

WOMANHOUSE

Intimacy, Identity and Domesticity

Susana Solís-Zara¹
University of Sevilla

1. Introduction

This text examines the issue of art and intimacy, and its strong connection with the concept of identity: and especially representations of female identity in the collaborative feminist art installation, performance space, exhibition and pedagogical project *Womanhouse* (January 30 – February 28, 1972). It is considered to be the first feminist art exhibition, coinciding with the foundation of feminist art criticism at the beginning of the seventies in the United States

The Project Womanhouse was a collaborative project that deals with women's gender experiences within the context of a real house

1. Susana Solís-Zara
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9932-9452>

setting in an urban neighbourhood in Los Angeles (<http://www.womanhouse.net/>). It presented and exhibited feminist artistic proposals concerning subjective identity, gender and intimacy like the ones found in domestic spaces. It includes perspectives such as the home as a space for both intimacy and identity, the body-house-home relationship, aspects of maternity and the dichotomy between the private and the public, all of which continue to be narratives in contemporary women's art.

The main object of this essay is therefore to analyse the *Womanhouse* project, as well as to examine some of its most prominent artworks and how intimacy was used as a means of expression, bringing every-day and home-related objects into the field of artistic representation. It is precisely women who developed the notion of intimacy, as their role in history has been one of marginality and invisibility, being mainly confined to the privacy of their homes.



Fig. 1. Invitation card to "Womanhouse", (January 30 – February 27, 1972), feminist art exhibition organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, co-founders of the California Institute of Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Program.

2. Results (Womanhouse Project, Los Angeles, 1972)

Although ignored for years by Art History hegemonic narrative, it all began with the emergence of the first Feminist Art Programme in 1971, first at the Fresno State College, California, and a year later at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) in Valencia, Los Angeles, where it was organised and promoted by the artists Judy Chicago (known by her piece, *Dinner Party*) and Miriam Schapiro,² both international figures in the field of Art and pioneers of feminist North American Art.

These programmes, designed to give female artists a place and an opportunity to express their opinions about gender issues that were already present in society, resulted in the first large-scale project organised by the two leaders and co-founders of the Feminist Art Programmes. In 1972 they organised a paradigmatic exhibition by feminist artists in an abandoned and soon-to-be demolished house in a residential street in Hollywood, which they would transform into a feminist project.

Twenty-one students and teachers from CalArts, as well as four other female artists from the local community, united and worked cooperatively to create the exhibition. They produced 29 works of art, presenting gender-related problems in society and a criticism of the socially constructed role of women in North American society.

As Miriam Schapiro recalled in 1987, “[o]ur purpose was to remake the old house into a place of dreams and fantasies. Each room would be transformed into a nonfunctioning art environment.” (“Recalling Womanhouse”, 1987, p. 25).

The house had 18 exhibition spaces, 17 rooms and a garden, all of which were transformed by the artists to generate spaces that expressed feminine meaning. The concept of the house came from the home being a space with which women had identified themselves for centuries and from where they had worked to please others. It was also a place

2. Schapiro, Miriam. “Recalling Womanhouse.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1/2, 1987, pp. 25-30. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40004836

for transgression, portraying the other side of traditions.

In *Womanhouse*, above all, there were performances and debates but also sculptures, installations and figures were created as well as rooms being decorated as if they themselves were paintings. The artists worked with the concepts of house and body, dismantling the stereotypes and roles that the heteropatriarchy expected from women: confinement to the private sphere of the home in opposition to the social value of the public sphere, reserved for men. It was exactly everything that Betty Friedan had attacked in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a work that generated debates amongst participants which were yet to be treated from an artistic perspective.³

Art historian Temma Balducci explained the powerful methodology that the artists engaged in with *Womanhouse*: “The artists who produced *Womanhouse* used parody and exaggeration as tools to undermine essentialist stereotypes about women that limited them to domestic roles, making it one of the earliest feminist artworks to question the boundaries between essential and constructed meaning.” (“Revisiting *Womanhouse*”, 2006, p. 17).

3. Other influential publications include the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* (1952), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1968), Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), and *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), an anthology edited by Robin Morgan.



Fig. 2. The front page of the exhibition catalog for "Womanhouse" (1972), feminist art exhibition organized by Judy Chicago (right) and Miriam Schapiro (left).



Fig. 3. Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and the students of the Feminist Art Program.

2.1 Rooms and installations (Feminist Artistic Proposals)

Viewers would wind their way through this home, confronted and challenged by parodies of societal expectations.

Amongst the items that formed part of the exhibition was *Linen Closet* by Sandra Orgel. She designed an installation consisting of a feminist criticism of the duties of a stay-at-home woman.

Other Works showed aspects of a more psychological relationship with the house, like *Nurturant Kitchen* by Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts and Robin Weltsch. This was one of the main symbolic spaces in the house, where the mothers' nutritional function was analysed.

The Dining Room (by Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding) was another important place related to nutrition, which comprised an extensive collaborative work where artists created, sculpted and sewed every element in the installation.

In the sculpture *Crocheted Environment*, by Faith Wilding, both a handcrafted element and a refuge, the artist mixed male and female domains by combining architecture and sewing. It consisted of an archetypical structure which resembled the uterus and used crochet work to reinforce feminine connotations.

On another note, *Bridal Staircase*, by Kathy Huberland, focuses on marriage, virginity and housewife conventions through a life-sized doll dressed as bride descending a staircase. Huberland's intention was to express her feelings about society's view of women: a present to help men, a housewife and a cook.

Leah's Room (installation / performance) by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman is a bedroom full of exuberant beauty and suffocating oppression. The performance was conducted daily for a prolonged period of time, where LeCoq continuously applied layer upon layer of make-up in a desperate attempt to preserve her vanishing beauty. She tried to illustrate high beauty standards that society imposed on women, as well as the feeling of desperation it provokes when it disappears.

Many of the works offer us a private and intimate insight into the life of a woman one such work is Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom*, a feminist work that politicises the relation between what society perceives as public or private. It was the first time in recent Art History that someone addressed menstruation, a topic considered taboo at the time.



Fig. 4. Linen Closet by Sandra Orgel, Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 5. Nurturant Kitchen (detail) by Susan Frazier, Vicki Hogetts y Robin Weltsch. Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 6. Faith Wilding. *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 7. *Bridal Staircase*, by Kathy Huberland, Los Angeles, 1972.

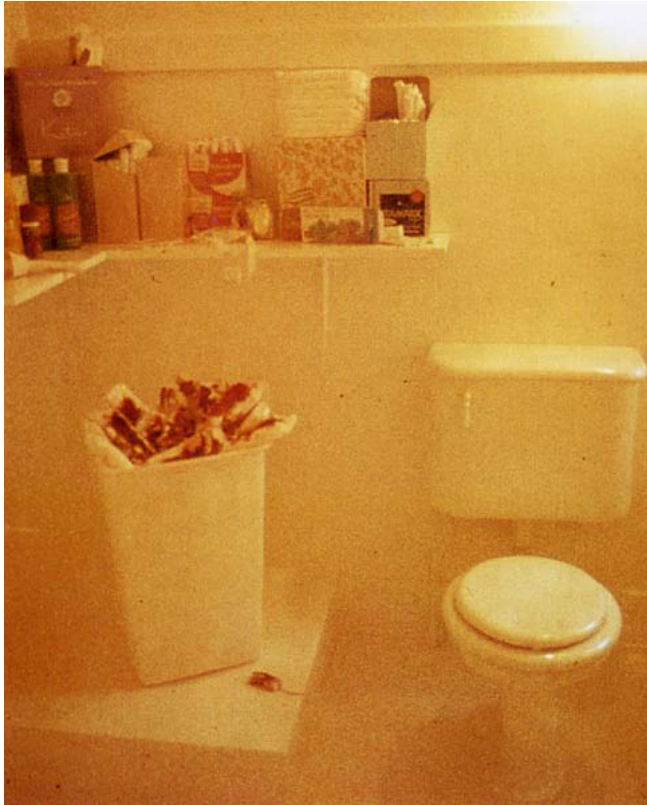


Fig. 8. *Menstruation Bathroom*, by Judy Chicago, Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 9. *Lea's Room* (installation / performance) by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman, Los Angeles, 1972.

In Womanhouse there were also performances as well as small theatre plays, which dramatized the conventions of gender and sexuality. These productions emerged from informal working sessions where women acted out aspects of their lives. An example of this, the play “The Three Women”, explores the psyches of three women: the go-getter, the hippie and the mother. They wear exaggerated makeup are initially meant to be comical. They tell the stories, all ‘trapped’ in some aspect of being a woman.

Other performances carried out Christine Rush (*Scrubbing*) and Sandra Orgel (*Ironing*) are connected to the concept of “Maintenance”, in such a way the undervalued world of domestic chores was also a must.

The performance “Cock and Cunt Play” (written by Judy Chicago), performed by Faith Wilding and Janice Lester, is an example of a work linked to intimate aspects like sexuality. Its main characters, a woman and a man, demonstrated abuse and gender violence, thus representing an exposition of sexism and gender roles through satire, conjuring up a desire for gender equality.

Another prominent play was “The Birth Trilogy”, in which a group of six women acted out the birth process, growing as the symbolically give birth to each through a tunnel created by their legs.

Then came the well-known performance by Faith Wilding, “Waiting”, calmer and more contemplative in nature, which portrayed the passive role the female sex had been relegated to. Wilding appears sitting passively with her hands on her lap, slowly rocking back and forth, while she murmurs a monologue about a woman’s incessant “wait”, which consisted of a monotonous and repetitive cycle waiting for life to start as she fulfils her duties and looks after the lives of others.⁴

In conclusion, all these works of art are considered to be feminist, as by creating them their artists fought for gender equality through topics such as gender relations and domestication, striving to generate awareness of the situation in which many women find themselves.

To achieve this, they converted each room of a house into an artistic space where questions which affected women in their daily lives could be reflected on. Thus, they subverted the concept of traditional artistic creation, whereby themes including domesticity, the body, identity, stereotypes, reproductive rights, beauty and gender roles were dealt with. Thus, it allowed a radical and literal questioning of women traditional confinement to the domestic and reproductive spheres. That same domestic space, historically naturalised as “feminine”, is thus criticized and transformed into a subject for artistic experimentation.

4. “Waiting” (extract), a 15-minute monolog, *scripted and performed by Faith Wilding*: <https://vimeo.com/36646228> Poem: <http://faithwilding.refugia.net/waitingpoem.pdf>



Fig. 10. *Three Women* (performance), Los Angeles , 1972.



Fig. 11. *Maintenance*, performed by Christine Rush and Sandra Orgel, Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 12. *Cock and Cun't Play*, performed by Faith Wilding (left) and Janice Lester (right), Los Angeles, 1972. Photograph by Lloyd Hamrol.



Fig. 13. *Birth Trilogy*, (performance), Los Angeles, 1972.



Fig. 14. Waiting (performance). A 15-minute monolog, scripted and performed by Faith Wilding in the Performance program at Womanhouse, 1972.

3. Conclusions

Throughout the project we become aware of Feminist Art as a means of expression intertwined with the artist's experience and her own awareness of the female condition, which is then expressed through the artwork. The role of the woman in her daily, intimate and professional life becomes part of the topic of art. The feminist motto "the personal is political", ratified in 1969 by Kate Millet, regains strength with Feminist Art, transforming every aspect of private life into a political experience.

In this way, the Womanhouse project, marked by a sense of private disclosure, opened a pathway where intimacy, daily life and fe-

male social roles were questioned. It has definitely been an influential exhibition and has influenced many institutional as well as individual artworks,⁵ shaping today's feminist art. As the Spanish art critic Juan Vicente Aliaga points out "one the lessons found in Womanhouse lay in how it uncovered the social and mental barriers between the public and the private, by turning them into fictional obstacles. Another thing to come out of this was that domesticity itself emerged as a concept and a mode of analysis. The realm of the domestic, together with a re-examination of the body, would become, in the seventies, two areas loaded with symbolism that challenged traditional thinking and questioned the assignment of roles. From being a space that was associated with menial tasks carried out by women, and was consequently largely ignored, the home began to transform itself into a political tool". (*Orden Fállico*, 2007, p. 283).

5. In 2018, for example, The National Museum of Women in the Arts exhibited "Women House" paying tribute to the foundational 1971 project of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's "Womanhouse."

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