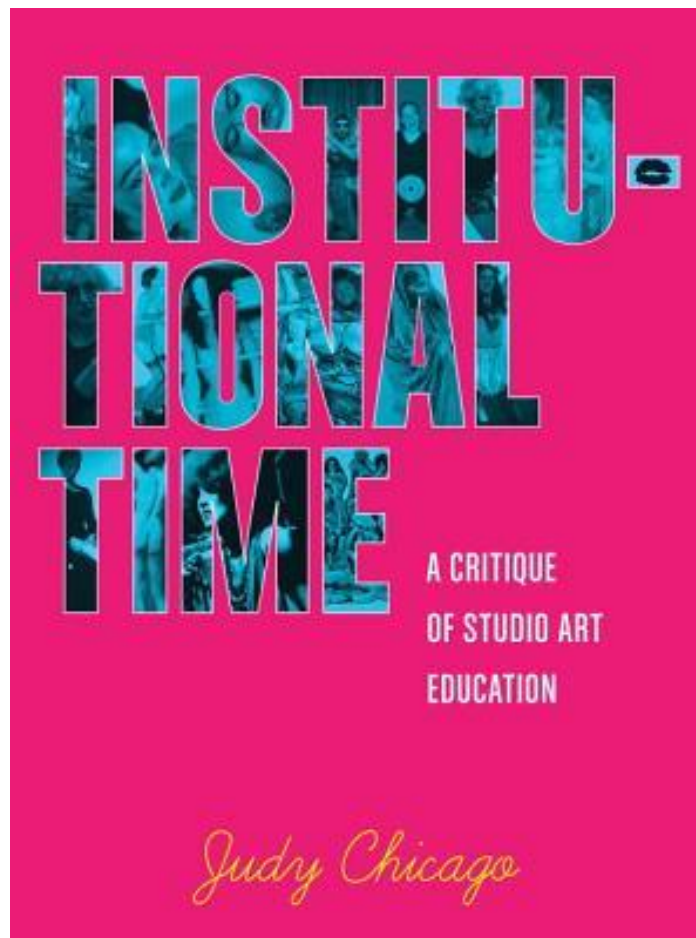


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review: *Institutional Time:
A Critique of Studio
Art Education*
by Judy Chicago

Reviewed by Christopher Kennedy



***Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*
by Judy Chicago (The Monacelli Press, 2014)**

I am a woman....I want to produce feminist art and...express what it feels like living in this society as a female . . . and not be labeled a 'Feminazi.' (University of Indiana Student, 1999)

As a celebrated artist central to the feminist art movement, Judy Chicago has spent her career challenging a male-dominated art world, creating large-scale collaborative projects, paintings, sculpture and performance art exploring the unique experience of women. While her pioneering work as a feminist artist is well-known, Chicago has also spent nearly four decades working as an educator in universities and with community-based organizations across the United States. In her latest book, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*, she reflects candidly on her teaching experience, weaving together an autobiographical account that details the development of several studio art programs for women and the evolution of a pedagogical approach linked closely to the tenets of democratic and student-centered learning.

Through first-hand accounts and historical analysis, Chicago argues that art education is still male-dominated and continues to focus on a formalist conception of art and art practice. She recounts lingering forms of sexism still present today, noting that the history of female artists and feminist art are often relegated to special interest topics rarely required in most curricula. As a consequence most students do not take "pride in women's heritage . . . [and] continue to labor under the notion that to be identified as a feminist is something heinous" (p. 15-16). Chicago also details the complicated negotiations that unfold between universities which desire more community-based experiences for students and visiting artists who are given little funding, resources and time to create something meaningful. While her accounts are timely and refreshing, Chicago does not directly address the corporatization of academia, omitting a crucial discussion on the neoliberalization of higher education, the current adjunct crisis, and the overwhelming burden of paying for art school. However, Chicago does provide some discussion of workforce representation, namely the unequal number of professional working artists that are women. But issues of class are not theorized in relationship to the feminist histories and aesthetic approaches explored. Chicago instead uses her own personal narrative and some historical research to highlight the possibilities of feminist art pedagogy, and the challenges female students still face in many university settings.

Graduating from UCLA in 1962, Chicago began her work as an educator at California State University at Fresno. Noticing that most of the women were not participating as much as her male students, she proposed a new studio course for women. This evolved into the Fresno Feminist Art Program, which provided a space for female artists to meet, discuss and make art. Chicago used this program to experiment pedagogically with what she describes as a "circle methodology," asking students to sit

in a circle and share personal stories in ways they had never done before. While this foray into democratic and student-centered learning may be common today, Chicago explains that her approach was a drastic departure from studio programs that were often cutthroat and focused on individual mastery of art technique and form, rather than critical thought. Over time Chicago's students became comfortable with sharing stories and personal truths, which she admits, at times frightened her:

. . . I was often scared to death of what I'd unleashed. Images and ideas were pouring out of the students; they were so powerful that they sometimes frightened me. (p. 31)

As the Fresno program evolved, performance art became a way to channel many of the experiences unearthed by students, including the *Cock and Cunt Play*, which explores the complexities of gender and femininity through satiric role-play. In 1971, Chicago relocated her work to CalArts. With some initial seed money she started Womanhouse with Miriam Shapiro, "one of the first visual expressions of women's feelings about their domestic lives" (p. 37). The works generated by students through this program were provocative and expressive of a particularly vibrant time in both the feminist and performance art movements in the United States. Chicago's art practice evolved around and within these movements, integrating new artistic forms and cross-disciplinary collaborations.

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Visually Chicago's early work plays with minimalism and unconventional materials to create deceptively simple paintings and sculptures that reference women's bodies and sacred geometry. Vivid pastel colors combined with bold shapes initially shocked some audiences with their brazen use and critique of the female form. In the 1970s, Chicago began to incorporate site-specific response, pyrotechnics, photography and staged performances to challenge the role of women in society. In 1974 she began work on arguably her best-known piece, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), a celebration of 1,038 women central to the history of Western Civilization. Currently on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the work features 39 place settings representing famous women arranged along a triangular table with the remaining 999 names carved into tiles on the floor.

In Part Two, Chicago provides an historical context for the depiction of women as artists, and their access to fine arts training. With very few opportunities to train as artists or exhibit work, women experience an entrenched gender bias implicit in what Chicago describes as a "Eurocentric focus on our educational system . . ." (p. 70). She

explains, not until the latter half of the 20th century did schools like Moore College of Art and Design, the Slade School of Fine Art, the Bauhaus or Black Mountain College offer a real space for women. Tracing some of the histories of female artists and educators through the latter half of the 20th century, Chicago argues that because most American colleges were founded on a British or Prussian institutional model, a “male-centered curriculum was pretty well set in stone” early on (p. 68). Despite a number of movements, both artistic and civic, Chicago explains that the recognition of women as autonomous agents and cultural producers is still an ongoing struggle. Chicago notes that higher education is heavily implicated in this phenomenon, explaining the focus on the Western “artist-as-genius” male archetype still diffuses through the cracks of even the most progressive art schools and institutions today.

As Chicago’s narrative unfolds, she describes her university teaching experiences at Indiana University in Bloomington, at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, and at Vanderbilt in Nashville among others. Although her pedagogical approach evolves with the site and group of people involved, it often draws from community-based and site-specific practices anchored in the collective experiences and concerns of students. However, as Chicago points out, she is not interested in merely focusing on the personal growth of students, or overemphasizing the form and composition of visual artworks. Rather she is more interested in helping students develop a subject matter for their work:

I see my role as a teacher in a very different way . . . my focus is to help participants transform personal experience into content-based expression in the tangible form of visual art (p. 190).

Chicago explains that the capacity of the work to tell a compelling story, to communicate an idea, or transport the viewer into poetic or literal engagement with the content of the work is her basis for evaluation and assessment.

While Chicago notes this approach may be useful and transformative for many students, it also produces a number of aesthetic challenges, namely students producing works of art that are overly representational. During her time at Indiana University she describes obstacles students faced in first identifying a subject matter and then using this as inspiration for art making. Chicago argues that the abstraction of art practice and the language artists are encouraged to express their ideas has become “virtually unintelligible,” disguised as reductive tropes and lingering

modernist tricks. She remarks, “Increasingly, understandable content in art has come to be seen almost like an infectious disease, something to be avoided” (p. 81). Through forms of storytelling and what she calls “self-presentations,” students were eventually able to use their own experiences and interests as material for art making, rather than merely focus on a particular medium, style or form. The themes explored by Chicago’s students, like those she encountered early on in Fresno, were deeply connected to cultures of oppression and inequity that are still largely ignored in educational settings—from homophobia and sexism, to issues of mental wellness and access to comprehensive healthcare, to the shifting makeup of the family unit.

In 2001, Chicago and her collaborator Donald Woodman were invited to teach a course at Western Kentucky University in the women’s studies department. The director of the program suggested a project based on the Womanhouse program that Chicago co-founded at UCLA. Intrigued by the idea, Chicago and Woodman decided to explore the concept of “home,” noticing a deep connection to place and southern culture amongst students and locals. Chicago and Woodman were offered a small house to live in while visiting and teaching at the school, eventually creating a project called *At Home: A Kentucky Project*. However, when they arrived, they realized the house wouldn’t be a suitable residence, eventually convincing the university to use the house as a studio and exhibition space instead. Chicago details the complicated negotiations with the university administration



JUDY CHICAGO, THE DINNER PARTY, 1979

and students in facilitating the project from funding shortfalls to attempted censorship of the final show. As in many of her past projects, Chicago and Woodman began the class with self-presentations where stories of rape and incest, suicide, depression, and body shame emerged from students. While Chicago was shocked by some of these accounts they would eventually become the subject matter for the final exhibition. By the end of the semester, a collection of sculptures, installations and mixed-media artworks with titles like *Rape Garage*, *Eating Disorder Bathroom* and *Prejudice Basement* filled the house, perhaps meant to distress and simultaneously inform visitors of the group’s collective struggle with a range of issues.

In the final chapter, Chicago recounts her foray into K-12 education, using *The Dinner Party*, as the focus for a curriculum exploring feminist art. In working with other arts educators, Chicago outlines some of the challenges in adapting concepts of gender, the body, and feminism to elementary and middle school audiences. Chicago explains how the Getty Center for Arts Education provided an

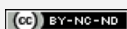
inspiration, using their Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) approach to create a “flexible framework on which teachers could build” (p. 231). Although Chicago explains she intentionally tried to avoid a prescriptive approach to creating the curriculum, her embrace of DBAE as a guiding framework is curious. Ideally DBAE attempts to connect educators, artists, and school administrators with the broader world of art through a comprehensive approach to art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. For many schools that adopted DBAE, this provided a coherent theoretical framework to re-imagine a wider use of art within the curriculum. However, since its adoption in the early 1980s, DBAE has been criticized for its overly structured and academic approach that often ignores diverse cultural perspectives and is used to manage and legitimize standards-based learning outcomes (Hamblen, 1987; Eisner, 1990).

In many ways, Chicago’s book comes at a time when social practice and community-based art has seen renewed interest. With increasing pressure to engage audiences and communities socially, digitally and politically, the role of civic institutions, museums and art schools has been called into question. How can art educators and institutions thoughtfully engage students in a discourse that is socially-engaged, but also builds a set of art and design skills that are aesthetically poignant and conceptually candid? Chicago’s book highlights a number of ethical considerations connected to these concerns, from issues of time and creative freedom, to the complexities of collaboration, and equitable compensation. However, there is not a consistent pedagogical or political examination of the larger socio-cultural conditions and systems of power that continue to privilege a Western and masculine conception of both art and education. Many critical pedagogues like Henry Giroux or Joe Kincheloe would argue a truly feminist and radical approach to learning requires a process of deschooling or unlearning for students to understand their positionalities and the ethical imperatives of making art that is critical of socio-cultural issues and contexts. Deschooling in particular requires more time and space to unpack and understand how the world is constructed historically as a complex system of power, privilege and social norms. The aim here is to equip students with skills to not only think critically and to “read” the world sociologically, but also to also take political action and become accountable for the decisions they make as both artists and citizens. Although storytelling and site-specific response can aid in this process, it is often not enough to inspire or sustain a critical art practice.

As Chicago’s book concludes, I was left wondering how educators and scholars like Shirley Steinberg, Maxine Greene, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and Stephanie Springgay would respond to and interpret Chicago’s use of embodied and transdisciplinary pedagogy as a kind of “post-formal” approach to education, using student-centered and everyday contexts to unstructure the learning process. In many ways Chicago’s focus on auto-ethnographic subject matter, the use of the body through performance, and the desire to connect students to their own lived experience is needed now more than ever as universities and studio art programs are pressured to link their programs to specific job-creation metrics and learning outcomes. However, without a theoretical examination of why and how these feminist pedagogical approaches resist and respond to larger systemic issues of socio-economic inequality, sexism, or racism reproduced through art schooling, they can easily be co-opted and reified into the very systems they seek to push against. This makes Chicago’s critique at times incomplete, but still useful for artists and educators alike. As a whole, Chicago’s stories and examples are candid and refreshing, revealing a deep kind of vulnerability that one rarely encounters from educators involved in the arts. This itself is perhaps reason enough to join Chicago on a journey through her entanglement with the institutions of art and education.

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