Cristina Castellano (2017, p. 15) points out, that Judy Chicago developed several projects related to questions and problems concerning women: intimacy, the right to exist, to see different, to express oneself authentically with the available means. Thus, women were able to cross the barriers of domination by gaining recognition as artists.

Therefore, art is both a condition and a means for freedom. And Judy Chicago's proposal fulfills its purpose: to pay a well-deserved tribute to those women who achieved freedom and allowed that of many others from art, politics, struggle in the streets, despite the violence, silence and oppression of culture and its standards.

So, although far from the traditional aesthetic categories, Judy Chicago's proposal is valuable in that it becomes a platform for the recognition of women in history and the construction of a history of women, one that disturbs the established order and that goes, in addition to art, to postmodern thought to provoke that rupture with the hegemonic, to be able to tell a story from the "other" perspective, rescuing biological differences as a particularly feminine experience in which the appropriation of the sexual highlights the importance of the different. *The Dinner party* is a possibility to amplify female voice and representation

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