

**Jewish Identities in
American Feminist Art**
Ghosts of ethnicity

Lisa E. Bloom

Chapter 2

2 Negotiating Jewishness in the 1970s

The work of Judy Chicago and Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Greenberg's nightmare: women artists breaking the rules

In the 1970s, US feminism's exploration of "who women are" had great ambitions, but was also powered by questioning the structure of various organized religions, local employment conditions, and US domestic relations, as well as the gender dynamics in the art world itself. In general, a disproportionate percentage of the artists involved in the feminist art movement on both coasts were secular Jews. Many of these Jewish feminist artists left their Jewishness at home and acted politically, as feminists, and as generic white Americans. In this respect, they followed earlier twentieth-century assimilationist paths whereby Jews joined the English-speaking socialist and communist parties instead of the Yiddish-speaking branches of their equivalents. A disproportionate number of the white communists in the 1930s and New Left members in the 1960s were Jewish, who identified politically as white while downplaying their ethnicity.

Whether women artists in the 1970s recognized each other as fellow Jews and whether that recognition provided a sense of commonality and belonging that enabled them to collaborate closely with each other even if they outwardly left behind their Jewish identity are still open questions. One can only assume that it was an important factor, but one that was not commented on at the time in print because many of these women were trying to get away from their Jewishness and their family background, and were moving toward a commitment to US social causes, in this case the women's movement.

Since there was a fair amount of traffic between the two coasts and other parts of the country, there was no simple geographical divide in how 1970s feminism played out, though California did attract many Jewish feminist artists and critics, among others, because of the high level of activity and opportunities it offered. Art school structures in California allowed for greater experimentation and faculties were openly hiring couples at places such as the California Institute of the Arts and the University of California, resulting in a relatively large number of

women in arts faculties. This hiring policy gave women artists an opening that did not exist for them in the East or the Midwest, and in some cases it led to the creation of feminist structures and spaces for Jewish women within universities. Some of the more sought-after programs included the Feminist Art Program that Judy Chicago developed at Fresno College, which served as a model for a subsequent program at California Institute of the Arts in 1971. It is also significant that some of the most influential feminist projects such as *Womanhouse* and *The Dinner Party* which were seen by more women internationally than any other feminist artwork of the 1970s came out of California.¹

In what follows, I discuss how two very different Jewish women artists of some renown – Judy Chicago and Mierle Laderman Ukeles – negotiated their careers as artists and feminists in the 1970s. The point of comparing these two women's work is to give a critical account of different kinds of ethnically marked feminist practices coming out of that moment on different coasts. The chapter focuses on the suggestiveness of their work in exploring the ethnic, national, religious, and racial undertones in what were once seen as dominant white feminist art practices. For this reason the chapter begins by examining in some depth the significance of Chicago's name change from Gerowitz to Chicago. Then it proceeds to examine the different terms whereby the works of these two artists were accepted into the canon of US art. From its inception, the women's movement has been wary of the notion of the canon. Some have attacked or dismissed it altogether, whereas others want to add the names of women artists to the current histories of art. In this context, it is significant to follow how Judy Chicago, a leading US feminist artist engaged in large collaborative projects involving up to four hundred contributors, scripts herself into narratives of the art world. This process involved Chicago backgrounding her Jewishness – a very common gesture among secular Jews of her generation – and deploying accessible craft-based aesthetics in favor of a feminist universalizing mission, which ultimately ratifies some of the common assumptions in traditional art history. Her elevation of craft aesthetics including porcelain dinner plates as fine art went against the Greenbergian legacy with its emphasis on high art. Indeed, throughout the history of modernism, the decorative and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as "women's work," a form of "low art" from which "high art" has striven to separate itself. By embracing the decorative and domestic handicrafts in a transgressive way, Chicago's (and Schapiro's) work at that time was seen as a breakthrough and a significant contribution to the women's art movement. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work takes a different trajectory, for on the one hand she foregrounds her Jewishness, defined in a traditional way (as a religion), while on the other, she engages in a radical aesthetics like Chicago that departs from standard practices and assumptions of art history.

From Gerowitz to Chicago

Though the work of Judy Chicago has garnered much critical attention over the years internationally, most critics have examined Chicago's discourse as being only about gender, rather than about a whole set of identifications mediated through various social and national identities, all involving questions of power inequality.² This oversight is due in part to Chicago herself, who gained visibility in the 1970s as an artist by emphasizing her gender to the exclusion of all else. Yet ethnicity also played a central role in her self-construction as both a feminist and an artist, as evidenced in the following passage from her first autobiography, *Through the Flower*:

I wanted my being a woman to be visible in the work and had thus decided to change my name from Judy Gerowitz to Judy Chicago as an act of identifying myself as an independent woman . . . My name change was on the wall directly across from the entrance. It said: *Judy Gerowitz* hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name, *Judy Chicago*.³

Her name change in 1970 from the ethnically marked Gerowitz to the more American-sounding Chicago is seemingly central to her scripting of herself in public as an autonomous feminist subject and artist. Thus from the outset the categories of gender, nation, and ethnicity speak to each other, although the erasure of her ethnic name in favor of a national identity was not seen at the time as a public rejection of her ethnic group so much as turning away from patriarchy in general. Yet, it is also hard to disentangle her allegiance to feminism from her ambition to have a career in the art world since conditions at that time and place might not have been propitious for someone identified as a middle-class Jewish woman.

Though Chicago did not necessarily disavow her Jewish identity, Chicago's name change did in some respects follow a common strategy among immigrants of adopting anglicized names, a practice that was already in place for several generations of Eastern European Jews in the United States. As historian Ronald Takaki writes:

The desire to become American led to the changing of names for first generation Jewish immigrants. Russian – skis and – vitches were dropped, and names like Levinsky became Levin. But names were also anglicized: from Bochlowitz to Buckley, Jacobsen to Jackson, and Stepinsky to Stevens. Many young people adopted “American” first names in school: Dvoirah became Dora; Hyman, Howard; Moishe, Morris; Breina, Beatrice; and Rivka, Ruth.⁴

Among first-generation Eastern European Jewish immigrants, the goal was to blend in with American society. It was important for immigrants to assimilate if they wanted to become successful. Name-changing belonged to that process and was part of what scholar John Cuddihy termed “the price of admission.” Overall this process worked well: consider, for example, the success of Bob Dylan, or Jewish baseball players like Sandy Koufax, who were of the same generation as Chicago and Ukeles. This practice of name-changing has a long history, since the distinctiveness of Jewish names even in Europe carried the mark of “difference.” Given the emphasis on homogeneity within American culture, there was great pressure to conform to Anglo-Saxon standards. Changing one's name was a less painful way to assume the guise than having rhinoplastic surgery, which was also a common procedure in postwar America among Jews seeking to make their physical features conform to popular notions of Anglo-American beauty.

However, it is significant in Chicago's case that she chose a name that aligned her not with high WASPs but with working-class Americans. Her new working-class name was fitting, if unwittingly so, given her father's radicalism in the union movement. However, in the 1970s, Chicago is silent about her family's politics and her Jewishness. Her father, a Marxist and a labor organizer, was targeted by the FBI in the 1940s and became a victim of the anticommunist sentiments that preceded the McCarthy hearings. Chicago later recalled how an FBI agent forced his way into their house when she was six years old to ask her and her brother about their parents' political affiliations. Her father was subsequently driven out of the union by 1948. In her second autobiography, *Beyond the Flower*, Chicago reflects back on this extremely difficult period in her life:

Shortly before my father's death, he and I had a conversation that left an indelible impression on me. He had apparently promised my mother that he would not tell me that he was a Communist. I do not exactly know why my mother extracted this pledge from my father, though I would imagine that, as this was the 1950s and anti-Communist fervor was at a high pitch, she was probably frightened. He spoke with me a short time before he left for the hospital. At one point he asked me if I knew what a Communist was, to which I replied, “I think so.” Then, despite his vow to my mother he told me that he himself was a Communist and asked whether I believed that all Communists were “bad,” as I was being taught in school. (The “Weekly Reader” at this time featured comics in which monstrous yellow Communists were pictured bayoneting handsome American boys.)⁵

Chicago recalls how this experience made her perceive herself as an outsider in American culture, even within the classroom. She writes:

Another – and ultimately more far-reaching – effect of this interchange was

that from then on, when it was time to look at the "Weekly Reader" in school, I found myself in possession of a secret: that my father was one of those dreaded Communists.⁶

Despite the prevalence by the 1960s of anti-Jewish exclusionary actions (including quotas, housing covenants, social restrictions, and employment discrimination) and widespread caricatures of communists in everyday life (such as the images that appeared in Chicago's *Weekly Reader*) Jews such as Chicago were nevertheless able to move within mainstream US society, unlike African-Americans and Latinos who remained firmly on the social margins of society and had no means to "pass" within it. Because of the simultaneity of Jewish insider and outsider status, Chicago only later in her life felt able to publicly discuss her Jewishness and her father's radicalism, which was so much a part of her early sense of identity.

Chicago's autobiographical writing and self-portrait

Indeed, Chicago herself seems more influenced by feminist revisionist work of the 1980s and 1990s, acknowledging the oversimplification in her having given priority to gender over other forms of difference in the 1970s. She recently wrote: "We cast the dialogue incorrectly in the seventies. We cast it around gender, and we were also simplistic about the nature of identity. Identity is multiple."⁷ Her awareness of opposition between gender identification and other modes of identification does not extend, however, to an examination of the conflicts inherent in a project that attempts to join feminist ideals of sisterhood with the traditional values of individualism and its emphasis on the artist as romantic genius.⁸ Though she might not repudiate the importance she places on individualism, she does bring quite different values to her 1996 account of her individuality as a white ethnic woman artist and the complex motives underlying her decision to change her name to something that sounded all-American:

I was a twenty-three-year-old widow with a different name — Gerowitz — taken not out of wifely duty, no way . . . When Jerry and I were wed, young proto-feminist that I was, I had kept my original surname, altering it only after noticing — while doing the "gallery stroll" every Saturday afternoon, which is what all the "cool" art people did — that there seemed to be too many other artists named Cohen. I soon exchanged one seemingly patriarchal name for another, my then young husband's seemingly less common. But after Jerry died, people kept mistaking me for the daughter of his parents; not that I didn't like them. It was just that two years of marriage hardly seemed sufficient reason to carry someone else's name for the rest of my life . . .

The upshot of this was that I felt as though I did not have a name that suited me. Still I had become somewhat known under the marital appellation,

particularly after I started showing at the Rolf Nelson Gallery, one of the best spots in town. Rolf . . . started calling me Judy Chicago due in part to the strong Windy City accent I had retained, but also because he thought it suited the tough and aggressive stance I had felt obliged to take in order to make my way into the macho art scene that was LA in the 1960s. Rolf tried to convince me to take this name professionally, but I went only so far as to use it in the phone directory. This was, in fact, an "in" thing to do at the time, as there were several artists with "underground" names.⁹

Chicago's name change seems to have been important initially as a means of associating herself clearly with the dominant masculinist artistic culture of the 1960s in which "underground names" listed in the phone book were in keeping with the style of the local Los Angeles art community. Though Chicago is describing a gradual process, her comments above are not in keeping with her claims earlier in her career as a US feminist artist that she was "divesting herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance." These words would suggest that a strong and independent woman such as herself could not permit any male to mediate or authorize her declaration of a new feminist identity.

In retrospect, however, such a statement does not account for the role of men such as Rolf Nelson in her career, who, she suggests, not only knew how exclusionary and masculinist the LA art scene was at that time but also went so far as to support promising women artists like Chicago. His advice also protected her against the charge of being different by offering the built-in privilege of an anglicized last name that sounded more American, and more working-class. Other than through her name change, the idealized terms of Chicago's 1970s feminism did not allow her to acknowledge her ethnicity, her collaboration with men, or the ways in which her concepts of gender and ethnicity related to ideologies of race, nation, and class. As she writes in 1996,

I sometimes joke that in the early days of the Women's Movement, we had not yet discovered (or invented, as the case may be) our own forms. Therefore we borrowed some, notably from the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps inspired by the radical stance of the Black Panthers, I decided to publicly "divest" myself of the name Gerowitz in favor of Judy Chicago.¹⁰

In such passages Chicago reveals the wide-ranging influences on her and suggests with hindsight that she might have called into question the universalism both of her feminism and of art world practices at that time. In her reference to the Black Panthers, she points out that feminists of the period in the United States aligned themselves with blackness, not so much to counter whiteness as to pursue the strategies and tactics of the civil rights movement which was making progress in effecting real social change.

For a 1970 exhibition announcement in *Artforum*, Chicago had herself photographed in full boxing gear standing in front of a supporting female boxing “trainer” (Figure 2.1). According to Chicago, the publicity photograph was intended as a parody of certain gallery practices in LA at that time:

During this period my male art buddies were all prone to very macho announcements and posters in relation to their own shows, something Jack [Glenn, the owner of a rather prominent gallery] suggested spoofing with a picture of me in a boxing ring, the very one in which Muhammad Ali trained.

I would also see this image posted in the studios of many women artists whom I visited during the 1970s . . . I guess that the boxing ring ad marked the moment when women all over the country came out fighting in an effort to somehow effect a change in the intense discrimination of the art world.¹¹

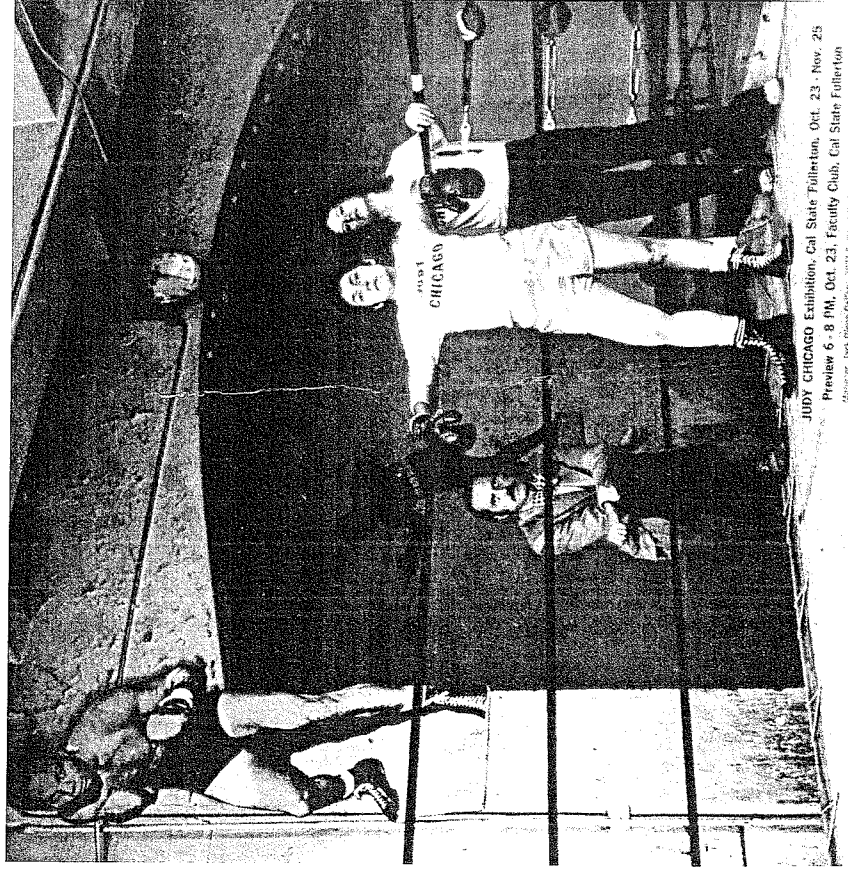


Figure 2.1 Judy Chicago, exhibition advertisement, *Artforum*, December 1970. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

In the poster Chicago aligns herself with popular-culture figures in the boxing world, notably Muhammad Ali. The gesture recalls the ambivalent identification that earlier bohemian subcultures in the United States had with “blackness.” It is not surprising that Chicago’s feminism, as exemplified in this poster, was inflected by her artistic milieu, which regarded cultural signs of blackness as the mark of “cool.” Yet, it is striking how this poster resonated in primarily gendered terms for both male and female audiences of the day.

In Chicago’s reading of this self-portrait, the ambivalent mixture of her distancing from and identifying with blackness is meant to lure the US modernist art establishment into an affiliation with feminism, which this poster seems to hint at in the confrontational stance between the two women and the viewer. This affiliation between blackness and feminism evokes a tradition of avant-garde “racial romanticism” that can be traced to other Jewish-American artists and writers. For example, there was Norman Mailer’s 1957 figure of the “White Negro,” who stalks the jazz clubs in search of sex and speed, who blurs the boundaries between Jewish and black identities.¹² To understand Chicago’s evocation of feminism in this poster and its relationship to Mailer’s figure requires taking into account not only the racial dimension, her whiteness, but also the ethnic one, her Jewishness. Her partial identification with Muhammad Ali implies an affinity, whether past or potential, between African-Americans and Jews, two groups outside the dominant culture of Europe and the WASP-dominated USA.

The Dinner Party and Chicago’s feminism

Chicago was also aware of certain traditional and New Age religious influences on her work. Perhaps this realization is best exemplified in her well-known feminist image-making project *The Dinner Party* (1979), a monumental labor that came to involve four hundred people producing a symbolic representation of the history of significant women in Western civilization. The project that has become an icon of feminist art in the US revises the history of Western culture by naming and symbolizing in visual form 1,038 women from various historical periods. Nine hundred and ninety-nine famous women are named on porcelain floor tiles, and the remaining thirty-nine are honored by being given place settings at a triangular dinner table (Figure 2.2). The arrangement references Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper. Perhaps more unexpectedly, it also alludes to the changing of the millennium and the transformative significance of that moment in certain New Age beliefs:

That moment in the future when the double standard – which defines men’s rituals as not only significant but sacred while rendering women’s invisible – will end, and all human effort will be honored for its part in the richness of the human experience.¹³

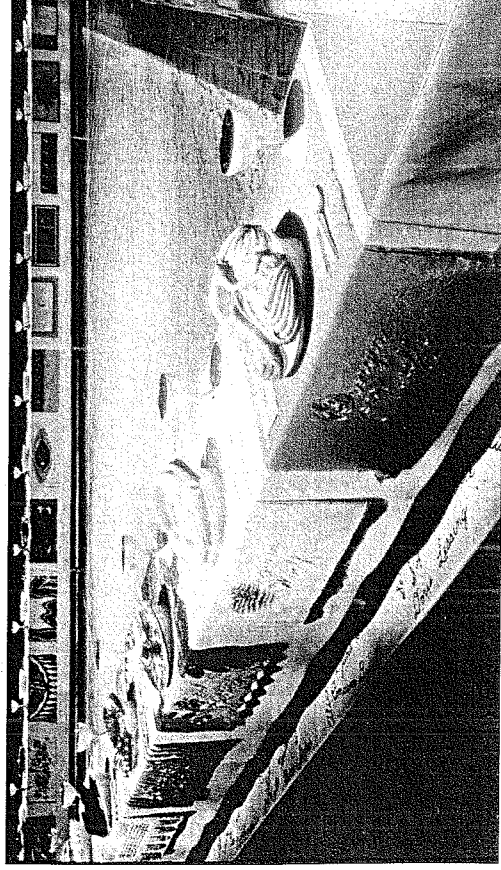


Figure 2.2 Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, with the Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe place settings in the foreground, mixed media. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

The dinner party plates themselves all feature a butterfly or flower-like sculpture, representing a woman's vagina. These vulvar forms are meant to be emblematic of feminist heroines throughout history. Each place setting features a placemat with the woman's name and artworks relating to the woman's life, along with a napkin, utensils, a goblet, and a plate. The thirty-nine honorees at the dinner table itself are also symbolically represented through an elaborate needlework runner, in large part worked in techniques drawn from the period in which each woman lived (Figure 2.3). The room-sized sculpture was celebrated as the icon of 1970s feminist art when first exhibited. It was seen as quite groundbreaking at the time, in part because of its radical aesthetics that broke down this hierarchy between high and low, the fine arts and the crafts. Also, it validated the traditional activities of women, and connected the four hundred women working on the project with women who were important historically. The enormous artwork was a grand gesture to acknowledge these significant women and to honor them. However, the form this acknowledgment took, in putting emphasis on the women's sexuality, was anything but ordinary or conventional at that time.

The piece was shown again in 1996 as part of an exhibition in Los Angeles organized by feminist art historian Amelia Jones, for the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles and more recently at the Brooklyn Museum in New York where it is now permanently housed. The UCLA Hammer exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were particularly significant because it was part of a wider project to rethink the reception of *The Dinner Party* in both feminist art



Figure 2.3 Judy Chicago, "Sojourner Truth Plate," *The Dinner Party*, 1979, porcelain. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

practice and theory over the past twenty years. Though the writers of the museum catalogue *Sexual Politics* are mindful of the racial and ethnic tensions in Chicago's work, the overall emphasis of the catalogue is to reorient historical accounts of contemporary feminist art practice in Los Angeles, in terms of the representation of the female body and pleasure. Consequently, the *Dinner Party* exhibit was accompanied by important feminist work from the 1960s to the 1990s all dealing with issues of sexuality that contrasted with those in Chicago's work.

The 1996 exhibition's catalogue contested the assumption in Chicago's *Dinner Party* that the history of feminism is a phenomenon and product of white Western women alone. Not only does Jones, the exhibition's curator, disagree with Chicago's assumption that women should be characterized as a singular group on the basis of their shared sexual oppression, but she also finds Chicago's lack of consistency in her use of the vulvar forms suggestive of an uneasiness with representing certain kinds of racial and ethnic subjectivity.¹⁴ Jones quotes Alice Walker to describe how Chicago's design for the Sojourner Truth Plate exemplifies this discomfort about black women specifically:

All of the other plates are creatively imagined vaginas . . . The Sojourner Truth plate is the only one in the collection that shows – instead of a vagina – a face. In fact, *three faces* . . . It occurred to me that perhaps white women

feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go.¹⁵

Rather than taking issue either with the vaginal imagery or with Chicago's disregard for difference in using the vagina as a universal symbol of femaleness, Walker and Jones criticize *The Dinner Party* for treating black women as essentially different from white women, in what was otherwise meant to be a celebration of all female sexuality.¹⁶ This is an important critique, pointing out that by using two symbols rather than one, Chicago sets up a center-periphery dichotomy, contrasting the "norm" and the "other," putting white women at the center and black women on the margins.¹⁷ Thus, Chicago's vaginal iconography celebrates the sexuality, not of *all* women, but only of white ones, disavowing internal ethnic and class differences and contrasting the external "otherness" of black sexuality. Her chosen symbol unifies Euro-American female identity as feminist while expressing its difference from black "others." Walker and Jones imply that a revision of the understanding of black women's sexuality is beyond the recuperative powers of Chicago's art.

Ironically, the ethnic subtext of both *The Dinner Party* and the boxing picture, rather than transcending the opposition of center and periphery, itself becomes peripheral. Chicago has moved her feminist voice to the center but relegated her Jewishness to the periphery. In this way Chicago can speak for all women through the ethnically and racially unmarked discourse of both feminism and Christianity. To do this she adapts the metaphor of the Last Supper for her *Dinner Party* and through her vaginal imagery also naturalizes the Christianity of the women presented in the project. Her appropriation of Christianity into her own feminist discourse may not be meant to exalt Christian women at the expense of "other" women such as herself, since her project also references New Age religions. Given the dominance of Christianity in the United States, however, it is not surprising that Nancy Ring, one of the Jewish contributors to *Sexual Politics*, forcefully expresses her skepticism about Chicago's choice of Last Supper iconography as a means to celebrate feminism. Ring even goes so far as to imply that Chicago used the Christ figure in the project to enhance her status as a white feminist:

Where exactly was she [Chicago] coming from when she chose to power her art making activities by mixing the primary metaphors of the Last Supper and the dinner party? . . . The consistency with which Chicago chose Anglo-American and European women to sit at her table and her selection of the figure of a soon-to-be transubstantiated Christ to signify feminist transformation can reveal as much about the grounds from which her project sprang as they do about the lofty place to which she aspires.¹⁸

If *The Dinner Party* is meant to evoke female solidarity, that evocation comes at a

price, for in staging harmony, it also represses awareness of Jewish and other ethnicities. Chicago's "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's term, dominated by famous Anglo-American and European women who are mostly Christian, avoids even a "managed" harmony among ethnic groups. Jewishness disappears historically too, since even an unabashedly Jewish woman such as Gertrude Stein becomes associated exclusively with her sexuality and nationality, and her Jewishness is not mentioned.

Questions of collaboration and attribution

Like other currents of art criticism, for those working within the Greenbergian legacy very little has been said about collaborative projects between artists. So a tension emerged between the collaborative nature of Judy Chicago's projects, especially *The Dinner Party*, on the one hand, and Chicago's self-presentation as a singular artist and the way critics folded her artistic practice under a single proper name, on the other.

For example, during a national tour of *The Dinner Party* ten years after its making, Chicago encountered a lot of criticism for her individual stardom in the press, as well as about the single authorship of her work from within the women's art community. Chicago's position was complicated by the unpaid labor of the hundreds of women who participated in the actual making of *The Dinner Party*. She also had to deal with criticism about her leadership status in a movement of women who generally had no experience in public life and little professional training. The expectations put on feminist leaders, such as Chicago, was high amongst women who were involved in the women's art movement. One of the sources of conflict was how Chicago negotiated her identity as an artist since her individual stardom, conferred by the media, conflicted with the sense of collective unity that formed the basis of 1970s feminist art. For example, Michèle Barrett, a British feminist, took issue with the gap between Chicago's feminism and her apparent desire to fit into an older, more conservative discourse of art history, and observed in the 1980s that Chicago's work process in her *Dinner Party* installation was of a special kind, which entailed

principles of collective work . . . not so much . . . ones I might recognize as a feminist but an attempt to re-create the "School" or studio of an "Artistic Genius" like Michelangelo. Although hundreds of people gave much time and work to the project it is Judy Chicago personally who has, apparently not unwillingly, made an international reputation from it.¹⁹

Barrett's remark, published in 1982, identifies tensions between an elitist and hierarchical discourse of art history and canon formation which distinguishes the creative artist from ordinary individuals, and a feminist discourse that favors

nonhierarchical collaboration. The egalitarian ideals promoted by US feminism, in particular its emphasis on cooperative authorship, became vulnerable to the infiltration of traditional concepts such as individual genius as a key defining order of academic art history and unacknowledged (gentile) whiteness.²⁰

The Dinner Party was seen in the late 1970s not in the ethnic and racial terms outlined above, but as part of the liberal critique of stereotypes in the 1960s and 1970s and as an instance of the positive feminist sexual imagery that was popular in the period, along with such slogans as “Sisterhood Is Powerful” and “Black Is Beautiful.” At that time, it was a common practice to regard images of women as merely reflections, good or bad, and to compare “bad” or “false” images of women (such as fashion advertisements) to “good” or “true” images of women. The best example of such an approach is the collaborative project *Womanhouse* (1972), organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro with their twenty-one female students, at the California Institute of the Arts. Significantly, in this project all the students are named as artists of specific room installations in *Womanhouse* (Figure 2.4). The group of teachers and students took over and renovated an empty house in downtown Los Angeles and remade each of its rooms as a “true” dramatic representation of women’s experiences beginning in childhood: home, housework, menstruation, marriage, and so on (Figure 2.5). This was a significant

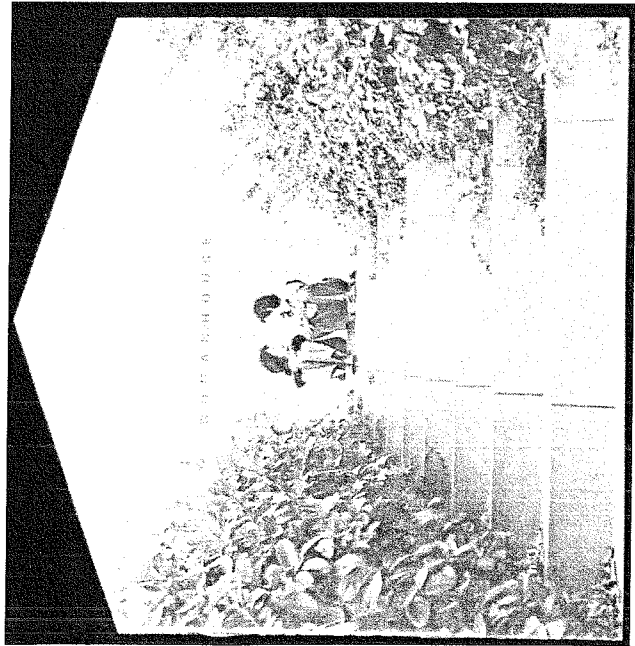


Figure 2.4 Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at *Womanhouse*. *Womanhouse* catalogue designed by Sheila Lebrant de Brettville, 1971, mixed media installation. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

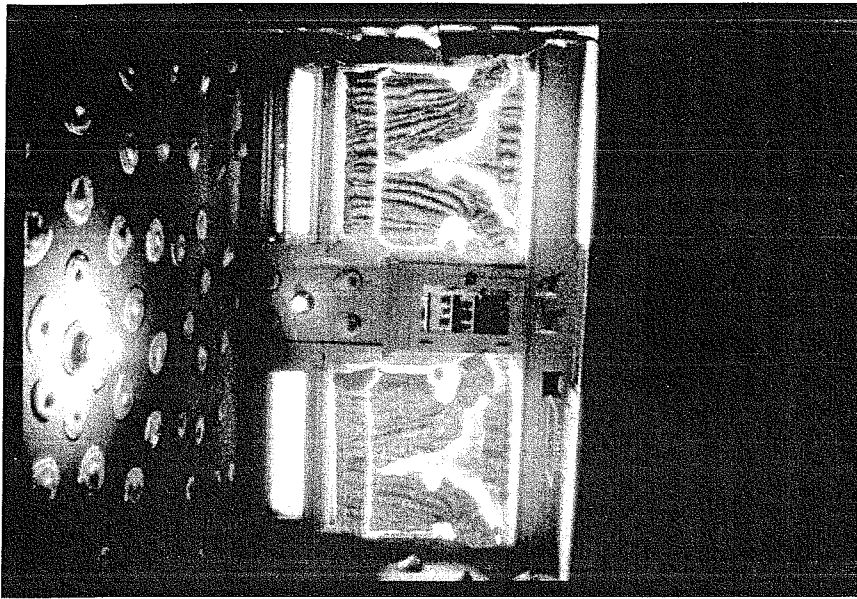


Figure 2.5 Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts, and Robin Weltsch, *Nurturant Kirchen* (detail), mixed media site installation at *Womanhouse*, 1972. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

project that was part of a larger attempt for women to produce a viable alternative structure to the “art world.” It was also meant to create a critical frame of reference for an understanding of woman’s struggle within the home. Chicago wrote:

Womanhouse became both an environment that housed the work of women artists working out of their experiences and the “house” of female reality in which one entered to experience the real facts of women’s lives, feelings, and concerns.²¹

In certain ways the project was about housework for women as a political issue, and the limits of having housework be the major source of women’s identity at

that time. Each artist chose one of the seventeen rooms in the house for “her” room wherein she created her own installation environment. The content of *Womanhouse*, its rooms and performances, presented a direct representation of women in their homes. Like many of the women’s art projects during this period, the work was limited by the fact that it represented a middle-class Euro-American perspective, although it suggested the underlying presence of an unacknowledged nonwhite ethnic or racial class (Figure 2.6). Therefore, the experiences of the black or Chicana maid or the white working-class cleaning woman were not represented. Since the only experiences of domesticity and marriage represented were those of the students and their teachers, the project did not address a number of issues related to those issues that it raised, such as the differences among women themselves, specifically those arising from an inequality in power relations between the students and teachers within the project itself. Nor did it

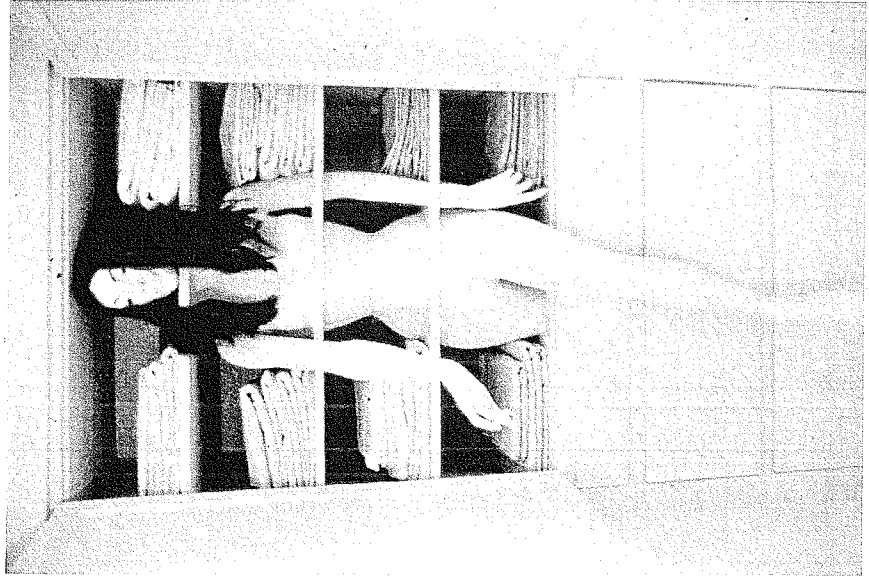


Figure 2.6 Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet*, mixed media site installation at *Womanhouse*, 1972. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

engage the question of why middle-class women many of whom actually spent their days scrubbing, cleaning, and scraping went to incongruous lengths to disguise their work and erase its evidence from their hands. It also does not consider the heterogeneity of identities among women from different white ethnic groups, and how they might represent themselves differently from the way they are represented in the popular media, as in the case of US Jewish women, who are frequently portrayed in popular culture as unwilling to participate in any form of domestic labor, refusing to clean or cook.²²

Mierle Laderman Ukeles: maintenance art

Maintenance is a drag: it takes all the fucking time. The Mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on the maintenance jobs⇒minimum wages, housewives⇒no pay.²³

(Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1969)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles adopts a strategy quite different from Chicago’s, encompassing a more complex social content but also, in certain works, reflecting a traditional definition of Jewishness. In a manner similar to how Chicago represented herself in the boxing poster, Ukeles constructs in her Maintenance Art manifesto of 1969 a working-class persona that stands outside of the standard assumptions and practices of the art world. Her work complicates Chicago’s evocation of a white normative middle-class space and the set of identities it marks out, and does not separate “culture” from other dimensions of daily life. Indeed, her work questions the boundaries between the two by focusing on the issue of “maintenance,” or the labor of cleaning, and how that kind of work is often unpaid, unrecognized, and undervalued. Significantly, Ukeles does not focus just on the invisible labor of white middle-class housewives, but extends her analysis to include maids, janitors, sanitation workers, and cleaning women.

Ukeles highlighted these concerns in a series of four performance works in July 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. For *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object* (Figure 2.7) Ukeles selected an artifact – a female mummy housed in a glass case – from the museum’s permanent collection in order to call attention to the invisible labor of the janitor whose job it was to keep the case clean. Ukeles cleaned the case herself and made a “dust painting” from the dirt. By naming the cleaning “art” rather than “maintenance,” she called attention to the value of this kind of labor to museum professionals. Another performance involved her washing the floors of the museum and the outdoor steps on her hands and knees, in full view of museum visitors, for a span of eight hours. This dual performance, titled *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, (Figure 2.8), also elevated the hard menial tasks and domestic drudgery often performed by women to the public realm of the museum, suggesting that the maintenance of museums is much



Figure 2.7 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Cleaning Female Mummy Housed in Glass Case*, part of *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973–74, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Photograph of performance. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

like the maintenance of homes. In both cases, the labor (often feminized) is mostly unacknowledged and underappreciated yet critical for sustaining the daily existence of our lives. In the context of the museum, the work of janitors and cleaning women is done mostly by working-class laborers. The performance is meant to call attention to this labor force that ensures the smooth functioning of countless institutions in our communities but remains mostly hidden from view.

In perhaps her most disruptive performance piece at the Wadsworth, titled *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security* (Figure 2.9), Ukeles scaled off the entire museum, gallery by gallery, and took over the responsibilities of the museum guard whose position it was to maintain the security of the museum. This performance of locking and unlocking doors extended even to the curatorial offices during

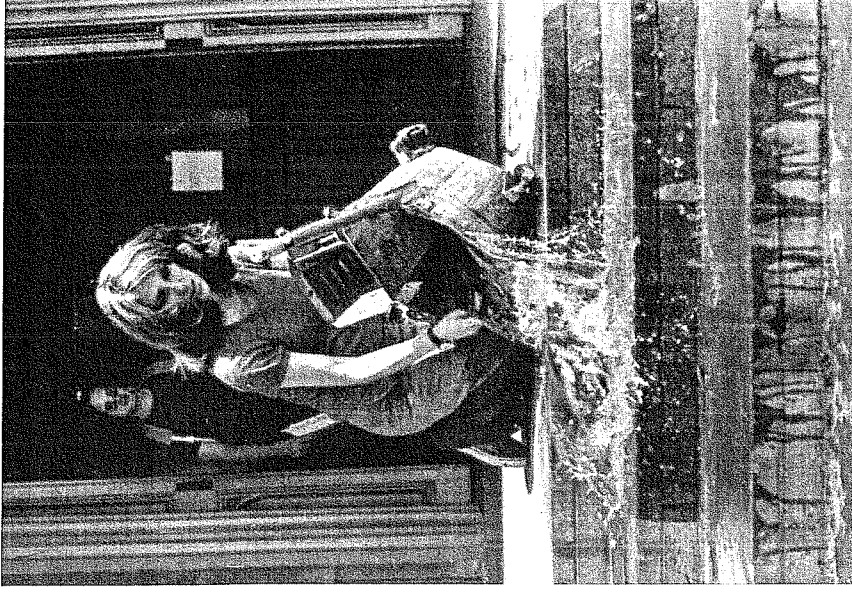


Figure 2.8 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Photograph of performance. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

working hours, so that many people were temporarily locked in or locked out and were therefore unable to do their work. By exposing the hidden labor of the museum's security guard, Ukeles aimed to upset the orderliness of the museum's daily routine. By privileging maintenance over other forms of work within the museum, such as curating, her piece bestowed value on these otherwise unobtrusive yet ubiquitous maintenance operations and explored the ramifications of making the labor of museum security visible.

It is significant that Ukeles's "maintenance art," whether it involved becoming a cleaning person in a museum or taking on the persona of a museum guard, has some parallels in the work of other artists from the period, for example Martha Rosler's *Tijuana Maid* (1976) (Figure 4.3) which in its original form appeared as a bilingual novel in Spanish and English that she sent through the mail to other

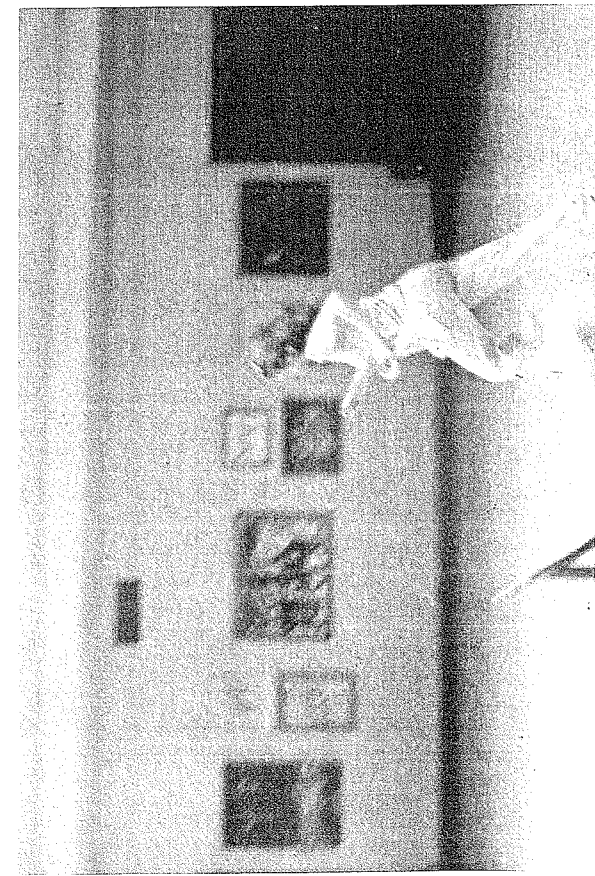


Figure 2.9 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security*, 1973, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Photograph of performance. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

artists. This work details the daily hardships of a Tijuana maid working in San Diego, written from her point of view, and explores both the dependence of white middle-class women in southern California on the labor of Mexican domestics and the structural oppression of these laborers' lives. Both Ukeles and Rosler took a different trajectory than Chicago, exploring issues dealing with work, specifically blue-collar labor, pink-collar labor, and, in the work of Rosler, nonwhite labor. These works also provide a striking contrast to Chicago's *Dinner Party*, in which the work of maintenance – cooking, eating, and cleaning up – is absent altogether. Both Ukeles and Rosler are interested in work that is not recognized as such in the art world. Rather than focusing on a notion of the artist as “genius” in keeping with the ideal model of subjectivity offered by a discourse of conservative art history, they are instead concerned with the hidden labor that makes such a discourse of genius even possible.

Ukeles has also been interested in making visible the labor of childcare and its relation to the status of working women artists. According to Ukeles, though many women artists of her generation had children, it was understood, in her words, as “dangerous to be seen with them” in the New York art world in the 1970s.²⁴ Most women artists at that time were often dependent on babysitters and housekeepers to do the maintenance work in their own household so that they could do their art in public while their children were confined solely to the spaces

of domesticity. Given the art world taboos of the period, Ukeles tried to lend the value of art to the predicament and pressures these working women artists faced. However, as a Jewish orthodox woman, Ukeles was also battling this issue within the Jewish community at a time when there was reluctance to support feminist calls for day-care centers to support working mothers. Jewish leaders at this time argued that the woman's role was one of provider and caregiver to the family, thereby enabling her husband and sons to fulfill their religious obligations. Thus many Jewish men were resistant to accommodating women with careers and to sharing domestic and childcare responsibilities. Though this was not the case in Ukeles's own household, it is within this context that one can fully appreciate her little-known performance piece *It's Okay To Have a Babysitter* presented in January 1974 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which consisted of her repeating the following statement over and over: “It's okay to have a babysitter, for the good of my family, for the good of my baby, for the good of myself.” She printed this statement out hundreds of times on a sheet of paper and read it out loud like a mantra. Ukeles then stamped the text with her Maintenance Art stamp and hung the text up as an artwork.

Considerable critical attention has been given to Ukeles's Maintenance Art. Yet much of what makes it unusual work for the period is its ethnic subtext, which has been largely ignored, as well as how it deals explicitly with a more tradition-bound form of Jewishness, defined by orthodox religion and its gendered practices. Ukeles was one of the few observant orthodox Jewish women in the feminist art movement at that time, and it is important that the work she has done specifically on Jewishness and gender, dating from the earliest moments of her career, be seen in the context of her more well-known Maintenance Art work. Unlike other Jewish feminist artists of her generation, such as Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, and Nancy Spero, among others, who broke completely with the Jewish faith – and in some cases, this meant living without assistance from family or community – Ukeles took the opposite posture: she did not break away from the Jewish community, but instead struggled to become a member of it by helping to change it from within. This resulted in her experiencing the conflict that arises when living as a member of two divergent groups that are often at odds with each other. As the general feminist movement made great strides and earned wide acceptance within the United States, it also won greater legitimacy and respect within US Judaism. By the 1970s, Jewish women began to reexamine and challenge religious laws and communal practices that relegated them to second-class status. This kind of feminist reform within Judaism also informed certain ideas in Ukeles's work dealing with the putatively “private” aspects of traditional Jewish women's lives and experience.

For Ukeles, questioning how you get “clean” and who's responsible for everyone else's cleanliness in the family is a central subject in the heart of Jewish ritual and Jewish law, which make a strict separation between profane and holy

activities. Within this equation, maintenance work usually relegated to women is seen as the embodiment of profane activity. Ukeles's art is aimed at disrupting this opposition in order to demonstrate that the work of maintenance is an important realm of human activity that serves to bind the profane and the sacred together. In doing so, her radical aesthetic also introduces a radical element within orthodox religious practices.

Another aspect of Jewish law that Ukeles questions is the divide separating Jewish males and their god (the holy) from females (the profane). Hebrew scripture views male sex and male sexuality as sacrosanct, while female sex and female sexuality are viewed as abominable, unclean, and in need of male control. One of the ways whereby Jewish female sexuality is made clean is through the ritual of the *mikva*, a pool of water designed for the rite of purification, used primarily by married women after menstruating and following childbirth. Ukeles is interested in reclaiming the *mikva* from its negative and limiting role as simply a place where Jewish women go so their husbands can have intercourse with them and then bear them children. She points out the discrepancy between the traditional Jewish role of the *mikva* and its actual functioning as a special place for women. Writing on her 1977 performance *Mikva Dreams* at Franklin Furnace in New York, Ukeles asserted: "Like parasitical barnacles clinging to a truly nurturant source, misunderstandings have adhered to the concept and power of the *Mikva*. No. *Mikva* is not about women as dirty."²⁵ *Mikva Dreams* was meant as a specific portrait of the ordinary monthly routine of a religious Jewish woman as seen through the number of times (210) she would need to go to the *mikva* during her lifetime. Ukeles explains how this practice of immersion has been used by the Jews for thousands of years and how making this very private issue public as an art piece was important to her:

You don't tell your family, you don't tell your children, you don't say where you are going. It's a secret journey. Which really, if you think about it, in this confessional age, when people are telling everybody everything, is a very remarkable thing. And I wanted to talk about it. And I actually felt that I was kind of breaking a taboo both ways by doing this at the Franklin Furnace. Since you are not supposed to talk about it in public, and yet here's the artwork, which gives me the permission to talk about anything. So I felt very much at home.²⁶

As an observant Jew, Ukeles straddles two communities and neither seems to openly embrace her work. Her work was met by silence from the observant Jewish community who attended her performance; she received greater support from her colleagues in the arts, though they were interested in her work more in relation to pluralizing religious practices and seeking alternatives to patriarchal religions such as Judaism.

Recent evolutions

In Chapter 1, I pointed out the conflicting manner in which Abstract Expressionism as an art form was claimed as an American or New York art form on the one hand, and as a universalist cultural style that transcended the geographically specific on the other. However, in this chapter, I wanted to examine the cultural specificity of US feminist art and its relation to Jewishness, as well as to scrutinize and evaluate the ways that feminism as articulated by Chicago ironically turned into a similar discourse of universalizing feminist art. That is why I dwelled on Chicago's *Dinner Party*, her relationship to a discourse of conservative art history, and the significance of her name change. The impulse toward universalism is not uncommon for Jewish intellectuals in general. Indeed, as David Biale has put it, "universalism, it sometimes seems, is a peculiar symptom of Jewish particularism."²⁷

Chicago has more recently produced work that explicitly reflects that she is both white and Jewish in her exhibition and book *Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light* (1993) which is a collaborative project with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman. It is worth noting that referencing the Holocaust is one of the acceptable mainstream ways to foreground and understand Jewishness in the US after 1945. Other acceptable contexts were Yiddishkeit culture, Zionism, and Judaism. The *Holocaust Project* displays some consistency with her earlier works since Chicago is still producing iconic painted images that deal on a literal level with unquestionable oppression. In addition, it uses a structure of identification common in Holocaust museums in the United States, where there is a traditional identification between viewers and concentration camp victims. The murals place emphasis on the victims of Nazi crimes (and especial emphasis on Jewish women) as a way to commemorate them, extol them, and bring them back from the dead. However, it is significant that Chicago's work does deal critically with the indifference of Russia, Britain, and the United States toward the Holocaust as can be seen in her *Wall of Indifference* (Figure 2.10). Even more unexpected is the way she points out the disconnect between American Jews such as her own family and the events taking place in Europe:

Still, I wonder: How could my family have celebrated Christmas while European Jews were being herded onto trains and carried unknowingly to total dehumanization and death?²⁸

It is in these critical moments that the *Holocaust Project* departs from the strategy of commemoration used for *The Dinner Party*, which was intended to resurrect and celebrate important women who had been relegated to the dustbin of history. What is also unique in her memorial project is her important emphasis on Jewish women in this project, a subject not often focused on in more mainstream Holocaust memorials.²⁹

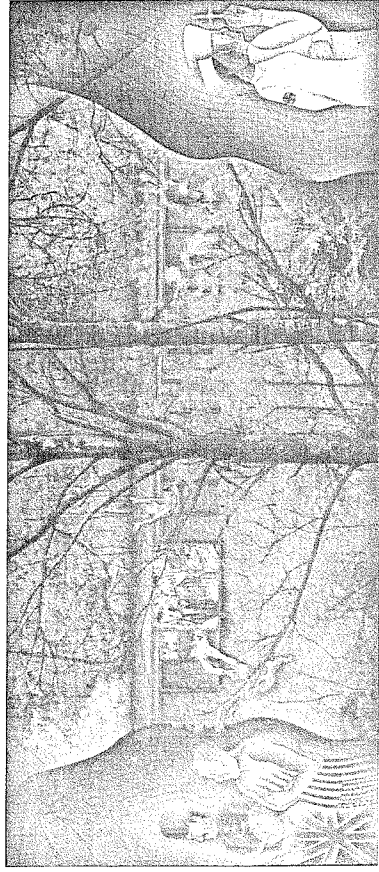


Figure 2.10 Judy Chicago with Donald Woodman, *Wall of Indifference* from *The Holocaust Project*, 1993, sprayed acrylic, oil paint, Marshall photo oil, and photography on photolinen, 43¼ × 96¼ in. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

Ukeles's later work shows a continuing development of her ideas of maintenance art. By the late 1970s, she began to extend the references in her work beyond a purely feminist and Jewish context in order to reveal the conditions of work handed to maintenance workers in the New York City sanitation system, where she has her studio. In *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976), she worked for two months as part of the sanitation bureaucracy, cleaning floors and elevators in a lower Manhattan office building along with three hundred janitors and cleaning women. This was followed in 1980 by a large-scale performance titled *Touch Sanitation* that involved approximately 8,500 workers in the New York City Sanitation Department. Her project, which took eleven months to complete, was "to face and shake hands" with each one of the 8,500 sanitation workers while saying the words: "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." More recently, her work has broadened its focus on hygiene and maintenance work to the rethinking of environmental issues.³⁰ This later emphasis on actions outside of gallery or museum spaces, which puts her even farther on the margins of an art support system, runs concurrently with museum- or gallery-based work dealing specifically with questions of Jewishness.

A case in point is a performance work that Ukeles did at the Jewish Museum in 1986 called *Immerse Again* which revisited how the mikva is used ritually in the Jewish religion to change the status of a non-Jew into that of a Jew. In this context, the mikva, a ritual pool of fresh "living" water, is used for spiritual purification and cleansing purposes. Mikva now seems to have a broader meaning of cleansing than that discussed earlier, which was specific to women. At the time Ukeles did this mikva piece she was particularly interested in the situation of Ethiopian Jews after 1980, when the state of Israel "discovered" them. Before that time, Israel had refused to take in Ethiopian Jews, but starting in 1980 they were

received with great enthusiasm as Israel found itself in need of new immigrants because so many Jews were emigrating to the United States. Yet, within a very short time, the newcomers found themselves facing unfair treatment from the Israelis. For example, many rabbis started questioning whether the Ethiopian Jews were Jewish enough because they didn't observe a lot of the practices that other Ashkenazim and Sephardic Jews did such as Hanukkah. As a result, the Jewish rabbis insisted that the Ethiopian Jews could not be accepted as Jewish until they converted by going to the mikva. The elders of the Ethiopian group were so angry with this turn against them that they threatened to commit suicide first, or to walk back to Ethiopia. Ukeles's solution in her performance, when she recounted the situation, was to propose a universal immersion project in which all Jews would be required to immerse themselves in pure water so that everyone would have the same status. Therefore, the mikva would function in a democratic way to prevent any one Jew from claiming that he or she is more Jewish than anyone else.

In the postwar environment in the United States, a large number of Eastern European Jews entered positions of power in a burgeoning US art world for the first time. The most successful art critics conducted their whitening within the world of high culture, in Greenberg's case through his well-known universalizing formalist aesthetic position, which was inescapably imbricated in a complex politics of identity and a discomfort with the national. By contrast, Chicago and Ukeles, among others, three decades later were each helping to define US feminist art and whiteness as they became part of it. Both were Greenberg's worst nightmare since each in a different way broke all his rules. In Chicago's case, it was the way her paintings combined politics and art and drew from a crafts aesthetics; in the case of Ukeles, it was through her radical aesthetics and actions and the way they foregrounded social content. In addition, these Jewish feminist artists considered Greenberg's alienated cosmopolitanist view of American culture as insufficient. Instead, they were more willing to embrace a kind of Americanness that was connected with the freedoms associated with US progressive social movements, most importantly the women's movement. They rebelled against the homogeneity and the patriarchal limitations of Jewish familial life and emphasized their social self-invention and political identity. Some of the power of the works discussed here is contingent on their ethnic subtext, but Chicago and Ukeles also opened up Jewishness to other possibilities, including the radical utopian hope of making their lives different from their mothers' through the creation of new forms of art and activism.