

A TEI Project

Interview of Judy Chicago

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 10, 2003

COLLINGS

Good afternoon, Judy. We were talking just a little bit about the climate that you had been so instrumental in creating here in Los Angeles, and you were saying—

CHICAGO

I think that I have the experience often, either when I'm reading something or hearing something, I'm kind of like the elephant in the room.

COLLINGS

[chuckles] I think that's a really good way of putting it.

CHICAGO

It's like nobody's mentioning me. There's a whole series of pieces in this month's Art Forum about feminism, art and feminism. Of course, they never asked me to talk about it. They never interviewed me. One of the women talked about how she cut school in high school and went to see The Dinner Party at the San Francisco Museum, but that's the only reference. It's like it sort of happened all by itself, all these people suddenly everywhere, all over, were suddenly doing these things, and it didn't have any authorship. It's another way of erasing women that women participate in. There was a lot of discussion about the resistance to institutionalizing feminist art and to acknowledging it as a major movement by the museums. Recently there have been all these sort of fringe shows, as if they're rediscovering feminist art all the time in these fringe shows, but never in the Museum of Modern Art. In fact, the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. is mounting the first major survey of feminist art from 1970-1985. It's an international exhibit. It's the first one. I'm meeting the

curator next week. So even Linda Nochlin, when mentioning the Brooklyn Museum, which is going to establish an important center for feminist art— But there was no mention of the fact that the centerpiece is going to be The Dinner Party. I mean, it's that I'm always the elephant in the room.

COLLINGS

How do you account for that?

CHICAGO

I think it has to do with many things. One, we're certainly unfamiliar with attributing significant authorship to women. Helen Frankenthaler couldn't have started the stain movement, she only could be the catalyst for it. What history do we have of seeing a woman in the position— I'm not claiming this for myself, but just let's look at the bigger picture. Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo. Do we really have any models for a woman having that kind of impact on culture? No, we have none. It's almost inconceivable. Then there's jealousy. I mean, there's all kinds of things that women contribute themselves to this. Like what you're talking about; about women not wanting to admit that there was a climate of permission or a context for change in the seventies. One of the things I did that I regret, although I'm not prone to regret, it's just that I couched everything in the collective “we” and assumed that everybody had the same ideas that I had. At that time, I couldn't name for myself what I was setting out to do, even though I knew it. I mean, I knew it, I was conscious of it, but it was too frightening to me. It was too frightening to me to say I'm going to Fresno to create a feminist art practice and a feminist art education.

COLLINGS

You really sort of stuck your neck out in that sense, because as well as stepping forward in terms of feminism, as well as stepping forward in terms of art, you were also stepping forward in terms of trying to institutionalize a radical new pedagogy. Entire college departments focused on how to create new forms of thinking, and here you were kind of doing it on your own. I think that's one of the things that I really wanted to get into when we got into Fresno, and maybe we could just jump ahead just a little bit.

CHICAGO

Yeah, let's get into that. I'm more interested in this than coming to L.A. and thinking that all the buildings were going to float away. [laughter]

COLLINGS

Okay. That's very interesting. One of the things that I would like you to do, just to try to recreate some of your first days at Fresno, you said in an interview that you gave in 1971 that one reason you were going was to give art classes to women because “I need to be with women as much as women need to be with me.” Just going from the general to the specific, I was wondering what were

your thoughts about the potential for the particular women that you began to interview to participate in the class?

CHICAGO

You mean what was I looking for?

COLLINGS

Yeah. And what were you thinking as you started to actually meet individual and particular women?

CHICAGO

First of all, I couched what I was doing in terms that were less threatening, because, I mean, there was no context for what I was doing. I remember when I first broached it to the head of the art department, and I said that I had come up with all these women in college and gone through undergraduate school, that there were a lot of women students in graduate school, and somehow, once I got into professional practice, they all kind of disappeared. There were so few of them, and I wanted to try and do something about this. I thought that something was going wrong in their education and that maybe I could make a contribution to this, so I thought I'd like to try having an all-female class to see if maybe I could help with that. That was what I said.

COLLINGS

That's a very focused purpose.

CHICAGO

Yeah, but that was not actually my whole purpose. I was, at that point, facing the fact that I had—I couldn't articulate this then, but I can now about the way in which the art curriculum is biased against women. It has to do with the fact that often the way men get themselves going artistically is playing around with form, and by and large, this is not always the case—it would be essentializing to say it's always the case—but there's definitely general tendencies where women's work tends to be more content-based, and men's work tends to be more formally based and the content tends to be more hidden. This shouldn't really be a surprise because, of course, men hide the emotional content in their personalities, so why anybody thinks I'm essentializing men and women by saying that. It's a perfect reflection of how we're socialized, it has nothing to do with how we are potentially as people. How we're socialized. Women are socialized to be more expressive emotionally. They're allowed more expression emotionally. Men are socialized to be less expressive emotionally and more expressive formally and go through a conversation about sports to bond, as opposed to women just telling each other how they feel. So they bring that same predisposition to art making. What happens in curriculum is that it's built on what is more natural to men, which is more formally based, so inherently is biased against women's way of working. I went through that myself when I went through graduate school, which was gradually being forced to move away

from a content base in art. Of course, this was also the heyday of modernism, and that, again, was very formally based. So by the time I ended the end of my first decade as a practicing professional artist, I had developed a tremendous amount of formal expertise, but I was entirely alienated from my own content as a woman. Being a woman was a continual obstacle to me as an artist. I was always bumping up against everybody's attitude. "You can't be a woman and an artist, too." "I can't deal with your work, it's too strong." "It's too strong for a woman." "What am I supposed to do?" "You're making art stronger than the men." "What am I supposed to do? I better not look." I was bumping up against it all the time. My, quote, "condition" as a woman, the construct of femininity, as it's now called, was impeding me constantly. That was pretty formidable content, and I did not know how to unite that content with my formal means as an artist, and I was at the point where I wasn't exactly getting rewarded for trying to be like the guys. This was the prevailing problem of my life, and I wanted to confront it, and I wanted to confront it through art, and I didn't know how. I always try also to be useful, so I thought maybe I could find some meeting point between my own dilemma and the fact that young women were going through what I had gone through, and maybe I could help them not have to go through it and, in the process, also figure out how to do it for myself. I always had a dual agenda.

COLLINGS

In everything?

CHICAGO

Yeah. All the organizations. That's when I left the Woman's Building was because I had figured out how to unite my content and my form. Yeah, I always had a dual agenda in terms of trying to change the social situation and also trying to figure out how to do it for myself, how to make more room for myself, expressive room, public room.

COLLINGS

So these were always the two tracks of the dual agenda, the social transformation and creative realization.

CHICAGO

Yeah. That's very well put. Okay. Because there was no precedent, nobody knew how radical what I was doing was, see? It's not like it is today. There was this sort of soft space that there is when nobody has—

COLLINGS

—colonized a certain area.

CHICAGO

Right. So there was this space, and I moved into it. Then I got in there, so now I could do the women's class. I put up flyers, as you know. I wanted to find young women who had a lot of talent, who wanted to be artists, of course. This

was before I discovered that they didn't know what that meant when they said, "I want to be an artist." They didn't have a clue. Oh, yeah, I want to be an artist, like I want to go to the moon. My favorite story about that is about Suzanne Lacy, who was the psychology major who had a burning desire to be in the class and I didn't want her because she couldn't draw or paint. She was older. She was like twenty-five. Most of them were nineteen or twenty, except for her and Faith Wilding. Faith was a weaver. Suzanne just burned my ass until she got in the class, and I was, like— But she demonstrates that there are different ways you can become realized as an artist. She came from a passion to make art. She had a lot to say, and she was an ardent feminist, even though she had no skills whatsoever. Then there were some people that had way more skills and who never went anywhere.

COLLINGS

That's so often the case. Where do you think that you were getting your emotional support for doing all of this kind of thing?

CHICAGO

That's how I got into trouble, because I didn't have any emotional support. When it all sort of exploded, I was only thirty. You must remember this. I was only thirty. I was still a young woman, a young artist.

COLLINGS

Why do you say "when it all sort of exploded"?

CHICAGO

Well, because I gave these young women permission to be themselves, and they just went crazy, started doing cunt cheers, right? [mutual laughter] Oh, we're going to make a costume and we're going to see Ti-Grace Atkinson and do cunt cheers in front of the Shriners. "C-U, C-U, C-U, CUNT!" I thought, oh, my God.

COLLINGS

What did you think about that at the time?

CHICAGO

Well, part of me thought it was fabulous, and then part of me was terrified. I mean, these were the days when men would jump up on the stage when we would talk about what we were doing and want to kill us. It was sort of dangerous. I don't think my students understood the danger, but I did. I was old enough to understand the danger of what they were doing. They had all this youthful exuberance. They didn't know enough to know that it could have consequences.

COLLINGS

So how did you negotiate that with them in terms of—

CHICAGO

I didn't negotiate with them. I felt completely committed to providing them support and never, ever letting them know that what they were doing was frightening to me in some ways. Absolutely not. I would never have done that. That's actually when I turned to Miriam Shapiro, because she was older than me, and I needed help and support. I was a very naïve person. I still have trouble with this, although I'm wiser now, but I never understood about people having agendas. One of the things people can't believe about me—they say all these bizarre things about me—is they just can't believe I really exist, like there could really be somebody who is sort of as motivated by non-selfish reasons. I mean, I'm selfish as an artist, but I'm not selfish personally. I'm just not. I lived with nothing for so many years, I didn't care. I was never a careerist, I never was concerned about my career as an artist. I'm saying this because Mimi wasn't like that, and that's ultimately why it didn't work.

COLLINGS

Because she wanted to take the work in a direction that was not—

CHICAGO

I think she wanted to take my program, actually.

COLLINGS

The one at CalArts.

CHICAGO

Well, the one that was brought— I brought my Feminist Art Program to CalArts, and I left CalArts with nothing. I left my program, my students, slides, everything. I just gave it to her and started again. People don't understand this about me either. I'm a real coward around confrontation. I didn't want to confront her.

COLLINGS

What was it that you felt like you needed to confront her about? I'm not clear on the specifics.

CHICAGO

Things went very well between us at first, for the first year. We did the Womanhouse project. Then there was a conference in Washington at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art] where we presented slides about Womanhouse. It was the first conference of women in the arts. And again, people didn't know what they were doing. They brought all the women from around the country, sort of the early feminist artists, historians, critics, everybody, curators. There was just again a huge explosion. There were two hundred of us. When we presented Womanhouse, there was a much greater response to me when I was speaking than to her. Afterwards, she was furious with me. She accused me of manipulating the audience to make this happen. Now, there's a lot of things I am but manipulative is not one of them. I didn't understand what she was

talking about. Then she used to call me up and yell at me. I was always doing something wrong, like the good mommy turned into the bad mommy, basically.

COLLINGS

Was it something wrong that had to do with the administration of CalArts?

CHICAGO

No. It had to do with her personal neurosis, and it also had to do with control, and it also had to do with motives, like the motives for why she got involved in the program and why I got involved in the program. I mean, they weren't the same motives.

COLLINGS

How long did you work successfully with her, would you say?

CHICAGO

Until we finished Womanhouse. The conference was in February, because Womanhouse was opened in January, and then the conference was in February in Washington, and by May I had resigned. I had a two-year contract. We had a big studio that they had set up for us at CalArts, and I was out of the studio. I had a basement with my students. We were down there by ourselves. And Mimi had everything—the program, the studio. There were a lot of things I couldn't confront, like the hostility of the men at CalArts towards the program. Mimi was better at that. Her husband was the dean [Paul Brach], so she had manipulated to get the program in to CalArts. Then when it was really there, of course, it challenged all the values of the institution. And it spread. I mean, there was a feminist art program in design, there was influence of a feminist art program in every department in the campus when we were actually out in Valencia. Then, of course, they erased it. They've erased it from the history of CalArts. It had a huge effect. There was a young woman who was raped, and all the women in the dorms and all the women from the entire school convened to talk about policy. It was huge, the effect on CalArts. As soon as the students left, walked out of the Feminist Art Program, they were confronted with a whole set of values about art that were completely contrary to the values of the Feminist Art Program, and I could not confront the male faculty.

COLLINGS

Why was that?

CHICAGO

I was terrified of confrontation. I just couldn't. I couldn't do it. It was too scary to me. I just have always just gone my own path, which is probably one of the reasons that there's so much misunderstanding about me. I just never reply to what people say about me. I just keep going down my own path. That path didn't work, so I left and started again.

COLLINGS

Did you consider going back to Fresno at that point?

CHICAGO

No. No, I never would have gone back to Fresno.

COLLINGS

And why was that?

CHICAGO

Well, I didn't want to live in Fresno. I mean, the whole idea was to go there and come back. I went there for a year, that was it. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't gotten the offer from CalArts. I have no idea. I don't think I thought about it. The offer for CalArts came in the second semester of the women's program at Fresno, so I don't know what I would do. The program continued in Fresno, you know that. For thirty years it continued. I think it got kind of watered down, but it did continue.

COLLINGS

That's a tremendous contribution. They should name it after you.

CHICAGO

There was a celebration there after thirty years. There was a celebration of the Feminist Art Program. It's very interesting. Now it has been acknowledged in Fresno, more than CalArts ever did.

COLLINGS

What kind of women just in terms of like class backgrounds and ethnicities and so on were attracted—

CHICAGO

They were all white, and I think they were middle-class and lowermiddle-class. I don't think there were any upper-class.

COLLINGS

Did you notice if any of the work that they were doing addressed any of their particular class situations?

CHICAGO

I don't think class was a really big thing yet. There's been a lot of accusations that sexual preference wasn't, but that's not true. Sexual preference was definitely part— I mean, the whole issue of sexual preference was—I mean, there was no issue, there was no issue.

COLLINGS

At that time it wasn't—

CHICAGO

No. There were lesbians in the group, there were always lesbians in the group, and nobody made any deal about it at all. This whole thing has developed since then about how the feminist art movement wasn't hospitable to lesbians. That was not true of my programs and my projects, especially in the Woman's Building. One of the things, actually, that's so great about the project in Pomona [Envisioning the Future] is that it's not only got men and women, but

it's unbelievably ethnically diverse. It's just great. In fact, there are some groups where there's only one white person. It's just great.

COLLINGS

Obviously, this is jumping way ahead, but I think that one of the things, just from the surface, that's interesting about the Pomona thing is that it's specifically dealing with the future; whereas, so much of the feminist work was about redressing wrongs of the past. It's a different focus in that way.

CHICAGO

It's definitely a different focus, yeah.

COLLINGS

It's interesting that you've made that transformation. Just getting kind of into more of the nitty-gritty of your pedagogy when you were at Fresno. I was reading in this issue of *Everywomanabout*, for example, one of the assignments that you would give people: Think about walking down the street and try to contact those feelings you get when guys start coming on, put those feelings into some form. It's very interesting to have a record of really exactly what the group was doing, and I wonder if—

CHICAGO

I think that was an early form of what I now call content search. Now I've developed it to another level. A lot of things I tried out there over the years. Even the thing about consciousness raising, it was inadequately named, because the thing with consciousness raising in the old consciousness raising circles is that everybody spoke, it was completely equal. My pedagogy has never really been quite like that. It's always combined that kind of going around the circle with intervention and guidance and direction. For example, a focus visualization, like imagine this, recreate it in your mind. Now come to form about how you can enact it through either a painting or a performance or something like that. That's what I now call content search. This is the first time I've ever tried to train other people in how to do it. That's what I'm doing here in Pomona. There are nine facilitators who I've put through this process. But now it's much more— you know, I've spent thirty years developing it, this pedagogical method. But in Fresno, it was very intuitive and I was just trying out stuff and learning as I went.

COLLINGS

Was this actually the first time that you had been a teacher?

CHICAGO

No. But I've not taken any kind of full-time job. I taught UCLA Extension, high school classes, and then I taught at UC Irvine Extension. Even then I used to go around the circle, because I didn't like that there was an inequity in participation. Some people were really quiet and other people were really talkative. Even then I used to do that so that everybody would talk.

COLLINGS

This was before the consciousness raising idea.

CHICAGO

This was in the sixties. I was never in a consciousness raising group. I came to consciousness by myself in my studio in the sixties. I thought through the construct of femininity in my studio, because it interfered with my being able to realize myself as an artist.

COLLINGS

You talk about how in graduate school you began to use these feminine images and how your instructors were so upset by it. Where do you feel like you were getting your inspiration, if you could call it that, at that time? So much of what you write about is how important it is for women to have a context.

CHICAGO

There was no women's context. There weren't any women artists. At least I didn't know any. There obviously had been. That's what I found out later. But at that point, it was brainwashing to say that there have never been any great women artists, and blah, blah, blah. I didn't know about the erasure and all that then. I was a young artist, so I had a burning desire to make art, but I have no idea where the forms came from. I'd been a student of art since the time I was a child. I used to study at the Art Institute every week, so who knows where it came from? It came from looking at art and making art for years and years and years.

COLLINGS

Do you feel like the atmosphere at UCLA was more macho, like what you described about the Barney's Beanery?

CHICAGO

No. That was more the art world. The atmosphere was macho but a different kind of macho. It was just male dominated. I wouldn't say it was bravado macho like Barney's. Barney's was the young male artists. It was quite different from the old farts at UCLA. [mutual laughter]

COLLINGS

One of the other things that you did at Fresno was you had reading groups.

CHICAGO

Yep.

COLLINGS

That's sort of unusual in art education.

CHICAGO

Well, see, I had started my own readings of women's— I started this sort of self-guided search for my history.

COLLINGS

This was when you were in graduate school.

CHICAGO

No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This was at the end of the sixties, right before I went to Fresno. It was part of this whole discovery that I had a history. I cannot tell you when exactly I decided that I was going to start reading, systematically, through women's literature. It was somewhere towards the end of the sixties before I went to Fresno. I'd been going to used bookstores, and I'd been gathering all these books. In fact, the library I started putting together is now at one of the UNM branches. We donated it. It's all books by and about women.

COLLINGS

Do you recall anything in particular that really struck you?

CHICAGO

Yeah, yeah. I started out reading— First I read through Jane Austen, then I read through the Brontes and George Sand—what I could find of George Sand, there was hardly anything—and George Eliot and Edith Wharton, and that's when I read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and then I read Virginia Wolfe. I read their whole body of works.

COLLINGS

What did you like best?

CHICAGO

I liked all of it. I liked all of it. It was a revelation to me. It was a complete revelation to me, because they all spoke to me. “*Madame Dironda*”, oh, my God. You don't know what it feels like to be fit into a Chinese slipper? I'm this big and— My God, it spoke to me, all of it spoke to me. And by finding my history, I found my voice. So I had my students do it in order to help them. Also, we were also putting together this art history slide file.

COLLINGS

Did you do a lot of reading as a child?

CHICAGO

Yeah. All the time.

COLLINGS

But never anything by women at that time.

CHICAGO

No, of course not. I read all the Americans. I read Dos Passos and Hemingway and Faulkner. In fact, by the time I got to high school, I'd already read through all of American fiction, and they didn't believe me. I had to crib *Reader's Digest* book reviews because they wouldn't accept Dostoevsky.

COLLINGS

I know we weren't going to talk about *The Dinner Party*, but there is a scene in the film [*Right out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*] that Johanna Demetrakas made where you're expressing some frustration with some of the women at the table for their unwillingness to—

CHICAGO

Uh-huh. Women live in a state of trained ignorance

COLLINGS

I wondered, in your experiences of bringing these reading groups to the Fresno women and to others, was this frustration sort of a constant?

CHICAGO

No. That was a particular frustration because they all wanted to have a discussion about—I can't remember what it was—about feminism, I think. Yeah, it was about feminism. Then they wouldn't do any reading, and I got pissed off.

COLLINGS

I'm just wondering about how receptive the art students were to doing this kind of scholarship.

CHICAGO

Well, we have the same thing now. Actually, it was interesting, there was more receptivity here to the research and to the readings than there was like, say, when we taught in Kentucky in 2001. That was a project about the home, revisiting the subject of the home thirty years after *Womanhouse*, with both male and female students. There, the issue around research became a big thing, and why weren't they doing research? Well, they didn't know how to do research, actually, a lot of them. They thought research was surfing the net. So there was more resistance there. Traditionally, artists can be incredibly lazy about doing research. On the other hand, we did these lectures and panels and there were a number of artists who presented their work, and it was very clear that they were very knowledgeable about what they were working on, like Patrick Nagatani, who did a whole series called *Nuclear Enchantment* about the nuclear industry in New Mexico. He knew all about it. We were able to point to successful artists whose work is rooted in knowledge and scholarship, that they're informed and that that's a really important thing to be.

COLLINGS

During this period, I know that you met Anais Nin in 1971. You talk about her remarkable presence and what an impact her presence made on you. I'm wondering if this was the first woman who had made such an impression on you.

CHICAGO

Yes. Well, no. Actually, that's not true, because I was having this experience at the end of the sixties and the early seventies of meeting women who I'd heard this woman was a bitch and that woman was a bitch, and then I loved them, like Louise Nevelson. I met Louise Nevelson. I met June Wayne. I met Anais— Well, nobody would call Anais a bitch because she was so gracious. But all these women who were supposed to be, oh, they're ball busters and they're

bitches and they're this and that. Of course, they were just strong, self-contained women. I loved every one of them. June Wayne was a huge model for me. But Anais I had a particular reverence for.

COLLINGS

And why was that?

CHICAGO

I think that I identified with the fact that she had brought herself to consciousness. I don't think I've actually ever talked about this. Although I have a new project coming out about Anais. A couple of years ago, I was asked to do an essay about her, so this book, *Fragments from the Delta Venus* is coming out. It'll be out on Valentine's Day. Prints and watercolors based on *Delta of Venus* go with it. I don't think I've ever really spoken about this particular thing, but I think it's because, like I said, I came to consciousness in my studio before the women's movement, and Anais brought herself to consciousness. Let's see if I can call up the quote. I start the essay in the book with a quote from Anais about— Well, it basically is, I was ashamed to take and so I gave. That's a perfect description of what happens to women, of course. It's a better quote than that.

COLLINGS

Because it says that the exchange is the thing that one must have, and if you're ashamed to take, there's nothing left, you must give.

CHICAGO

Well, no. You give instead of taking because you're ashamed to take.

COLLINGS

Right. And you have to do one or the other if you're human.

CHICAGO

No. You actually have to do both. You have to learn to give and take.

COLLINGS

Yes, but there has to be the interchange.

CHICAGO

Yeah, but if you can't take, then it's not actually a give and take, it's just a give. That's where a lot of women get lost. Both expectation and self expectation. In Anais's diaries, over a way long more protracted period of time than it took me because I was younger, she came to consciousness. That's what happened to her. That's what her diaries record. It's the slow agonizing fulfillment, realization, of a creative woman who was locked in all these roles, locked in the construct of femininity and who worked her way out of it. I think I really, really identified with that. Also, she helped me enormously.

COLLINGS

How did she help you?

CHICAGO

Well, first of all, she encouraged me to write, which changed my life. She provided me with a model, I think, too. Because a lot of the women, like Louise Nevelson and June Wayne, even though I admired what they'd done, or Mimi, they were really tough. They had this really tough façade. I was like that, too, but that's not how I am. I'm just not like that. Anais, I think, provided me with a different kind of model strength. She was way more gracious than I'll ever be. I'm a direct and straightforward person. But still, I didn't want to be so tough. I didn't want to act like that, I just didn't. I wanted to find a way to model what I believed in, too, which is generosity of the spirit.

COLLINGS

So she was the first woman you met who sort of provided that kind of modeling then.

CHICAGO

Mm-hmm.

COLLINGS

What about any of the students that you worked with? Sometimes the teacher discovers something in the student.

CHICAGO

I know people always say that they learn more from their students, but that's not my experience.

COLLINGS

I know that in your article on Anais Nin you talk about how your fear of what you considered to be these very destructive images that you had come up with in The Dinner Party drawings. You said that that afternoon in 1974—this is jumping ahead a little bit—"Anais helped me to understand that I had internalized this attitude and that as I expressed myself creatively, I had internalized those taboos." I wonder if you have any particular memory of how she managed to bring you to the other—

CHICAGO

She just told me.

COLLINGS

In sort of one or two sentences.

CHICAGO

Yeah, she just told me that what I was experiencing was fear of my own power and that female power, I had—we all have—been socialized to believe that there's something demonic, and the terrible mother. There's a whole series of small porcelain I did about that titled Butterfly Goddesses and Other Porcelain Miniatures which preceded The Dinner Party. [tape off, then resumes]

COLLINGS

While we're on the subject of relationships, how would you evaluate your friendships with the women around you? You've talked a little bit about Miriam Shapiro, but some of the other important women: Faith Wilding, Jan Lester.

CHICAGO

They were my students. I had other relationships. Arlene Raven, the art historian, I'm still friends with. There were some women around when I started the Woman's Building, Sheila de Bretteville. There were some women who I brought into the Woman's Building that I was really close with. I had a longtime friend that, unfortunately, I ended the friendship. It was really stupid. Anyway, she was my really dearest friend. I always had a lot of women friends.

COLLINGS

The reason I ask is because you said here in your book how, when you were at graduate school, you were sort of taught or you sort of believed that the work of other women was uninteresting, and what other women were doing—

CHICAGO

No. By the seventies I'd changed my mind.

COLLINGS

I was wondering if you could recapitulate a little bit about how— Was there any change that you needed to come to about how you would talk with other women, for example?

CHICAGO

My discovery of women's history and women's contributions and women's writing and women's art led me to start looking at contemporary women's art. In fact, there's a woman named Dextra Frankel, who used to run the gallery at Cal State Fullerton, who's actually involved in the "Envisioning the Flower" project. She's doing the exhibition design for the project. She did a talk two weeks ago in which she reminded me about the fact that we visited like fifty women artist studios in the early seventies around California. Most of them were completely invisible.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

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CHICAGO

Mimi and I organized probably one of the first—and it became very popular after that—the first sort of women artists' conference, where women came and showed their slides all weekend. Then Mimi and Dextra and I, particularly Dextra and I, visited all these women artists' studios from all over. There were a couple of women in San Francisco, Jay DeFeo and Joan Brown. They were a little older than me, and they were the only women artists who were visible at that time, in the sixties. I tried to get to know them. They weren't really

receptive. But everything changed in the early seventies. Then all of a sudden a different climate was developing. There were all these women who were just completely unknown, whose work was unknown. They were working in the kitchens of their boyfriends' studios, or they were working in the back, or they were not showing. At that point, I wasn't even looking at men's work anymore. I wasn't reading anything by men, either. I stopped. I just did a sort of remedial education and just confined myself to looking at women's art and reading women's writing. I didn't care anymore what men were doing, I wanted to know what women were doing. I just went a hundred and eighty degrees, three hundred and sixty degrees.

COLLINGS

Can you sort of pinpoint the exact timeframe?

CHICAGO

That was the end of the sixties, early seventies.

COLLINGS

I just wondered if there was any sort of particular—

CHICAGO

It was all part of this whole, like, opening.

COLLINGS

I forgot to ask you this question when we were talking about Anais Nin. It was interesting to me that you had been so frightened by what you felt was the destructive power of these images.

CHICAGO

I used to get frightened all the time, like even all the way into the Birth Project when I was making these big pieces like Earth Birth. I'd spray these big fourteen-foot images of the earth as female or as the goddess giving birth, and then I'd go home and shake. These images would come out of me, and they'd scare the hell out of me. First of all, I'd never seen anything like that except for early goddess imagery, and second of all, it was like— That's what I meant about struggling to consciousness in my studio. When I did Let It All Hang Out, it was an abstract painting about the power of female sexuality, and it scared the shit out of me. It was like seven feet by seven feet, and it was turning in a circle and dissolving. I'm like, Oh, my God. It was powerful and vulnerable, and I'd never seen anything like it, and it scared the hell out of me.

COLLINGS

What were you scared of?

CHICAGO

I don't know. I thought something terrible was going to happen. I'd be punished for having expressed this. It's very deep in women. Then that's one of the reasons they attack other women who break the taboo, because we've been taught that something terrible's going to happen. It's completely irrational. It's

like the woman who won't let her daughter be circumcised. All the other women in the community want to kill her. Or the woman who wouldn't let her daughter have her feet bound. It's women who enact the patriarchal paradigm. They enforce it.

COLLINGS

Do you feel that that has changed?

CHICAGO

Some. In some parts of the world.

COLLINGS

But I mean in terms of your experience as an artist.

CHICAGO

Oh, yeah. I'm not afraid anymore. Oh, yeah. I am a little, but not like that.

COLLINGS

When did that change for you?

CHICAGO

It didn't change overnight. It was little by little by little by little. Accustoming myself little by little by little to my power. Now if I have the feelings, I know what they are. It's not that I don't have them. I just can identify them and not be stopped by them.

COLLINGS

It seems like Womanhouse was fairly well received.

CHICAGO

Yeah, it was. A lot of the early stuff was well received because nobody understood what it really meant yet.

COLLINGS

It certainly wasn't the way that The Dinner Party was received. Is that how you account for the difference?

CHICAGO

No. Womanhouse was an oddity and it happened in California. The Dinner Party was actually a real intervention, a major intervention in modernism, in the writing of history, and everything else. It didn't really elicit the rage until it got to New York.

COLLINGS

The stakes for the art establishment were just significantly higher.

CHICAGO

Ah. I mean, it was in New York. It was in New York. You know what was the most pathetic thing was the way so-called feminists picked up the patriarchal criticism and reiterated it. Like the thing about The Dinner Party being degrading to women? Where the hell does that come from? It got to the point—you don't know this—when The Dinner Party was going to be shown at UCLA, Armand Hammer [UCLA Hammer Museum]—

COLLINGS

The one that Amelia [Jones] organized?

CHICAGO

Yeah, the women studies department at UCLA threatened to picket it because it degraded women.

COLLINGS

Really?

CHICAGO

How's that?

COLLINGS

Wow!

CHICAGO

I remember having the discussion about this with my board, and they were so flabbergasted that perfectly ordinary women understood The Dinner Party celebrated women, and so-called feminist theorists didn't get it. Finally, one of my board members said, "Let them picket. Just think what people are going to think of them out there."

COLLINGS

Was this the faculty, do you happen to know?

CHICAGO

Yeah.

COLLINGS

I see. Because I was going to say maybe a bunch of undergraduate—

CHICAGO

They were teaching these young women that The Dinner Party degraded women, was essentialist, it reduced women to nothing but their sexual parts, that I exploited women, and I was a racist.

COLLINGS

How did it feel to be served up on a plate like that?

CHICAGO

Right. By women.

COLLINGS

Well, at least it puts you into the canon in some form. There is one little question about The Dinner Party work that I really wanted to ask you, because I was really struck by the sentence in your autobiography. You talk about walking past an antique store, I think it is, and you say that you were "enchanted" by a beautifully painted porcelain plate. I was really struck by the use of the word enchanted because it just had a whole different tone than so much of the discussion that goes prior to that in the book. [mutual laughter]

CHICAGO

Probably because I had used some other word so many times, I probably went to look it up and then found a different word, i.e., “enchanted.”

COLLINGS

Were you really enchanted by this plate?

CHICAGO

Well, I had never paid any attention to china painting before, so this— My aunt [Dorothy Polin] was a china painter. She didn't do a lot of it, but she did a little of it. I certainly didn't pay any attention to her plates on the wall. They weren't as well painted as this plate I saw, either. This was like a traditional— I think it was probably a European painted plate. It was kind of like I met Donald [Woodman] several times and I didn't pay attention to him, and then finally I was enchanted by him. It was kind of like that. Like you see something and it doesn't mean anything to you, and then all of a sudden it enchants you. You can't exactly explain why.

COLLINGS

Have you had responses to—

CHICAGO

Other media?

COLLINGS

Yeah.

CHICAGO

Needlework. I had the same sort of thing when I first began to discover needlework as an unexplored visual potential. I still think it's gorgeous. What it's used for is usually pretty kitschy, so it's the application of it that's the potential of the technique. And that's what I saw when I looked at that plate. I was trying to figure out what to do, how to do the Great Ladies and move them along. I needed a different form, and I saw it. I saw it on the plate.

COLLINGS

Did you buy the plate?

CHICAGO

No. But I went to study china painting. And I remember going to the Victoria and Albert Museum in England, and I spent hours, days with my face pressed against the windows of the glass cases looking at all that incredible painting from the porcelain factories.

COLLINGS

I just wanted to ask you about that because I was just really struck by your use of the word. I think in terms of a chronology, we're still at CalArts. Oh, actually, I did want to ask you one last question about being at Fresno. Faith Wilding writes in this issue of *Everywoman*, she says, "Our task is to expand, cultivate, and promote our female values until they change the world as it now exists." I won't read the whole thing.

CHICAGO

Ah, the seventies. [laughter]

COLLINGS

Suzanne Lacy also had a really definitive statement of that sort in the issue. Let's see. She says something along the lines of, "We set our goals high," she finishes with, "nothing less than the complete reconstruction of our world." You had said that you always had this dual purpose, that you were interested in social change and your art making.

CHICAGO

And I was interested in social change through my art making.

COLLINGS

But these statements suggest that the art making was in the service of social change. Do you think that that's a fair representation of what was going on at Fresno at that time?

CHICAGO

No, I don't think so. I think there was mostly much more focus on— I mean, what we did mostly was work on art. I just think we tied it to this high-fallutin goal. We were— God, it was such a moment in time. There was just so much hope in all that stuff, not like now.

COLLINGS

There was a definite sense that history was progressing in only one direction.

CHICAGO

Yeah, it was getting better. Right.

COLLINGS

We don't have that sense today.

CHICAGO

No. [tape off, then resumes]

COLLINGS

I sort of forgot where we left off, but let's say that we're at CalArts. I wanted to ask you about your Cock and Cunt play for Womanhouse. I love it. It's so good. I was wondering, how did you write this? Did you just sort of shoot it off?

CHICAGO

I have no idea.

COLLINGS

Were you doing a lot of writing at that time?

CHICAGO

No. I wrote it in Fresno.

COLLINGS

That's right, yeah.

CHICAGO

My studio was in a supermarket, and I had a meat locker. The meat locker was my office. It was just— My students were doing performance. I went into the meat locker, out it came in a fit of frenzy and rage. I was scared to death. I didn't show it for a long time. I didn't even show it to them, nothing. I just scared myself to death with it. Then I started using it as an exercise with them. They would change roles. They would play the male part and then the female part, and it would help them see where they were stopped. Like they had problems with the aggressive part of the male role. That was very instructive. Then it got incorporated into performances in Womanhouse.

COLLINGS

Right. When the students were doing this play, it seems like they—at least in the Womanhouse video—it seems like the two performers are really having a lot of fun with it.

CHICAGO

Well, they had gone through it in Fresno. We all did it, all together. We all did it. We'd go back and forth, and we'd all play both roles, so they'd had a lot of experience with it. Again, a lot of the stuff was less frightening to them than to me.

COLLINGS

Right. But you never revealed any of this fright to them.

CHICAGO

No.

COLLINGS

You thought something would happen to them, like a real thing?

CHICAGO

No. I didn't reveal it to them because I felt it was my role to support them. It was my problem, it wasn't their problem. I have a lot of feelings about what is and is not appropriate to share with your students.

COLLINGS

What are some other things that are not appropriate to share with students?

CHICAGO

I think it's not appropriate to ask them to help you.

COLLINGS

That would have put you in kind of an awkward spot then, when you're in a situation where you're supposed to all be— That would mean that you would necessarily have to be kind of the authority figure.

CHICAGO

No, no, no, no. The way I teach breaks that down. I teach more as a facilitator than as an authority figure. There were just ways in which I would not burden them.

COLLINGS

That makes sense. Let's see. You were at CalArts—

CHICAGO

In fact, I just had an experience here in this project where one of facilitators violated this particular tenet.

COLLINGS

Oh, yeah? What happened?

CHICAGO

Donald and I sent two of the facilitators who were team teaching an email sharing our observations and our discontent with how they were proceeding, and they showed it to their students. Then they had their students respond to it, that we had observed that their students seemed disempowered. Then they asked their students to tell us how they weren't disempowered. It's the only time in my life I completely lost it, I totally lost it, I completely lost it. The guy doesn't understand why this was— The woman has come to understand it, but he just doesn't understand why I got so upset or why this was, for me, such a violation of not only the relationship with us but, from my point of view, they used their students and put them in an untenable position. I just completely lost it.

COLLINGS

Do you see your art making as being completely separate from your pedagogical practice?

CHICAGO

No, not entirely, because I use a lot of this methodology in the organization of my projects. But people got educated also through the art making as well as through the process.

COLLINGS

Right, exactly. It seems like this is a situation where rather than somebody being an artist who teaches because that's how they support themselves, and this is, in fact, sort of part of what you do.

CHICAGO

Well, actually, it's interesting because the facilitators in this project, they all are dealing differently with their groups in terms of whether they're making art or not. They've made different decisions. It's interesting. Some are actually making art with the group and are going to show with the group, and some are absolutely not doing that. They want just to be the facilitator of the participants' work. It's interesting because it demonstrates that there's a spectrum of choices for the facilitator in terms of art making and this kind of methodology of helping people come to what they're going to do and helping them do it. That's interesting to me, actually.

COLLINGS

What has been your decision in this case?

CHICAGO

I'm acting as facilitator. For me, there's been a difference when I've gone someplace and taught. The only time there's been a fusion for me is when people are coming to work on my images, on my projects. Then I'm being an artist. But I've used the kind of going around the circle and empowerment technique to empower the group and also to build a group spirit and to bond and to do all those things that I do in a more focused way when I'm teaching.

COLLINGS

Okay. Probably a lot of this was going on when you were at the Woman's Building as well.

CHICAGO

Yeah.

COLLINGS

What was your role at the Woman's Building?

CHICAGO

I suppose in a way I had a leadership role, although I sort of didn't totally acknowledge it. Sheila and Arlene and I came together out of CalArts to form the Feminist Studio Workshop, but then I brought all these different groups together to create the Woman's Building.

COLLINGS

And part of your idea was that you needed to have a feminist exhibition space, you needed to have—

CHICAGO

We needed a context.

COLLINGS

Exactly.

CHICAGO

We needed a context. We needed a context. There was a young woman who was in the feminist art program at CalArts named Mira Schor, who's a very well-known painter and feminist theorist. She works out of New York. She wrote a really important essay called "Patrilineage" about how women artists are still put into a "patrilineage" as opposed to in a "matrilineage." The Woman's Building idea was that you would see women's work in a feminist context, sort of like what Amelia tried to do.

COLLINGS

In her book.

CHICAGO

No, as a curator. In the exhibition and the book [Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History]. But, in the exhibition, was to look at The Dinner Party in the context of other art that was going on at that time and has gone on since. So the Woman's Building was an attempt way earlier to create a

context for looking at women's creative production, cultural production, in a feminist context. The same thing happened when The Dinner Party opened in San Francisco Museum [of Modern Art]. There was an entire weekend of activities, seminars, poetry readings, plays, performances, again trying to contextualize The Dinner Party in women's cultural production and women's history. That's what the idea was in the— and also in the Woman's Building— was also to create a viable economic structure.

COLLINGS

People applied to come to the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building.

CHICAGO

Yeah. And also I was going around the country a lot, and I would solicit young women that I met.

COLLINGS

How did you select people when they applied? Did you have a selection process?

CHICAGO

I think so, but I don't really quite remember that. I think it was pretty loose. After all, there's a lot of self-selection. Somebody picks up from Las Cruces and moves to Los Angeles to be in the program, pretty well they're like— It was a lot of self-selection.

COLLINGS

So there was never a case of saying, This person, I don't think they fit the criteria.

CHICAGO

Too early, too early. That's all happened since.

COLLINGS

And there were fees, right?

CHICAGO

I'm sure there were fees.

COLLINGS

Do you remember anything about how you set that up?

CHICAGO

I know that I went from earning way more at CalArts to way less at the Feminist Studio Workshop. I remember that. But I can't remember how much it was.

COLLINGS

How did you incorporate the things that you had learned as a teacher at Fresno and CalArts into what you were doing at the Woman's Building?

CHICAGO

First of all, we often team taught, Sheila and Arlene and I. I had expanded from teaching alone at Fresno to teaching with Mimi at CalArts, so I integrated collaborative teaching.

COLLINGS

Did that work for you better?

CHICAGO

With Sheila and Arlene it was really easy. Also, Sheila was a designer and Arlene was an art historian, so it wasn't two artists. That was, I think, a better arrangement. And also, we had had an art historian [Paula Harper] at CalArts, too, who also did some team teaching with us, so that got integrated in. I used a lot of the same methods. But I was only there a year.

COLLINGS

What was different about working with this group? This is not an accredited—

CHICAGO

Well, there was no contradiction. They didn't leave the Feminist Studio Workshop and walk into patriarchy. They left the Feminist Studio Workshop, and there was the Grandview Gallery and the Women's Gallery and the Sisterhood Bookstore. There was an entire context, so the workshop was in a context that supported and reinforced the values of the workshop, so it was completely different than at CalArts where they'd leave the Feminist Art Program and reenter patriarchal values in two seconds. It was confusing, particularly for the young women.

COLLINGS

Do you think that this created better work?

CHICAGO

Well, it created more— Of course, they still went back to, quote, "their real lives" out of the building, but the building was pretty powerful. I mean, a whole building? Even though there were differences of opinion, there was still some coherence of values.

COLLINGS

Was this an enjoyable year for you?

CHICAGO

People had a really big misunderstanding also about me about how I'd done a lot of administration and stuff, which I'm really lousy at. I didn't do very much administration. I just taught. But, yeah, I think it was pretty great. I remember when the Woman's Building opened. It was pretty fabulous. I had my Great Ladies show, and I felt as if my work and the context meshed, and the audience meshed, for the first time in my life. It was great, it was fabulous. It was incredibly empowering.

COLLINGS

Yeah, because when you talk about some of the fears at Fresno, I would think that that wouldn't be present there.

CHICAGO

No. This was fantastic. Oh, yeah, it was very reinforcing. My God! But I think that's part of what probably gave me the courage to then take it all into my studio and start The Dinner Party.

COLLINGS

Right. It's almost as if you were a star pupil or something.

CHICAGO

[laughter] That's very good. I graduated from my own program. [laughter]

COLLINGS

It sort of sounds that way.

CHICAGO

Yeah, that's sort of right. I did graduate from my own program. [mutual laughter] Then I went round the world and made good, right? [laughter] That was good, that was very funny.

COLLINGS

I was talking with one of the participants from the Studio Workshop, and she said that one of the things that you taught her that was so important for her was the idea—it's just a simple thing—of introducing herself using her first name and last name, shaking hands firmly, looking people in the eye, and I was just wondering if you could think of other what we might call charm school techniques or reverse charm school techniques.

CHICAGO

Oh, yes. I started that in Fresno. It used to drive me crazy. [very soft voice] Hello. My name's Cheryl and I have trouble talking in groups. [firm voice] Stand up. My name is Cheryl Zurilgen and I am blah, blah, blah. Oh, my God! Absolutely.

COLLINGS

So this was something that you had brought with you all the way along. Were there other sort of ground rules along those lines that you can think of?

CHICAGO

I don't know if they were ground rules, but they were definitely my—

COLLINGS

Or basic building blocks of—

CHICAGO

Yeah, now I can talk about the building blocks. Now that I'm trying to teach it to other people, I'm clearer about the building blocks. So, yeah, there's the use of the circle, going around in the circle to build synergy, to build group bonding. It was interesting having the facilitators we're training now talk about their observations about why we sit in a circle. They said, Well, because then

you have to see each other. You actually look at each other. Also listening, deep listening, deep listening, which says, when you listen to each other, you inherently communicate that what the person has to say is valuable. This is very important, especially for women, who are always told that what they have to say is not valuable. So the building blocks are kind of this going around the circle, going around the circle, inclusion, building a strong group basis, breaking down the traditional teacher-student relationship, breaking down the authority of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a human being, who the teacher is, who the person is and finding the place between who the students are and who the teacher is as people, where there can be real connection and real interaction as opposed to just the teacher standing up and imparting some abstract information to these, quote, "blank slates" and hoping it lands. It's a completely different model. And encouraging each person to find their voice and then helping them figure out how to best express that voice, in what form. Should it be in opera or should it be a song? Should it be vocal at all? Should it be instrumental? Should it have many instruments? I'm talking in musical terms, but this is a parallel to art making forms. So those building blocks were all there in the Fresno program, in much less developed form. I was not as adept at doing it. I was not as adept at staying back, pulling back from it. I was definitely more directive when I was younger.

COLLINGS

Did you ever study educational theory? No. You just kind of felt your way.

CHICAGO

Probably the person I really relate to most is bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress [Education as the Practice of Freedom]*. I know her theories are built based on Paolo Freire—

COLLINGS

Right. That's exactly what I was thinking.

CHICAGO

Liberation, yeah. But I understood about liberation theology, and all those kinds of— I was just a natural for all that. I mean, I just naturally gravitated to it.

COLLINGS

Why do you think that was?

CHICAGO

Probably my background, my childhood, my father. My father used to do it. I used to watch him do it. I used to watch him encourage group discussions in our house and go around the circle and ask everybody what they thought.

COLLINGS

Because he was a labor organizer.

CHICAGO

Yeah.

COLLINGS

And he was raising consciousness [laughter] and you went on to continue the good work. What's different about doing it now vis-à-vis at that time?

CHICAGO

I'm not as scared. [laughter] I know more what I'm doing. I can laugh more, too, at the things that happen. It used to get me so upset when there would be tears. In fact, I was just having this conversation with one of the facilitators about it's been three weeks of bliss and now there's conflict, and they're having some reactions to the conflict. I'm like really, bring a hundred people together and not have conflict? You must be dreaming. So maybe what we have now to teach people is that conflict doesn't kill and that you can actually resolve conflict in a way that allows you to go on. So that's where we are now. Donald has not quite as much patience as I do with all of the various manifestations of multiple personalities and different agendas. Now I have a much greater— Sometimes I find this is very funny. I didn't find it funny when I was young. I took all so seriously.

COLLINGS

You never laughed about anything while you were—

CHICAGO

Oh, yeah, sure. I used to laugh. Like at The Dinner Party I used to come up with a saying that would keep me from going crazy, which was, You can lead a horse to water but you can't make her think. You know what I'm saying? Really frustrated, like I'd like to kill her, and then I'd say that.

COLLINGS

Was that vis-à-vis the people working at the—

CHICAGO

Yeah, yeah. There were a lot of funny things at The Dinner Party, like they show in the film. With the mood thing, people, they mythologize my responses. If I have a response, I forget about it five seconds later. It's like, oh, God, she got angry. It's like, oh, my God!

COLLINGS

How do you feel about that The Dinner Party film [Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, 1979], by the way? Have you seen it recently?

CHICAGO

Yeah, I've seen it a hundred times.

COLLINGS

Do you like it?

CHICAGO

I told Johanna, the thing I don't like about it is that it looks like we all sat around and talked and suddenly there was *The Dinner Party*. But filmmakers don't like the endless hours of art making, they like the *Sturm und Drang*, so there's too much of that.

COLLINGS

But do you feel that all the elements of the production experience were represented?

CHICAGO

I think she did pretty well. I think given the time of the film, when it was made—I know it's quite dated now, but I think it has a certain integrity to it.

COLLINGS

It comes off as a wonderful documentary of a particular period, and I just wondered if you, having been there, if you would agree with that.

CHICAGO

Well, I would have liked more art making, but—

COLLINGS

Looking back in terms of your efforts in the area of feminist pedagogy, how successful do you think the goal of allowing a new—I think you call it "female creator" in your book—to emerge that developed a new style?

CHICAGO

I think there's no question that feminist art is alive and well all over the planet. No matter how many times they keep trying to say that feminist art is passé, excuse me! What it is, though, it's continually being dehistoricized and decontextualized, so there again it's not a matrilineage. I keep seeing young women's work, like in needlework, for example—even in young men's needlework—it's been growing out of feminist art, and the history of feminist art and the breaking down of the distinctions between high and low art, but I see it put in these bizarre other contexts, like Andy Warhol becomes the person responsible for needlework in art. Excuse me? Did he ever use a needle? I don't think so. And thread. But again, it has to do with female authorship and resistance to acknowledging it.

COLLINGS

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. Is there anything that you miss about the sixties and the seventies?

CHICAGO

I miss the hope and the context. I definitely miss that. The hopefulness, I think that was really fabulous. The hopefulness was fabulous, that we could actually make a difference, that there could be social change, and that art could play a role, an important role. It makes me unhappy the way in which marketplace values have overtaken everything, including the art world.

COLLINGS

Yeah. There is definitely a palpable sense in *The Dinner Party* film of people sort of—especially with the filming of the Thursday night discussions—of people having a sense that they're sort of marking ground in time and that there's a before the things that they were doing socially—

CHICAGO

Before they awoke, you mean?

COLLINGS

Yeah. There's a before and an after, and that before and after includes other people, not just themselves. I think now we have a much more differentiated—

CHICAGO

Oh, you mean Kathe [Kathe] Pollitt. Did you ever read this piece by Kathe Pollitt? She's a wonderful writer. "Feminism, C'est Moi." She was talking about that's where we are in the nineties, feminism, c'est moi. When you talk to young women, right?

COLLINGS

Right. I think that's a very good way of putting it.

CHICAGO

That's right. Feminism, c'est moi. Makes one unhappy.

COLLINGS

You say at the end of an interview that you did in *Everywoman* in 1970—

CHICAGO

That was a long time ago.

COLLINGS

That's right. You say, "We do not yet have a human society."

CHICAGO

That's all the more true now.

COLLINGS

Do you think that's more true than at that time?

CHICAGO

Well, I think that I was right then when I didn't have a global perspective, and now that I have a global perspective, I would say I'm still right. We not only don't have a human society, we don't have a society that's livable or equitable to any of the creatures on the planet. Most of the creatures on the planet.

COLLINGS

Looking back thirty, forty years, do you feel a sense of accomplishment in terms of your—not just your art production—but your pedagogy of that period? What's your gut feeling looking back?

CHICAGO

There are two different questions. The art production, until *The Dinner Party* was permanently housed, I would have said I do not feel my goals have been accomplished. Changing people's lives was not sufficient for me. Because

I'm an artist and because I want the art I make to be able to continue to do that. There's before The Dinner Party's permanent housing and now there's after. There's no question that now that's been achieved, it's been a huge difference in my life, for me, personally. For me, that marks a really major step. Not only for me, but in terms of the institutionalizing of feminist art, because I always have seen The Dinner Party as a wedge opening up the discourse to the voices of many more people, women and people of color. I believe that will happen. I believe in the power of The Dinner Party to act. I've seen it. That's why I believe it in, because I've seen it. There's not many works of art that have galvanized people into action and caused them to organize and find spaces and raise money, and set up staffs to show a work of art. The full extent of the impact of The Dinner Party, I think, is a long time from being known. For years The Dinner Party existed in memory. It had a meaning to people who had never even seen it. Now they're going to be able to see it and see it and see it and see it and see it, and it's almost inconceivable to know what that will do.

COLLINGS

I think that's tremendously important.

CHICAGO

So that's one thing. Knowing about it and seeing it are two entirely different things.

COLLINGS

I can imagine. I've never seen it, but the pictures suggest that it has a tremendous presence.

CHICAGO

Well, it's not just its presence. It has to do also with the fact that there are probably in America only three places you can go where—

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CHICAGO

There's only two now, but when The Dinner Party permanent housing opens, when the center opens, the [Elizabeth A.] Sackler Center [for Feminist Art] at the Brooklyn Museum, there will be three places that women can go where they'll be able to see female experience extended into public space. That's the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the [Arthur and Elizabeth] Schlesinger Library for the History of Women in America at Radcliffe-Harvard, and the Brooklyn Museum. The reason I talk about this is because when I went to the Schlesinger Library, I burst into tears. I had the same experience walking in there that people tell me they have when they go off into The Dinner Party space, which is I walked into this four-story building, and on the wall are the pictures of the

women I've carried around in my memory for years, and there's this whole hive of people working on preserving the history of those women. It overpowers me. It overpowered me. So, in a way, absence is only illuminated by presence. The absence of feeling affirmed like that, you only begin to understand it when you're in the presence of that affirmation.

COLLINGS

Right. Like alienation is looking in the mirror and you can't see your reflection.

CHICAGO

Right. So that's the same for what it means to not have our experience extended into public space. Men are so used to it, it's not even real to them and they can't even imagine it. I've been thinking a lot about the issue about the veil and stuff. I've had some interactions with Middle Eastern women, Islamic women, who don't understand why I'm so upset about the veil. They tell me that's not so important, and there are other problems. Well, the real issue has to do with women don't own public space. They can only be individuals in private; they cannot be individuals in public because they have to be shrouded. It's like a walking symbol for the fight for the right for women to be individuals in the world and to be acknowledged as such.

COLLINGS

I think the answer to this question is no, but when you were getting into The Dinner Party—your earlier art but particularly into The Dinner Party—did you have a sense that you were, as you put it, placing a wedge into history?

CHICAGO

Attempting to place a wedge into history, yeah.

COLLINGS

And into the institutional—

CHICAGO

That was my goal. Unless it was to be permanently housed, I wouldn't have achieved my goal.

COLLINGS

So for a long time then, you felt that your goal was—

CHICAGO

Elusive. There were periods when I thought it was never going to happen.

COLLINGS

So that is a very powerful before and after, isn't it?

CHICAGO

Mm-hmm.

COLLINGS

But you haven't felt that way about any of your other projects. Is that right?

CHICAGO

Well, of course. Now I'm fighting to have the body of my work seen, and it's like the The Dinner Party's one piece in a big body of work. Maybe I'll make that and maybe I won't make that. I don't know. I'm applying the strategy I finally came up with with The Dinner Party, which was to preserve The Dinner Party until such time as it could be permanently housed. I'm trying to apply that strategy to the body of my work with the idea that someday maybe, even if it's not seen during my lifetime, maybe it will be seen and understood after I die. Because I didn't stop with The Dinner Party. It's only the beginning. I shouldn't be uncharitable about discounting what it means to have even that piece acknowledged. There are artists who work their whole lives who don't even get that. Particularly a lot of women. Nevertheless, I have a big body of art.

COLLINGS

Do you still feel this very high level of social responsibility that you wrote about in *Through the Flower*? I mean, is this something that competes in terms of importance with your own creative drive? And could you ever see yourself in your studio rediscovering another part of yourself?

CHICAGO

Well, I've been doing that. I do that all the time.

COLLINGS

But it seems like in this work that you're doing now—

CHICAGO

You mean the project?

COLLINGS

Yeah.

CHICAGO

But I'm teaching and making money. I have to make money, too, you know. But in terms of my own private art making, I've been doing watercolors since 1996. Things have a way of getting a little bigger than I had planned. Like the Anais Nin project, which started out as this little modest suite of water colors, then became a book, then became prints. It's gotten bigger [laughter] They have this sort of way of happening without me, sort of.

COLLINGS

Was it the watercolors— You said that you enrolled in a class and you took your assistant's name?

CHICAGO

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Why did you do that?

CHICAGO

Because I wanted not to be anybody looking over my shoulder if I did something horrible. You know what I mean? I had freedom.

COLLINGS

You wanted to be a private individual rather than a public—

CHICAGO

Freedom. Freedom. That's why I've chosen to teach for a semester or a quarter and be gone. Freedom. I want freedom.

COLLINGS

So you would never consider joining an art faculty somewhere?

CHICAGO

Depends on what the deal was. I mean, I'd have to have freedom.

COLLINGS

Let me just ask you, did you ever consider another name besides Chicago?

CHICAGO

That name evolved. It's what became my name.

COLLINGS

I was sort of struck by the fact that it's a place.

CHICAGO

Yeah, well, I just used to be called that, so—

COLLINGS

So much of what you have done is creating spaces and places.

CHICAGO

It's funny, yeah.

COLLINGS

I wondered if it was important to you that—

CHICAGO

No. It's just that that's what I used to be called, so it seemed natural.

COLLINGS

I think I've sort of—unless we would get into a project with a different kind of timeframe, I think I've come to the end of my headline questions.

CHICAGO

I hope I've been helpful. I hope this has been helpful to you in terms of what you're doing. Or useful. I just want it to be useful in terms of the other research you're doing and the interviews you're doing.

COLLINGS

I think that it is. I just wondered if there was any word picture or any way that you would like to like to summarize the two decades, sort of thinking back—
What color was it in your mind?

CHICAGO

I would say the sixties was pretty dark, and the seventies was pretty light. The sixties was unmitigating struggle against all these obstacles: attitudes, lack of opportunity, prejudice, resistance. Even though that didn't go away, it was masked by the seventies, because the seventies there was this huge blossoming,

and there was this huge space. It allowed, I think, a lot of women to discover their potential. I think that's one of the things that it did, and I think that people don't talk enough about that.

COLLINGS

No. I think you're right. When could you say that you actually first heard about the women's movement? Do you remember anything in particular?

CHICAGO

No, no. It wasn't even the women's movement, it was literature.

COLLINGS

Literature. You mentioned the SCUM Manifesto, for example.

CHICAGO

Yeah, right. And the early Red Stocking stuff, the Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm, all that stuff was starting to come out at the end of the sixties. I got it, what was happening to me.

COLLINGS

Were friends telling you about it?

CHICAGO

I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't remember how I happened to see— I think I read articles about it. I think I read about the Red Stockings in the newspaper. There used to be a lot of print—

COLLINGS

In the alternative-type newspapers?

CHICAGO

And also in the regular newspapers. There was a little bit of hoo-ha about this. It was all kind of new, and nobody quite knew what to make of it. There was more coverage of it than there is now, actually. It was like there was this protest of the Miss America contest, and all of that was just— It was like little stirrings, and they were reported on. It was kind of like how Womanhouse—

COLLINGS

Well, just the fact that Womanhouse was in Time magazine.

CHICAGO

Right. There was a lot of interest in this. Nobody quite knew what was happening. It didn't have a name yet. Just, these new things were happening. I think it's really hard to get that sense back. Nobody quite went, Oh, God, Feminazis. There was none of that. It was news. It was news. Womanhouse was news. People got sort of a kick out of it. It was audacious. These women were writing these things, they were kind of new and unusual. It took a while before there was a real comprehension of what this meant. Then as soon as that happened, there began to be the is feminism dead trip in the media. That started in the late seventies. An unrelenting chant about how feminism was dead, feminism was passé. Post-feminism. That came later, post-feminism.

COLLINGS

Do you remember any of the particular landmark moments, like the Pill coming out?

CHICAGO

I don't remember. I remember the pill coming. I think the pill came out in—

COLLINGS

Nineteen-seventy, I think.

CHICAGO

No, before that. Didn't it come out before that? When did the Pill come out?

COLLINGS

Let's see. FDA approval of the Pill— I'm sorry. Nineteen-sixty. I was getting confused here.

CHICAGO

I knew I didn't use diaphragms for very long.

COLLINGS

I was thinking, like, your early college years, but you started in 1957 in college.

CHICAGO

I think by the early sixties the Pill was pretty well around. I think we all gave up our diaphragms in the early sixties.

COLLINGS

And that was that. Oh, by the way, I did want to ask you, and I sort of skipped over this. While you were in Los Angeles during your art school years, did you take any interest in Chicano muralists' work or anything along that line?

CHICAGO

No. That's not actually true. It was not that early, though. I can't remember if it was the late sixties or early seventies, I got to know Judy Baca, who I'm still friends with. She came and gave a talk at our weekend. Actually, our developments paralleled in a lot of ways. Her issues have become way more global. She showed a slide of me coming to one of her brainstorming sessions about the Great Wall, which I totally forgot about. Definitely had an overlap with her and that, so I knew about her, of course, and SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center].

COLLINGS

Right. I was thinking about the muralist aspects of some of the birth project images.

CHICAGO

Oh, yes. Some other people have said that. It didn't come from that. It came from growing up with some Diego Riveras in my house, I think, posters or something. I saw that style early on.

COLLINGS

Did you ever go down to Mexico?

CHICAGO

Not till way later. I didn't go to Mexico until— I went to Tijuana and stuff, but I didn't really go to Mexico City until the early eighties. Went to see Frida Kahlo's house. Maybe 1980, something like that. But I certainly knew about their work.

COLLINGS

Right. That piece, Did You Know Your Mother Had a Sacred Heart? it has sort of a Chicano art motif.

CHICAGO

Really? That's interesting.

COLLINGS

Almost like these altar pieces that people have in their houses.

CHICAGO

It actually harkens back to Virgin Mary altars, but I can see that, too. Probably they do, too.

COLLINGS

Yeah, exactly. Okay. I think that's all I have to ask you about. Thank you, Judy.

CHICAGO

Okay. I'm sorry I can't give you more time, but it doesn't seem like you need it.

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