

## The Woman's Building and Los Angeles' Leading Role in the Feminist Art Movement

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*Acknowledgment:*

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Throughout this volume, contributors give credence to the importance of space (e.g. room, house) and its defining role in the development of feminist communities and feminist art. Another significant dimension of space is the city in which feminist activism, culture and art practice take place. Los Angeles, more than any other city, played a defining role in the evolution of the feminist art movement in the 1970s. Flowering out of the liberation and protest movements of the sixties—anti-war protests, civil rights and Black power and women's liberation—the women artists' movement comprised a diverse coalition of artists, educators, and critics who sought to re-define the relationship between art and society. Feminist artists viewed art as both a social process and a symbolic framework that could be used to confront broadly political and deeply personal issues. Many pursued an activist agenda, intervening in public spaces and institutions to address issues of social justice and democracy. Feminist artists also analyzed the relationship between public representations of gender and self-image, critiquing the dominant culture's representations of women and re-imagining the possibilities of female identity through art.



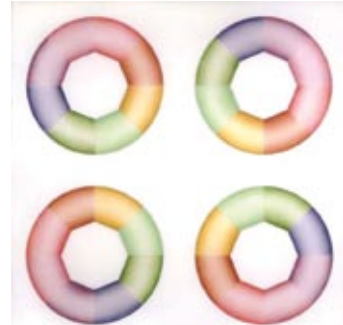
*The activist group, Sisters Of Survival (SOS), wore nun's habits the colors of the rainbow to raise consciousness about the growing nuclear threat. This billboard, "Something is Clouding Your Future" was displayed in Los Angeles by SOS in 1985. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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The implied and explicit East Coast/West Coast competition in the art world often saw New York as the nexus of the art world and Los Angeles as a frail newcomer, at best. Although New York has remained the largest center of mainstream art commerce and exhibition since the end of the Second World War, however, Los Angeles—in part because of its lack of an entrenched art-world infrastructure—offered women artists in the seventies greater freedom to invent new models for artistic production and reception. Los Angeles witnessed the growth of a thriving cluster of galleries and museums in the late 1950s and sixties, and attracted the attention of the international art establishment with the emergence of so-called “finish fetish” art, or “the L.A. look”—polished, shimmering objects fashioned from new industrial plastics and paint finishes developed for the defense and aerospace industries during World War II and the Korean War. By the late 1960s, then, a vibrant, if young, art scene had joined Hollywood’s film studios, the television industry, and the popular music industry in making Los Angeles the capital of what the Situationists called “the Spectacle.”<sup>1</sup> The popular media and the developing art establishment in Los



*Pasadena Lifesavers Red Series #3 circ. 1969 – 1970. Sprayed acrylic lacquer on-sheet acrylic, 5' x 5'. © Judy Chicago. (Source: Photo © Donald Woodman. <http://www.judychicago.com/judy-chicago.php?p=minimal8>.)*



*Collaborative artmaking group Mother Art performing at “Haunted Womanhouse,” the performance series that was part of “House of Women Conference” at Long Beach Museum, which accompanied the “At Home” exhibition. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

Angeles both became important targets of feminist intervention. Southern California feminists also worked to develop independent, female-governed organizations for educating women artists and for producing, displaying, and critiquing women’s art.

One of the principle philosophical underpinnings of the feminist art movement was the goal of creating a mutually supportive community of women artists. In opposition to the popular mythology of the lone (usually male) creative genius, the leaders of the feminist art movement contended that broad-based community support was a necessary condition of

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creative productivity, and set out to build the kind of support systems—both material and psychological—that women artists historically had lacked.<sup>2</sup> Most of the goals and strategies of feminist artists in the 1970s—including political activism, a collaborative approach to art making, and an emphasis on autobiographical and sexual subject matter, as well as the validation of traditionally feminine “craft” materials and techniques—revolved around the central goal of affirming women’s personal experiences, desires, and oppression as part of a shared history and culture, as well as a valid subject and source of art. Nationally and internationally, women artists established cooperative exhibition spaces, activist organizations, and other networks to provide support and a sense of community to previously isolated women artists. The Los Angeles Woman’s Building (1973-1991) was by far the longest-lived and most influential of these feminist art communities.

Given the range and scope of the activities carried out during the Woman’s Building’s eighteen years of operation, it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive account of its history and impact in the space of this essay.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I will offer an abbreviated analysis of the genesis of the Building, and then examine in some detail several projects sponsored there. These include, among others, the televised protest performance, *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977); a national exhibition network generated under the aegis of the *Great American Lesbian Art Show* (1980); and a special issue of the Woman’s Building newsletter dedicated to the problem of racism in the women’s movement (*Spinning Off*, May 1980). The diverse goals and needs of the artists working at the Woman’s Building, as well as shifting political and economic conditions, continually challenged the organization to redefine the meaning and role of a “feminist artists’ community.”

Communities traditionally have been defined by social scientists as geographically bounded spaces in which



*Maurine Renville (l.) and Phranc (r.) facilitate an FSW community meeting. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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groups of people live and interact over the course of a lifetime. The shifting group of feminist artists that orbited around the Woman's Building, however, might better be defined as an "imagined community," based on a shared sense of identity and purpose, and mediated by shared artistic and textual reference points.<sup>4</sup> Los Angeles is a notoriously diffuse metropolis, its far-flung neighborhoods criss-crossed by freeways and divided by miles of physical distance, as well as ethnic and socio-economic barriers. From its two locations within the ill-defined "downtown" region of the city (initially on Grandview Boulevard near MacArthur Park, and subsequently on North Spring Street at the far end of Chinatown), the Los Angeles Woman's Building represented an effort to construct a community within a perceived void. But the most effective means of accomplishing that goal, as well as the target audience, was often a matter of controversy. Building co-founder Sheila Levrant de Bretteville visualized the Woman's Building as a beacon for the general public, personified as a "woman on the street" who would reach out and embrace people from around the city.<sup>5</sup> Performance artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, among others, used the Building as a base from which to launch feminist interventions into the city's physical and institutional structures, including the media. Other Building members maintained a more separatist vision, wishing to preserve the Building as a safe haven from mainstream society. Theorists of lesbian social community have emphasized that for lesbians and gay men, in particular, a community of peers often takes the place of family as the primary support network and source of self-definition.<sup>6</sup> The projects discussed in this essay, viewed as case studies, help illuminate the varied goals of the Woman's Building's constituents, and the ways in which art making, as a social process and as a symbolic framework, both betrayed fractures amongst the Building's membership and mediated bonds between Building members, as well as other women in the wider community.

## The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno State and CalArts

The earliest prototype for the feminist art community that developed at the Woman's Building was an educational program for young women artists founded at Fresno State College in 1970. The Fresno Feminist Art Program was the brain-child of Judy Chicago, whose 1976 autobiography, *Through the Flower*, describes the profound alienation she felt as a young woman artist in Los Angeles in the 1960s, when nearly all critically and commercially successful artists were men, and the cool, industrial look of finish fetish art dominated the Los Angeles gallery scene.<sup>7</sup> After graduating from art school at the Univer-

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sity of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), Chicago achieved national recognition exhibiting minimalist, geometrical sculpture made with industrial materials. In retrospect, however, Chicago felt that her modest success had been won only at the cost of abandoning her real artistic interests and suppressing her sense of gender identity. As she subsequently analyzed her defensive response to the male-dominated art world:

In an attempt to compensate for the often uncomprehending responses [of men], the woman artist tries to prove that she's as good as a man. She gains attention by creating work that is extreme in scale, ambition, or scope . . . She resists being identified with woman because to be female is to be an object of contempt. And the brutal fact is that in the process of fighting for her life, she loses herself.<sup>8</sup>

Chicago conceived of the Feminist Art Program (FAP) as an “antidote” to her education at UCLA and the recurring bias she confronted as an emerging artist in the sixties. The program's first project, accordingly, was to remodel an off-campus studio space where Chicago and her fifteen female students could “evaluate themselves and their experiences without defensiveness and male interference.”<sup>9</sup> In direct opposition to the formalist orientation that prevailed at most art schools, Chicago structured her classes around consciousness-raising sessions. She and her students tackled emotionally-charged issues including ambition, money, relationships with parents and lovers, body-image, and sexuality, “going around the room” so that each woman had the opportunity to share her experiences and feelings. Consciousness-raising was a way of brainstorming ideas for artwork; it also encouraged the young women students to confront their personal situations as part of a larger cultural pattern which could be analyzed and changed. As program participant Faith Wilding later recalled the process:

As each woman spoke it became apparent that what had seemed to be purely “personal” experiences were actually shared by all the other women: we were discovering a common oppression based on our gender, which was defining our roles and identities as women. In subsequent group discussions, we analyzed the social and political mechanisms of this oppression, thus placing our personal histories into a larger cultural perspective. This was a direct application of the slogan of 1970s feminism: The personal is political.<sup>10</sup>

One theme that emerged with disturbing frequency in group discussions was the prevalence of violence and sexual exploitation in women's lives. The young artists confronted and responded to sexual violence in their artwork. In an early student performance described in Chicago's autobiography, for example, a male character violently extracts “service” from a female figure with a milking machine, and then drenches her body

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with the bloody contents of his bucket. Faith Wilding confronted social attitudes about menstruation in a tableau entitled *Sacrifice*, in which a wax effigy of the artist, heaped with decaying animal intestines, lay before an altar of bloody feminine hygiene products. One of the first public performances to address the topic of rape, *Ablutions*, was created by Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani in Los Angeles in 1972 in response to discussions that began at Fresno.

Chicago and her students used art to foster an empowered sense of sexual identity. Confronting a cultural tradition in which female sexuality is frequently figured as passive (in “virtuous” women) or else dangerous and shameful (in sexually assertive women), program participants invented myriad so-called “cunt” artworks, “vying with each other to come up with images of the female sexual organs by making paintings, drawings, and constructions of bleeding slits, holes and gashes, boxes, caves, or exquisite jewel pillows,” and thus reclaiming a derogatory sexual epithet as a symbol of pride.<sup>11</sup> Cay Lang, Vanalyne Green, Dori Atlantis and Susan Boud formed a performance group, the “Cunt Cheerleaders,” donning satin cheerleader costumes and chanting light-hearted and transgressive cheers to women such as the following, which they performed for program guest Ti-Grace Atkinson upon her arrival at the Fresno airport:

Split beaver, split beaver, lovely gooey cunts.  
Split beaver, split beaver . . .  
We come more than once.

Your cunt is a beauty,  
We know you always knew it,  
So if you feel like pissing,  
Just squat right down and do it!

I hold no pretenses when I pee,  
I kiss the earth and the earth kisses me.<sup>12</sup>

The young artists in FAP also experimented with nontraditional media including glitter and lace, sewing and crochet-work, costume, performance, and film, thus asserting the validity of so-called feminine “craft” materials and techniques as art. When the program relocated from Fresno to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), thirty miles north of Los Angeles, in the fall of 1971, the expanded group’s first project involved remodeling a dilapidated house near downtown and transforming it into a series of fantasy environments, entitled *Womanhouse*. *Womanhouse* explored women’s traditional roles in the home with a mixture of love, humor, irony and rage. Installations such as the Faith

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Wilding's fanciful, crocheted, igloo-shaped shelter, nicknamed the "Womb Room," as well as the lavish sculpted feast laid out in the collaborative "Dining Room," embodied an idealized dream of comfort and intimacy in the home. A more ambivalent vision of domesticity and family relationships surfaced in the "Nurturant Kitchen," created by Susan Fraser, Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch and Wanda Westcoast, in which molded foam-rubber fried eggs covered the ceiling and marched down the walls, gradually transmuting into sagging, exhausted breasts. Kathy Huberland's "Bridal Staircase," stood as a stark warning, with a starry-eyed bridal mannequin descending blithely toward a drab gray dead-end.<sup>13</sup>



*Bridal Staircase* by Kathy Huberland, from *Womanhouse* 1972, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: © Through The Flower archives. (Source: <http://www.judychicago.com/judychicago.php?p=womanhouse2>.)

*Womanhouse* was the first large-scale feminist art exhibition in the United States, and it inaugurated a new phase in the feminist art movement. The installation was open to the public for a month, from January 30 through February 28, 1972, and attracted some ten thousand visitors. To kick off the exhibition, the newly-formed bi-coastal women artists' network, West-East Bag (W.E.B.), held its inaugural conference there. The national art press and the popular media also gave *Womanhouse* extensive coverage, ranging from a film documentary broadcast on public television to stories in *ArtNews* and *Time* magazine.<sup>14</sup>

As the Feminist Art Program emerged from its isolation, the concept of feminist art and the notion of a community based on a shared female identity drew passionate responses. Since the 1970s, debate over the significance of so-called "female imagery" and the true meaning of feminist art has divided feminist critics. One strand of criticism, which reached a peak in the 1980s, holds that the emphasis some early feminist artists placed on autobiographical subject matter and so-called feminine media simply reinforces "essentialist" stereotypes; or in the words of art historian Griselda Pollock: "so long as we discuss women, the family, crafts or whatever else we have done as feminists we endorse the social givenness of woman, the family, the separate sphere."<sup>15</sup> Critics also increasingly voiced skepticism that women with different socio-economic backgrounds, racial

and ethnic identifications, and sexual orientations could be reasonably lumped together into an identity-based community, and whether it was productive to try do so. Yet it is not accurate to dismiss the feminist artwork of the 1970s as simplistically “essentialist.” The use of alternative media, autobiography, and performance allowed women artists in the 1970s to broach previously unspeakable topics, and their pioneering activism laid important groundwork for the critical strategies (and debates) of subsequent feminist theorists and artists, as well as other political art and identity-based art movements.

## A Woman in Public:

### The Feminist Studio Workshop and the Grandview Building

The success of *Womanhouse* and a rising groundswell of feminist art activism in Los Angeles in the early 1970s contributed to a perceived need for a more permanent institutional presence for women artists in Los Angeles. Chicago soon grew disillusioned with the situation at CalArts after the feminist art program resumed its activities on campus and was forced to submit to the administrative supervision of its host institution. She and two other CalArts faculty members, art historian Arlene Raven and designer Sheila de Bretteville, began laying plans for an independent women's art school, the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). Initially they held informal classes in de Bretteville's living room. By late 1973, however, they had a large enough student base to lease a two-story downtown building from the former Chouinard Art Institute, sharing rent and managerial responsibilities with Womanspace, a new cooperative gallery for women artists, and several other feminist organizations and businesses, including the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization of Women, the Associated Feminist Press, a branch of Sisterhood Bookstore, and women-operated galleries and performance venues. In addition to Chicago, de Bretteville and Raven, several additional instructors joined the Feminist Art Program staff, including performance artist Suzanne Lacy (who had trained with Chicago and de Bretteville at Fresno and CalArts, and also counted CalArts faculty member Alan Kaprow as an important influence), graphic designer Helen Alm Roth, art historian Ruth Iskin, and writer Deena Metzger.

The Woman's Building opened on November 28, 1973, at 743 South Grandview Boulevard, two blocks from MacArthur Park, a heavily-used downtown recreation area. Restaurants and small stores, many of them operated by Guatemalans and other Central American immigrants, encircle the park, while the surrounding streets combine apartment



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*Initial sessions of the newly established Feminist Studio Workshop were held at the home of founder Sheila de Bretteville. (Photo by Maria Karras. Collection of the artist.)*

buildings and houses with other local businesses. The mostly Spanish-speaking locals were not especially likely to visit the Woman's Building, but the park and surrounding restaurants attracted a mixed group of Angelenos from other parts of the city. The neighborhood was also familiar to artists and art students, with the Otis Art Institute situated on the far side of the park, in addition to the historical link with Chouinard. Inaugural festivities were attended by an estimated 5,000 people, many of them artists and former Chouinard staff and students.<sup>16</sup>

A poster advertising the opening of the Woman's Building, picturing a throng of spirited young women flocking to the Building entrance, embodied the founders' hope that the organization would function as the hub of a vital women's community.<sup>17</sup> When the



*Courtyard of Grandview Woman's Building. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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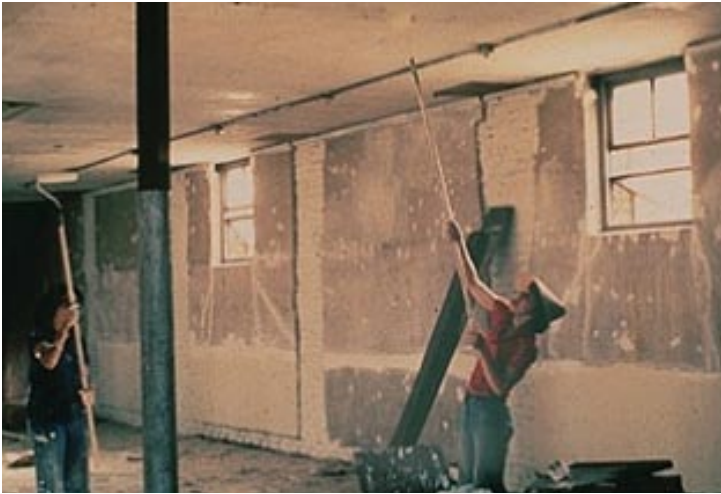
*Photo from the poster announcing the opening of the Women's Building, 743 South Grand View Boulevard, Los Angeles, November, 1973. (Photo by Maria Karras.)*

FSW inaugurated its full-time degree program at the Building, professors intentionally avoided the hierarchical structure of traditional educational institutions, instead modeling classes on the consciousness-raising format. Former student Cheri Gaulke remembers that everyone, including the teacher, sat in a circle, which struck her as “the ultimate symbol of the Woman's Building, of feminist process, that kind of equality.”<sup>18</sup> Students were encouraged to pool their skills and resources with women from other classes, so that writers, painters and printers might work together on the same project. Some of the initial class assignments involved repairing and remodeling the building itself, a tradition that Chicago had begun in the feminist art program at Fresno State and continued at *Womanhouse*. The group effort of constructing their own studio spaces, the collaborative art-making process, and the pleasures and anxieties of learning about one another in consciousness-raising sessions all helped foster a cohesive and intimate sense of community. As Gaulke explains, “your personal life was the subject [of your art], or was

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*Construction of the new space on Spring Street. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

a part of [it] . . . You weren't just there to develop your creativity, your intellect, but also your emotional self."<sup>19</sup>

Building co-founder Sheila de Bretteville played an especially important role in defining the Woman's Building's public role during this period, promoting the ideal that feminist art should intervene in the physical and social spaces of the community to create a more egalitarian and inclusive society. De Bretteville explained that she "saw the Building as Woman in public. It's almost as if the Building was a living creature in my mind as a woman on the street. And she was going to be . . . honored . . . and she would [bring] the feminine with her into the public realm."<sup>20</sup> Seeking to promote social equality through her artwork, de Bretteville developed design formats that, in her words, would invite the "participation of the broadest possible audience without the privileging of power."<sup>21</sup> Her mixed-media design, "Pink" (1974), for example, produced for an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in which participants were asked to "say something about color," incorporates handwritten comments, photographs and mementos offered by two dozen women of various ages and backgrounds. Invited by de Bretteville to consider "what pink meant to them and their vision of women," contributors offered poignant responses: "Scratch pink and it bleeds." "Pink is childish. I'm not pink now." "The color of pink is used mostly in saying: I Luv You!!!!" "Bazooka bub-

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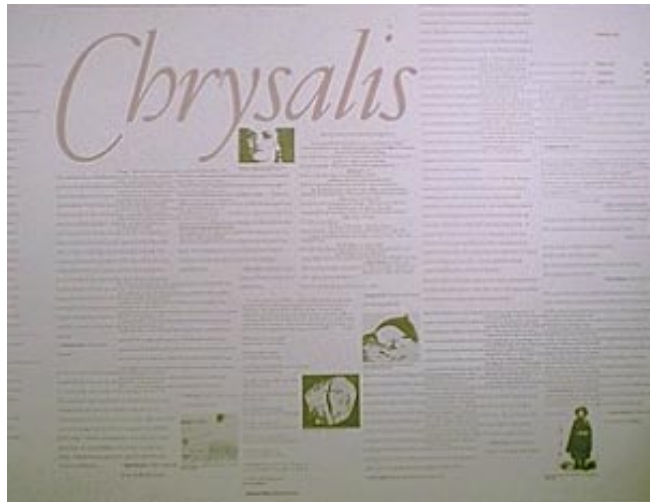
*Sheila de Bretteville's "Pink" poster in which she asked members of the FSW to make a "quilt square" about what they associated with the color pink. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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ble gum that makes your throat sore when you first chew it because it's so sickeningly sweet." "The soft inside pink flesh vulnerable." "I hated pink."<sup>22</sup> Utilizing a grid format with thirty-six squares, de Bretteville allotted an equal amount of space to each respondent, purposely leaving several squares empty to encourage museum-goers to add their own thoughts. She also hung a poster version of the project in various neighborhoods around Los Angeles, inviting passersby to contribute their responses. De Bretteville implement-



*Chrysalis poster designed by Sheila de Bretteville. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

ed a similar non-hierarchical format for her design of the literary review published by the Woman's Building, *Chrysalis, A Journal of Women's Culture*. Each contributor to the journal had a two-page spread, with open spaces for readers to contribute their responses or additions to the material published.

In the Feminist Studio Workshop, de Bretteville encouraged her students to address the connections between the physical and emotional spaces of the city. For one assignment, students made maps of Los Angeles and indicated the locations where they felt good or bad, where they felt threatened or supported. Next, they made posters showing how they would make a place in the city different. One student persuaded the Los Angeles Rapid Transit District bus line to display her posters on buses traversing the city.

In her administrative capacity at the Building, de Bretteville facilitated various forms of exchange between FSW students, other Building users and a broad community of women in Los Angeles and nationwide. Among her first priorities was the acquisition of a printing press for the FSW, so that students and other Building participants could self-publish. She also helped initiate a program of continuing education classes, thus allowing area women to take classes or to teach them without being full-time students or faculty. In the spring of 1974, she conceived a series of conferences that brought together participants from across the nation. The first of these conferences, "Women in Design" (March 20-21), featured nationally-known architects, designers, teachers and editors whom de Bretteville

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*Workshop in motion and improvisation at the Performance Conference, Mar. 25-28. 1975. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

invited to open a national dialogue on feminist strategies among women who “work in public, visual and physical forms.” Writers Deena Metzger, Holly Prado and Deborah Rosenfeld organized a conference for women writers, “Women and Words” (March 22-23), which brought together luminaries including Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, Meridell Le Sueur and Carolyn See, and resulted in an ongoing national writers series funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Performance Conference

(March 24-27; organized by Suzanne Lacy, Ellen Ledley, Candace Compton, Roxanne Hanna, Signe Dowse and Nancy Buchanan) featured workshops and performances by emerging and nationally-known artists, including Joan Jonas, Pauline Oliveras, Barbara Smith and Bonnie Sherk, among many others, and established the Woman's Building as an international center of women's performance art. Attended by hundreds of people, these events raised the Woman's Building's public profile and helped establish professional and personal networks that persisted long after the conferences ended.<sup>23</sup>

Suzanne Lacy, a conceptual performance artist and FSW instructor, expanded de Bretteville's model of audience collaboration to create large-scale “performance structures” designed to intervene in the physical and institutional spaces of the city. Lacy has also cited Allan Kaprow, who taught at CalArts in the 1970s, as a significant intellectual forebear for his idea that “everyday” ac-



*Three Weeks in May by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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tions and “happenings” could be art.<sup>24</sup> While she was at the Woman's Building, Lacy collaborated with Leslie Labowitz to found Ariadne, a Social Art Network, bringing together a broad affiliation of women in the arts, media, government, and the feminist community to create major collaborative artworks addressing specific social issues. For example, in *Three Weeks in May*, denoting the three-week period in 1977 during which the event unfolded, Lacy persuaded the Los Angeles Police Department to release statistics on the occurrence of reported rapes, a subject that was generally kept secret from the public. The visual centerpiece of the project was a pair of twenty-five-foot maps of Los Angeles mounted in the busy City Hall shopping mall. The first map recorded daily rape reports; for each rape designated in red, Lacy added nine fainter pink “echoes” representing the estimated nine in ten rapes that go unreported. The second map listed resources, including telephone hotlines, hospital emergency rooms and counseling centers, that offered services for women who had been raped. Lacy enlisted the participation of the city police, the news media, local politicians, and other artists, staging more than thirty events over the course of the project, including a press conference, self-defense workshops, a rape “speakout” and a series of art exhibitions and performances.<sup>25</sup>

Lacy next collaborated with Labowitz and writer Bia Lowe to create *In Mourning and In Rage* in December of

1977. Troubled by the sensationalized news coverage of a series of brutal rape-murders by the so-called “Hillside Strangler,” Labowitz and Lacy staged a performance protesting the murders and the media's sensationalist practices, while simultaneously exploiting the public information system to broadcast the event on television and in the newspaper. The



*In Mourning and In Rage* performance by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, with assistance by Bia Lowe, was staged on the steps of Los Angeles Hall, and designed to be viewed through newspaper and television coverage. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

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performance began at the steps of City Hall with the arrival of a hearse and accompanying motorcade. Nine monumental mourning figures, one for each murdered woman, emerged to confront the audience, draped in black from head to toe. By obscuring the performers' faces, paradoxically, the artists symbolically restored a sense of dignity to the murdered women. While the press had published photographs and titillating details about the personal lives of the victims, several of whom were prostitutes, their draped surrogates, in their very sameness and iconic generality, highlighted the women's shared humanity. Staged as a media event for politicians and reporters, the performance was designed, as Lacy has recounted, "as a series of thirty-second shots that, when strung together in a two-to-four minute news clip, would tell the story we wanted told."<sup>26</sup> The performance led to several public policy changes, including city sponsorship of free self-defense training for women and the publication of rape hotline numbers by the telephone company.

Performance art, as it was developed by Lacy and many others at the Woman's Building, became a powerful tool for activism, for confronting stereotypes and effecting symbolic self-transformations, and, perhaps most importantly, for establishing a sense of community among women. Performance groups based at the Building took their work into a variety of public venues around the city. Calling themselves "The Waitresses," for example, Jerri Allyn, Leslie Belt, Anne Gauldin, Patti Nicklaus, Jamie Wildman-Webber and Denise Yarfitz staged guerilla events in restaurants and other public spaces, employing satire to dramatize and critique women's traditional service roles. One of their featured characters was the Waitress Goddess Diana, who wore a soft-sculpture costume with a dozen cascading breasts. Another character, Wonder Waitress, came to the aid of harried restaurant workers, confronting impatient customers and intervening with nasty employers. Feminist Studio Workshop graduates Nancy Angelo, Candace Compton (later replaced by Vanalyne Green), Cheri Gaulke and Laurel Klick founded the Feminist Art Workers performance group in 1976 and embarked on a cross-country road-trip the following year as self-styled missionaries of feminist education. Their performances in community centers, universities and coffee houses, usually conducted in exchange for food or on the basis of "sliding-scale" audience contributions, highlighted the group's infectious sense of camaraderie.<sup>27</sup> These and other activist performance groups founded in the 1970s were the precursors of contemporary activist groups such as the Guerilla Girls and the Women's Action Coalition (WAC).

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The reinvention of performance art as a political statement and as a tool for community-building was one of the most important legacies of the Los Angeles Woman's Building. Steven Durland, former editor of *High Performance* magazine, considers the performance work done by Chicago, Lacy, Labowitz and others at the Woman's Building the best artwork produced during the 1970s, and credits it with giving new life to the performance idiom:

Not only did they take the form and politicize it, but they [oriented it toward] autobiography. Now that's used by artists from cultures outside the mainstream for self- and group-affirmation. It's a way of letting people know that they aren't alone. . . . In performance art, most of what had come before was formal experimentation. Had feminist art not come along, the form would probably have died a natural death.<sup>28</sup>

The feminist performance art of the 1970s gave rise to many of the strategies developed more broadly by artists in the 1980s, including autobiography, political activism, the transformation of self through multiple personae, and the appropriation and critique of mainstream culture.<sup>29</sup>

## A Building of One's Own: Separatism and the Spring Street Building

De Bretteville's vision of the Woman's Building as a "woman in the street," as compelling as it was, did not meet the needs of some of the women who came to the Building in search of community. Many young women who enrolled in the Feminist Studio Workshop or attended other events at the Building yearned to create a safe, supportive "family." They preferred to distance themselves from the larger community, having experienced their families of origin, their schools, workplaces or neighborhoods as hostile environments. De Bretteville recalls making the startling realization that her vision was completely at odds with what many of her students wanted: "I had all these notions about what the Woman's Building was, which in many ways was about women in public. And then when I got there and created it and was with these women, I saw that what they wanted was a private place . . . the women came for a home."<sup>30</sup>

The split between those who envisioned the Woman's Building as a beacon for the public and those who saw it as a safe haven came to a head in 1975, when Chouinard decided to sell the Grandview Building, and the Woman's Building was forced to relocate. De Bretteville hoped to find another downtown location that would be spacious enough to accommodate a broad range of activities. Other women lobbied for a smaller space in a



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more remote location near the beach or in the country. Chicago located a second story space in Pasadena, a small city at the northeast edge of Los Angeles, that the group gave serious consideration. Ultimately, however, de Bretteville held out for a large building in downtown Los Angeles, and in the summer of 1975 the Feminist Studio Workshop and other Building tenants moved to 1727 North Spring Street.<sup>31</sup>

Paradoxically, the ambitious decision to lease the largest and most centrally-located building possible for the Woman's Building probably contributed over the long run to the organization's increasing isolation. The only large downtown building the organization could afford was located



*Val's Cafe, 3rd floor. Neon sign by Lili Lakich. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

in an industrial district that lacked the lively neighborhood atmosphere of the original Grandview location, even though it was just a few miles away. Next to the railroad tracks and the nearly-dry Los Angeles River, the Woman's Building now shared quarters with windowless warehouses and a few scattered manufacturing plants. Many of the non-art tenants were forced to leave for want of foot traffic. The Feminist Studio Workshop and its extension program persisted as the key groups in the Woman's Building. Members also ran a gallery program, an Annual Women Writers Series, the Women's Graphic Center, and the Los Angeles Women's Video Center. At various times during its years on Spring Street, the Building housed a bookstore, a thrift store, a café, and the offices of *Chrysalis* and Women Against Violence Against Women.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the Building held a less visible position in the non-feminist, non-art Los Angeles community than it had at the Grandview Building.

The wish to create a safe, supportive haven at the Woman's Building also sometimes outweighed the desire to take an activist role in public during this period. For lesbian women at the Building, in particular, the notion of community often meant something different than it did to heterosexual women. Straight women more often tended to move in and out of the Woman's Building community, devoting time to their families, boyfriends, and

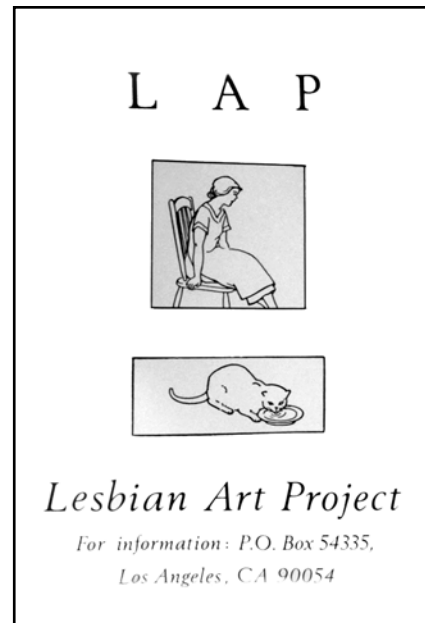
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other community involvements during their time away from school or work at the Building. For many lesbian members, on the other hand, the Building provided an all-encompassing social network. Cheri Gaulke, who entered the FSW as a self-identified heterosexual and came out as a lesbian three years later, remembers that “the community of women around the Woman’s Building . . . became my spiritual community, my emotional community, my political community. It became everything to me.”<sup>33</sup> Terry Wolverton, another graduate of the FSW, who later served as an administrator at the Building, concurs that “the need for reflection and support was a hugely motivating factor [and] often involved leaving behind old bonds. . . . Heterosexual women had more expectation of crossing back and forth over those borders. For lesbians there was less desire or possibility of slipping back and forth.”<sup>34</sup> To identify with the lesbian community at the Woman’s Building often meant risking the disapproval or outright rejection of one’s family and previous social circle.

The feminist art programs at Fresno State and CalArts and the FSW had always included many lesbian participants, but lesbian issues did not develop into a central focus of discussion at the Woman’s Building until the late 1970s. In 1977, Building co-founder Arlene Raven, who also co-directed the Center for Art Historical Studies with Ruth Iskin, invited artists who thought their artwork might contain lesbian content to a series of discussions that resulted in the formation of the Natalie Barney Collective.<sup>35</sup> The Collective then undertook the Lesbian Art Project in order to “discover, explore [and] create lesbian culture, art, and sensibility; make visible the contributions of lesbians to feminist human culture; [and] create a context for that work to be understood.”<sup>36</sup> Events sponsored by the Lesbian Art Project included consciousness-raising groups, a “gay-straight dialogue” at the Woman’s Building, gallery exhibitions of artwork by lesbians, a video-taped dialogue among lesbian artists, open houses, salons, performances, and a series of social events including a lesbian fashion show and several all-women dances.<sup>37</sup> After the Natalie Barney Collec-



*Proposed logo for the Lesbian Art Project, designed by Bia Lowe, 1977. (Collection of Terry Wolverton.)*

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[L. to R.] Sue Maberry, Jerri Allyn, Brooke Hallock, Nancy Angelo, Cheri Gaulke, Terry Wolverton, Catherine Stifter, Leslie Belt, Chutney Gunderson, Louise Moore, Christine Wong (not pictured, Cheryl Swannack and Arlene Raven)—the cast of *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* directed by Terry Wolverton. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

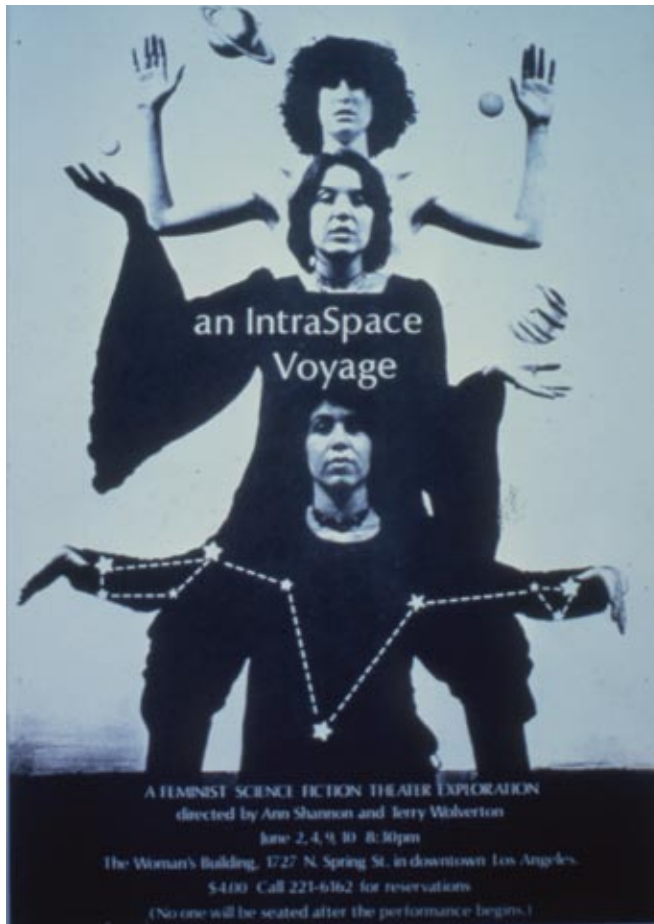
tive disbanded, several new projects focused on lesbian identity and issues emerged. The Lesbian Creators Series, initiated by Raven, brought lesbian artists to speak at the Woman's Building. Terry Wolverton organized a long-term performance project titled *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*. The *Oral Herstory* project began as a series of discussion sessions structured around consciousness-raising and journal-writing. It culminated in a performance featuring more than a dozen vignettes addressing the tremendous diversity of lesbian experience, as well as the shared struggles faced by lesbian women.

Another performance that grew out of the Lesbian Art Project, *FEMINA: An IntraSpace Voyage*, sheds particular light on the sense of vertigo many women felt upon claiming a place in the lesbian community at the Woman's Building, a decision that often meant leaving behind old ties, perhaps forever. Based on a science fiction story by Terry Wolverton, the performance incorporated dance, song and personal stories shared by each performer to dramatize the departure and journey of a group of women who determine to leave earth for a distant, unexplored destination, "FEMINA." Life as they know it has become physically and emotionally untenable; the voyagers are haunted by visions of apocalyptic

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Poster for *FEMINA: an IntraSpace Voyage*, designed by Bia Lowe. (Collection of Terry Wolverton.)

ular futuristic Hollywood films of the day, such as *2001*, *Star Wars*, or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Instead, by “[w]orking on *FEMINA*, [the performers] learned that the Universe is not separate from our selves, our own bodies.”<sup>41</sup> The symbolic journey to *FEMINA* functioned as a metaphor for the performers’ collective undertaking to construct a new community and a new sense of identity. During the development of the performance, Wolverton encouraged the participants to suspend disbelief and to embrace their imminent departure, as far as possible, as a physical and psychological reality. The force of their collective fantasy shook some *FEMINA* participants so profoundly that they actually decided to leave the project, too frightened to continue. One woman wrote an apology to Wolverton, “I know no other way to explain it except that I

wars and earthquakes, manifesting “the voice of destruction [that] shrieks like some terrible monster at the way we choose to love . . . our art . . . our voices, our bodies.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the suffering they have endured on earth, however, it is painful and frightening to turn away from the past. Mustering their courage for the journey, the women ritualistically “bid goodbye to everything and everyone they have ever known,” even “the selves they have been on earth.”<sup>39</sup> Lingered over the things they will miss most, one performer poignantly laments the loss of “the touch of [her] mother’s hand . . . the sound of rain . . . the laughter of children.”<sup>40</sup>

Wolverton explained in a press release that *FEMINA* was “not about build[ing] an enormous piece of hardware and blast[ing] off,” in contrast to the popular

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am scared. I am on such shaky ground here in L.A. and I cannot disrupt the existence I've created for myself so far."<sup>42</sup> Another tearfully informed Wolverton that she had to finish school and therefore couldn't leave earth for *FEMINA*.

Although these emotionally extreme responses may seem irrational from our present perspective, they provide insight into the life-altering impact the Woman's Building community had for many women. Cheri Gaulke remembers feeling a similar sense of instability, even fear, during her earliest months there. For her performance in *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, Gaulke recounted the story of her first visit to the Building in the summer of 1977. At that time, she still identified herself as a heterosexual. She had cut her hair very short, however, she explained, as

part of my sort of radical identity. And I remember I walked into the Woman's Building and there were all these women with . . . very, very short hair, like shaved heads like me . . . . And I freaked out because . . . I recognized something that was very scary, that I'd sort of been flirting with but hadn't realized in a conscious way. So I immediately went back to Minneapolis, grew my hair, died it red, you know, took back the feminine persona again."<sup>43</sup>

Despite her apprehension, Gaulke enrolled in the Feminist Studio Workshop in the fall. Her fears resurfaced on the first day of classes:

I remember the very first . . . thing we did when we got in this big room of about 50 women in a circle, you were supposed to turn to the woman next to you and share some story, or something that happened to you before you came. And I remember thinking that the woman next to me was insane. I was absolutely terrified and I thought she was, like, an ax murderer . . . . I still know her and she—I think she's a nice person now. But there was something about this new environment that just was—There was an unleashing of self that was just absolutely terrifying.<sup>44</sup>

By fostering a sense of community among women artists, feminists and lesbians, the Woman's Building lent women the strength to develop aspects of their identity that were condemned or denied by mainstream society.

Seeking to assert a positive image of lesbian identity and to increase the public visibility of lesbian artists, in 1980 the Woman's Building sponsored a series of exhibitions in collaboration with the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center under the umbrella title, *the Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS)*.<sup>45</sup> The series had a tripartite structure, including an invitational exhibition in Los Angeles honoring ten acclaimed lesbian art-

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ists, a national network that facilitated local lesbian art shows in cities across the nation, and a slide registry to document the artwork exhibited in the national GALAS network.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the invitational exhibition, events in Los Angeles included eight regional shows and a number of performances, film screenings, poetry readings, and a lesbian graphics show. The whole project was oriented toward helping lesbians and especially lesbian artists forge a sense of connection within a large, creative community.

Although a few writers had assayed a theoretical approach to the issue, there was no clear consensus about what “lesbian art” might look like.<sup>47</sup> The work included in the invitational exhibition ranged from minimalist abstraction to explicit photographs of women’s genitals and women making love. (The representations of female genitalia drew the most criticism from the mainstream press.)<sup>48</sup> Yet the artists concurred that the art-making process played a crucial role in establishing a sense of personal and sexual identity. As Harmony Hammond described the connection between her artwork and her inner life in a catalog statement about her wrapped ovoid sculptures:

To make art that has meaning, it is essential to make art that is honest. . . . it is essential that I do not cut off any part of myself. . . . I came out through my art and the feminist movement. That is, the work gave form to my lesbian feelings as it gives form to all my feelings and ideas.<sup>49</sup>

The *Great American Lesbian Art Show* offered one of the first visible demonstrations of widespread support and solidarity amongst lesbians, and especially lesbian artists, in an otherwise largely hostile society. There were many risks involved in staging the exhibition, for artist-participants and viewers alike.<sup>50</sup> A poignant statement in the GALAS Guidebook, “We Are Everywhere,” reminds readers that

[i]t is vital to remember that for each one of us present, there are hundreds of lesbians who have not identified themselves, or who have chosen not to live



Poster for Great American Lesbian Art Show designed by Bia Lowe. (Photo

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publicly as lesbians. Their reasons may be rooted in fear of personal or social consequences, or perhaps even ignorance of the options that exist for a lesbian lifestyle. It is our hope that the word of the GALAS project will reach these women, that their lives will be touched by the proud affirmations expressed in lesbian creative work.<sup>51</sup>

## At the Horizon of Identity Politics: Feminist Identities, Feminist Communities

The Woman's Building faced many new challenges during its second decade. Feminist theory and activism in the 1980s increasingly emphasized the differences among women, especially in regard to issues of race, class and sexual orientation. Although administrators at the Woman's Building worked to implement programming aimed at a diverse group of women, the organization faced criticism for failing to address the concerns of some women in the community, especially women of color. Indeed, the very notion of a community based on a supposedly common female identity came into question during this period.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the destabilizing effects of criticism from the political left was compounded by blows from the political right. Under the administration of President Reagan, who took office in 1980, federal funding for the arts was cut drastically and the Woman's Building lost an important source of financial revenue. Shifting political and economic trends also had a devastating effect on the FSW, which ceased full-time operations in 1981 due to falling enrollments. As Terry Wolverton assessed the mood in the eighties, "[s]uddenly, if women were going back to school, they were going into MBA programs, not into experimental feminist art programs. In the seventies, there was a certain ease in choosing a marginalized stance. In the eighties, there was the feeling that you wouldn't survive."<sup>53</sup>

By 1981, the three co-founders of the Woman's Building had ceased full-time involvement with the Building, and a second generation of leaders, including Wolverton, Gaulke, and Sue Maberry, all of whom had studied with the original core faculty in the FSW, took over the task of professionalizing the Woman's Building to meet the challenge of survival in the 1980s. Maberry devised a strategy to develop a profitable typesetting and design business at the Women's Graphic Center, making use of the last part of a substantial government grant to purchase type and a letterpress. After completing a professional fundraising training program, Terry Wolverton took on the task of extending the Building's base of support to include corporations and professional women, some of whom might previously have felt alienated by the Building's radical image.

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Many of the most dedicated members who worked to keep the Woman's Building afloat during the inhospitable backlash years of the eighties were lesbian women. As lesbians played an increasingly important role at the Building, gay women and straight women jockeyed for control of informal social policy as well as event programming. Both lesbians and straight women felt alienated at times. In the early years of the FSW, before lesbian-oriented groups began to organize, gay women in particular often felt outnumbered and unacknowledged. As the lesbian presence at the Building became increasingly politicized, conversely, heterosexual women sometimes felt unwelcome. Lesbian members feared that straight members weren't as committed to the survival of the Building as they were. There were also disputes over guidelines for social behavior at the Building—Could heterosexual women bring their husbands and boyfriends to Building events, or would that impinge on others' wish to maintain a female-oriented environment? Was it acceptable for lesbian lovers to kiss in public, or would that discourage walk-in visitors to the Building?<sup>54</sup> Throughout the history of the Woman's Building, nevertheless, there were sizable constituencies of both straight and lesbian women, and a sufficient balance of power that problems could be addressed from within the community.

Women of color, on the other hand, always occupied a minority position at the Woman's Building. Feminists from outside the Building staged an organized challenge to white women's dominance there, in 1980, when the activist group Lesbians of Color confronted the planning committee of the *Great American Lesbian Art Show*. Representatives of the group voiced concern that all six members of the GALAS planning committee were European-American, and that their publicity network did not extend beyond the white community. In response to these criticisms, the GALAS collective expanded its existing outreach to minority women's groups and also reserved two exhibition spaces in East Los Angeles and South-Central L.A. in order "to provide Black lesbians and Latina lesbians an opportunity to exhibit their art work in their own communities, as part of the GALAS regional network."<sup>55</sup> The GALAS invitational exhibition at the Woman's Building, which showcased the art of ten lesbian artist "role-models," ultimately included work by one African-American artist, Lula-Mae Blocton, and one Latina, Gloria Longval.

After GALAS closed, members of the Woman's Building adopted a number of strategies aimed at improving race relations and making the organization a more multicultural institution.<sup>56</sup> Terry Wolverton, who had co-coordinated the GALAS committee's efforts to develop better networks with women of color, initiated a "white women's anti-racism" consciousness-raising group, partly in response to complaints by women of color that



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they were tired of trying to help white women overcome their racism. The Building increased its sponsorship of exhibitions, writing workshops and other events featuring work by women of color, as well as emphasizing cultural exchange. The 1986 "Cross-Pollination" exhibition, for example, including the work of local artists Carol Chen, Michelle Clinton, Sylvia Delgado, Nelvatha Dunbar, Diane Gamboa, Cyndi Kahn, Linda Lopez, Linda Nishio, May Sun, Mari Umekubo, Patti Valdez and Linda Vallejo, as well as artists from other parts of the nation and the world, was particularly successful in attracting a broad audience and boosting the careers of several emerging artists.<sup>57</sup> Despite successful efforts to showcase work by artists and writers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, however, there is no evidence that Building membership among

women of color increased substantially during this period. Another strategy for increasing ethnic diversity at the Building involved hiring women of color for various staff positions. This approach often backfired, as the



*Nelvatha's poster from the "Cross-Pollination" poster project exhibition at Bridge Gallery, L.A. City Hall. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*



*Diane Gamboa's poster from the "Cross-Pollination" poster project exhibition at Bridge Gallery, L.A. City Hall. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

new employees found themselves in the demeaning position of carrying out the vision of long-time Building members (most of whom were white), without holding much autonomous power.

The history of race relations at the Woman's Building is complex and sometimes difficult to assess. Women of color constituted a small but significant portion of the Woman's Building's membership from

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the beginning, and many more participated in events at the Building but did not become members. Many white feminists, additionally, considered the fight against racism an important aspect of the feminist cause. Yet women of color often reported deep ambivalence about their experiences at the Woman's Building (and in relation to the women's movement more generally). For example, as the only Asian-American participant in the *Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, Chris Wong used her performance, *Yellow Queer*, to address the discomfort she felt with white feminists who viewed her as a novelty and an icon: "I was the first Yellow Queer most of these girls had ever seen/ So they had to like me/ because I was the only one they had." Nevertheless, the experience of participating in the performance was "one of the most incredible processes," according to Wong, who credited the project with giving her "the support [she] needed to acknowledge [her] ancestry."<sup>58</sup>

The May 1980 issue of the Woman's Building newsletter, *Spinning Off*, a special issue addressed to "Racism in the (White) Women's Movement," gives voice to the experience of women of color at the Woman's Building, who sometimes faced patronizing assumptions on the part of white feminists about what others should do or believe "for their own good." In an essay calling for women of color to "Confront white feminists," for example, Ariene Inouye-Matsuo argues that European-American feminists' ignorance of cultural differences often fosters a false sense of superiority:

Asian women [working with white feminists]," she writes, "have expressed feelings about being perceived as young, naïve little sisters who lack maturity and sophistication and therefore do not have to be taken seriously. Although Asian women are generally less verbal and tend to avoid conflict, these racist attitudes are not justified."<sup>59</sup>

The Comision Femenil Mexicana, a Mexican-American feminist group that was invited to submit a statement to the newsletter, likewise stressed the barriers imposed by insensitivity to differences in class, race and religious background:

One of the problems about the term feminism is that it's been so associated with the Anglo community that anyone that doesn't meet their criteria, whatever that is, gets left out. If you look at the early woman's movement, Anglo women were demanding . . . to get out of the house . . . or equal pay and access to executive positions. Most of our women are heads of household demanding jobs, period. . . . When we talk about abortion or sterilization, our perspective is again different this time because of our religious upbringing. Because people don't look at that we get told we are not feminist. We get neglected.<sup>60</sup>

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*D and E pages from Astounding Alphabet Stories, an artist book created by children from Plaza de La Raza in a workshop taught by Cheri Gaulke. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

Summing up the position of many, Betty Gilmore expressed the need “to see Third World women at the Building . . . in important roles . . . treated with the respect they do not often receive.”<sup>61</sup>

The precarious financial situation of the Woman's Building throughout the 1980s presented an additional source of instability. In the late 1970s, a downtown artists' district had appeared to be on the rise, but the scene fizzled out in the eighties, some say because of a lack of sustained commitment on the part of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency. The defunct

Los Angeles Theatre Center, for example, had been intended as the centerpiece of a gentrified Spring Street, a vision that never materialized. Many small theaters and arts spaces, including *High Performance* magazine, the Factory Place, Boyd Street Theaters, and Wallenboyd, either relocated or ceased operations during the eighties. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, which opened in 1978, remained one of the few alternative performance venues in Los Angeles, although it moved to Hollywood in the early 90s.<sup>62</sup>

Faced with a political backlash against alternative cultural institutions and drastically reduced government funding, the staff of the Woman's Building struggled to develop a business model that could generate corporate and individual revenues without compromising the organization's integrity. The Building leadership proved remarkably resourceful in this regard. The Women's Graphic Center, with Sue Maberry serving as business manager and Susan King as artistic director, provided an especially important financial foundation for the Woman's Building



*Postcard about two Hispanic girls by Dolores Guerrero-Cruz. Created in the 3-year-long “Postcard Project: Celebrating Our Heroines” taught by artist-in-residence Cheri Gaulke. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)*

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during its second decade, generating revenue from typesetting and design services commissioned by various women's groups, museums and galleries, and local businesses. The Graphic Center also served a vital community-building function in the Building, the neighborhood and the city, proving a popular resource for local artists and amateur designers. Groups of local schoolchildren, for example, were invited to develop their design skills there, and many of these children returned year after year, developing ongoing relationships with project leader Cheri Gaulke and others at the Building. Among the most successful community activities generated by the Women's Graphic Center was Gaulke's "Postcard Project," funded for three consecutive years (1985-88) by the California Arts Council, which enabled non-artist participants to learn the skills to design and print a postcard featuring a personal heroine or role model. During the final year of the project, several participants also designed posters that were displayed on city buses. The festive and elegant Vesta Awards, produced by Terry Wolverton and members of the Board of Directors to honor women for their achievements in the arts, also became a popular community event that attracted generous donations from individual and corporate sponsors. By the mid-eighties, the Woman's Building had recovered substantially from the loss of the FSW in 1981 and a membership low of 200, gradually adding classes, exhibitions and other programming, and rebuilding membership to more than 600 in 1985.

The recovery proved temporary, however. The computer revolution and the advent of computer-generated design dealt the Woman's Building a major financial blow, forcing the Women's Graphic Center out of business in 1987. A growing divide between the few dedicated member administrators struggling to keep the institution afloat, and the Board of Directors, who were removed from day-to-day operations, also took a toll. Finally, the Building was partly a victim of its own substantial success in generating institutional support for women artists in the art establishment. With increasing opportunities in the wider art world, young women artists in the 1980s became increasingly hesitant to associate with an institution they feared might appear to confer upon them a marginalized status. Unable to come clear of its financial difficulties, and with no clear consensus about its operating philosophy, the Woman's Building closed its doors in July of 1991. As Gaulke reviewed the status of the feminist art movement in 1991, shortly after the Building closed, "[t]here [was] a real crisis in determining what the feminist art strategy [was] . . . In deciding to close the public space, the board acknowledged that we don't know. . . ."63

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The Woman's Building made an indelible mark on the city, as well as the global art scene, during its eighteen years in downtown Los Angeles. The Building largely achieved its institutional goals, "to raise consciousness, to create dialogue, and to transform culture," as Arlene Raven legendarily formulated them. The Woman's Building provided a physical and social framework where artists and other women found the intellectual and emotional support to redefine their sense of identity, analyzing and challenging the dominant culture's often derogatory and exploitive images of women. From this supportive base, women at the Building intervened in the city's institutional machinery, including the popular media as well as the art world infrastructure, to help create a more democratic and more humane urban community. Los Angeles is poorer for its loss.

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<sup>1</sup> David James, "Popular Cinemas in Los Angeles: The Case of Visual Communications," *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, David James, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Nochlin documented the historical lack of institutional support for women artists in her provocatively-titled essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Artnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971).

<sup>3</sup> More than 1,500 images of people, activities, and events at the Woman's Building between 1973 and 1991 are available on the World Wide Web. See the Woman's Building Digital Image Archive, <http://www.woman-building.org/wb/>. Another valuable resource is the Woman's Building Oral History Project, which comprises interviews with more than thirty former Building members conducted by Michelle Moravec, available upon request from the Woman's Building Board of Directors. A comprehensive written account of the Woman's Building is Michelle Moravec's doctoral dissertation, "Building Women's Culture" (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1998). A memoir of her years at the Woman's Building by former executive director Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building*, was published by City Lights Publishers in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Anderson suggests that nations are imagined because in even the smallest, members will never know most of their "fellow-members." This differs from the situation at the Woman's Building, where the membership of 500 or so women probably recognized one another by sight and in many cases had close relationships. But insofar as the community around the Woman's Building was constructed out of a desire to create identity, a sense of togetherness, and a shared vision for the future, it can be viewed as a symbolic community. Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier's concept of a "social movement community," defined as "a network of individuals and groups loosely linked through an institutional base, multiple goals and actions and a collective identity that affirms members' common interests in opposition to dominant groups" is also a useful model for the community that developed around the Woman's Building. Taylor and Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 107.

<sup>5</sup> Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, interview by Michelle Moravec, Woman's Building Oral History Project, 12 August 1992, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>6</sup> See Kristin G. Esterberg, *Lesbian and Bisexual Identities: Constructing Communities, Constructing Selves* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1997. Also see Deborah G. Wolf, *The Lesbian Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1979; Taylor and Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities," 104-129.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Judy Chicago, *Everywoman 2*, (7 May 1971), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artists' Movement, Southern California, 1970-1976* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977), 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-1975," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Everywoman 2* (7 May 1971).

<sup>13</sup> Photographic documentation of *Womanhouse* is available in a catalogue, *Womanhouse*, designed by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. Photographs of the installation can also be seen in Faith Wilding's book about the early years of the feminist art movement, *By Our Own Hands*, 24-29; and Arlene Raven's essay, *Womanhouse*, in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 48-65.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the catalog, documentation of *Womanhouse* included a forty-minute documentary film by Johanna Demetrakas, reviews in *Time* (20 March 1972), *New Woman* (April/May 1972) and the *Los Angeles Times* (17 January 1972), among other publications; and a one-hour television special on KNET-TV, Los Angeles (Channel 28), produced by Lynn Litman in 1972.

<sup>15</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Fertility, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Lucy R. Lippard described the opening of the Woman's Building in a contemporary issue of *Art in America*. See "The L.A. Woman's Building," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 96-100. Reprinted from *Art in America* 62, no. 3 (May-June 1974).

<sup>17</sup> See Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, 62.

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<sup>18</sup> Cheri Gaulke, interview by Michelle Moravec, Woman's Building Oral History Project, 6 August 1992, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, interview by Michelle Moravec, Woman's Building Oral History Project, 12 August 1992, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, quoted in Liz McQuiston, *Women in Design: A Contemporary View* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, 79-80.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Lacy, interview by Laura Meyer, 19 December, 2001, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>25</sup> See Moria Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles, Astro Artz, 1983), 114-115. Also see Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May*, unpublished documentation commissioned by Studio Watts Workshop, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in Broude and Garrard, ed., *The Power of Feminist Art*, 267.

<sup>27</sup> Gaulke, interview by Moravec.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Durland, quoted in Jan Breslauer, "Woman's Building Lost to a Hitch in 'Herstory,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Terry Wolverton makes this point, compellingly, by way of response to some critics' position that 1970s feminist art was unsophisticated in comparison to the poststructuralist critiques of gender favored in the 1980s. Terry Wolverton, "The Women's Art Movement Today," *Artweek* 21, no. 5 (8 February 1990).

<sup>30</sup> De Bretteville, interview by Moravec.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *The First Decade: Celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the Woman's Building* (Los Angeles: The Woman's Building, 1983), 4, quoted in Moravec, "Building Women's Culture," 173, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>33</sup> Gaulke, interview by Moravec. Gaulke explains that although "that's going to sound like a cult or something it was really just a bunch of individuals struggling to figure out who they were with each other."

<sup>34</sup> Terry Wolverton, interview by Laura Meyer 1998, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>35</sup> Natalie Barney was an American lesbian expatriate who hosted a famous artistic and literary salon in 1920s Paris.

<sup>36</sup> Lesbian Art Project manuscript, 24 May 1978, cited in Moravec, "Building Women's Culture," 132.

<sup>37</sup> See Terry Wolverton, "The Lesbian Art Project," *Heresies* no. 7 (Spring 1979).

<sup>38</sup> Terry Wolverton, *FEMINA: AN INTRASPACE VOYAGE*, unpublished script (voice of Dyana Siberstein/"SeaNee").

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Christon, "Feminism Lifts Off at Woman's Bulding," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 May 1978, calendar section.

<sup>42</sup> Wolverton kept this letter with her archival materials from *FEMINA*, where I later found it. [Editors Note: Wolverton's archives have since been donated to Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California Los Angeles (Terry Wolverton Papers, Collection 445.)]

<sup>43</sup> Gaulke, interview by Moravec.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Tyaga was the principal organizer of the event and the GALAS collective also included Bia Lowe, Louise Moore, Jody Palmer, Barbara Stopha and Terry Wolverton. Lowe curated the invitational exhibition and Tyaga organized the national GALAS network.

<sup>46</sup> The artists featured in the invitational exhibition were Lula Mae Blocton, Tee Corinne, Betsy Damon, Louise Fishman, Nancy Fried, Harmony Hammond, Debbie Jones, Lili Lakich, Gloria Longval and Kate Millet.

<sup>47</sup> One of the first efforts to theorize lesbian art was Arlene Raven and Ruth Iskin's essay, "Through the Peep-hole: Toward a Lesbian Sensibility in Art," *Chrysalis*, Los Angeles, CA: No. 2, 1977, 19-28.

<sup>48</sup> In an otherwise enthusiastic review in *Artweek*, Neal Menzies dismisses Kate Millet's photographs and Debbie Jones' mixed media sculptures as unclear, poorly crafted and vulgar.

<sup>49</sup> Harmony Hammond, [*GALAS*] Guidebook (Los Angeles: The Woman's Building, 1980).

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<sup>50</sup> The Boston GALAS exhibition was carried out entirely “underground” and only advertised by word of mouth, after the coordinators “spent impossible months finding spaces for the show and then being turned down due to sudden fits of homophobia.” They also worried that work in the show might be damaged or destroyed. Nevertheless, the group deemed the event a great success, with sixty artists and twenty-five performers participating, successful fundraising activities, and positive coverage in the gay and lesbian press. [Boston GALAS exhibition coordinator, letter to Terry Wolverton, 1980. Terry Wolverton Papers, Collection 445, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.]

<sup>51</sup> Terry Wolverton, “We Are Everywhere,” [GALAS] Guidebook (Los Angeles: The Woman's Building, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Persephone Press, 1981). “In April, 1979, we wrote: We want to express to all women—especially to white middle class women—the experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement. We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions. We want to create a definition that expands what “feminist” means to us.” xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Terry Wolverton, cited in Jan Breslauer, “Woman's Building Lost to a Hitch in Herstory,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1992, sec. F.

<sup>54</sup> Cheri Gaulke, who entered the Feminist Studio Workshop as a heterosexual and later came out as a lesbian, remembers that straight women sometimes felt persecuted at the Woman's Building, in an ironic reversal of experience outside. When she decided to participate in workshops for the *Oral History of Lesbianism*, at least one woman threatened to boycott the play if Gaulke was in it. Midway through the project, however, Gaulke decided that she was a lesbian so the crisis was averted. Gaulke, interview by Moravec.

<sup>55</sup> GALAS Press Release, 7 February 1980.

<sup>56</sup> See Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, “‘At Home’ at the Woman's Building (But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?): Women of Color and Community” in this e-Book.

<sup>57</sup> “Cross Pollination,” April 16, 1986, Woman's Building Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, quoted in Moravec, “Building Women's Culture,” 202. The first “Cross Pollination” exhibition was curated by Josine Ianco-Starrels, Samella Lewis and Candace Lee at the Woman's Building in June 1979.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Wong, quoted in “An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism,” *Frontiers* 4, no. 3 (1979), 52-53.

<sup>59</sup> Arlene Inouye-Matsuo, “Confront white feminists,” *Spinning Off* (May 1980), 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Creating a Vehicle for Change: Comision Feminil Mexicana,” *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Betty Gilmore, “Racial Prejudice Is a Serious Social Disease,” *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jan Breslauer, “Woman's Building Lost to a Hitch in ‘Herstory,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1992, sec. F.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

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