

Why Not Judy Chicago?: Reflections from Barbara I. Dewey, Dean of University Libraries & Scholarly Communications, Penn State University

I was fortunate to attend the opening of the groundbreaking exhibition *Why Not Judy Chicago?* held at the Azkuna Zentroa in Bilbao, Spain. The exhibition and surrounding events were done in collaboration with the Musée d'art Contemporain de Bordeaux and Penn State University October 8-10, 2015. The exhibition, covering more than 50 years of Chicago's work, was brilliantly curated by Xabier Arakistain.

My attendance was an important follow up to Penn State's 2011 acquisition of the Judy Chicago Art Education Archives and major events at Penn State surrounding her 75th birthday including a symposium with Judy as keynote speaker "Judy Chicago: Planting a Feminist Art Education Archive," and exhibitions at the Penn State Palmer Museum *Surveying Judy Chicago: Five Decades* and in the Special Collections Library *Challenge Yourself: Judy Chicago's Studio Art Pedagogy*. Additionally, Penn State College of Art and Architecture developed the Judy Chicago Art Education Portal, a virtual and interactive way to have worldwide discussions related to issues of pedagogy providing an alternative means of documenting ideas and advancing feminist scholarship and teaching.

In *Why Not Judy Chicago?* I was struck by the way Arakistain balanced the meaning and impact of individual works with a sense of comprehensive understanding of the totality of the works. The title of the show, itself, tries to answer the question of why THE legendary pioneer of feminist art has not been recognized by the mainstream art world until now. Arakistain organized Chicago's work around the main conceptual, visual and political questions raised by Judy Chicago regarding art institutions and patriarchy. The exhibition touches on deep themes including her creation of a feminist iconography representing women where none existed. The earlier work also delves into the historical when references to women were rare. The art works in the show document her search for the history of feminist art. In the 21st century Chicago focuses on a redefinition and application of present day human rights. I found myself going through the exhibition "in order," "backwards," and by individual works to comprehend its meaning to me as a decades-long follower of Chicago's work. The exhibition will also travel to Bordeaux.

The venue, Azkuna Zentroa, was perfect for the exhibition fitting well into Chicago's philosophy of community, collaboration, and accessibility. Azkuna Zentroa, previously known as Alhóndiga Bilbao, is a multi-purpose venue located in the city of Bilbao, Spain. It was designed by French designer Philippe Starck in collaboration with Thibaut Mathieu and was opened to the public in stages between 18 May and 24 October 2010. The venue, labeled as a "Culture and Leisure Centre", consists of a cinema multiplex, a fitness centre (including swimming pool), a library, showrooms, an auditorium, shops, and a restaurant. In March 2015 its name was officially changed to Azkuna Zentroa in tribute to the late mayor of Bilbao Iñaki Azkuna. Originally a wine warehouse, it was designed by Basque architect Ricardo Bastida and inaugurated in 1909. However, in the 1970s, a new warehouse was planned and the Alhóndiga was abandoned. Several projects were suggested, ranging from public housing, a museum of

modern art, or even demolishing the entire building, but all were scrapped. Finally, in 1994 it was decided to renovate it and build a sports and culture center.

In addition to attending the opening of *Why Not Judy Chicago?* and accompanying symposium I also attended a meeting with international collaborators noted below to discuss an emerging international collaboration called "Art and Culture, Feminist Knowledge Network." Attending the meeting, held at the Azkuna Zentroa, were Lourdes Fernandez (Director of Azkuna Zentroa), Xabier Arakistain (Curator "Why Not Judy Chicago?"), Alasne Martin, Head of the Mediateka BBK (library), Lourdes Mendez (Chair of the Basque Country University for Art Anthropology and Director of "Feminist Perspectives in art productions and theories of art"), and Barbara Epalza, Institutional Relationship and Marketing Manager of Azkuna Zentroa. Hilary Robinson (Dean, Art and Design, Middlesex University), and Maria Ines Rodriguez (Director of Musee d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux) were unable to attend but are partners in the Art and Culture, Feminist Knowledge Network.

Xabier Arakistain conducted a conversation with Judy Chicago kicking off the seminar, "Feminist Perspectives in Artistic Productions and Theories of Art." Conducted in Spanish and English the conversation covered many aspects of Judy's art, pedagogy, and life experience. Her discussions of deficiencies, at best, and complete erasure, at worse, of the feminist experience resonated with my own experiences and thinking over time (and still to this day). She put this in the context of the huge deficits in mainstream art which required her to take a radical approach to creating, what she termed feminist art. The deeply personal, yet universally applicable conversation was an excellent way to help viewers better understand the exhibition's holistic approach to her work and especially the historical context.

The culminating event was the seminar "Feminist Perspectives in Artistic Productions and Theories of Art" co-organized by Xabier Arakistain and Lourdes Mendez. The seminar featured important talks on feminist art and Judy Chicago. Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director, The Getty Research Institute placed Judy Chicago's earlier work (such as *Car Hood*) in the context of pop art that was occurring at the time in Los Angeles, mainly by male artists. He also addressed the powerful *Lifesavers* underscoring its bold feminist ethos and counterpoint to mainstream art. Jane F. Gerhard, noted scholar and writer, provided an in depth analysis of Judy Chicago's iconic work, *The Dinner Party* and talked about her book of the same name reminding us that its execution was collaborative with over 400 people working on different aspects of Judy's vision. Its challenges including tremendous success in San Francisco and subsequent museum tour cancellations, criticism of female body-related images, and the reality that the art, itself, was forced into hiding until it finally found its home in the Brooklyn Museum were discussed. Amelia Jones, the Robert A. Day Professor in Art and Design and Vice-Dean of Critical Studies, USC, discussed the history of feminism and, especially the "2nd wave" including Judy Chicago. She highlighted the power of *The Red Flag* as an explicit woman image and also discussed Judy Chicago's innovative pedagogy and how it played out in the 1960s and 1970s. Edward Lucie-Smith, internationally known art critic and historian, wrote the 2000 biography, *Judy Chicago*. He asserts that she plays a central role, not only in the narrative of feminist art, but also in the

story of 20th and 21st century American Art. The seminar was also enriched with commentary by Judy Chicago, Xabier Arakistain, and Lourdes Mendez as well as an incredible array of questions from an audience of different generations.

In summary, attending *Why Not Judy Chicago?* and events surrounding it was a tremendous opportunity to focus, not only on Chicago's work, but also on how the institution of "library" can erase the deficit of feminist art and knowledge and preserve this erasure forever. I look forward to future collaborations and projects to that end.