

In Memory of Audrey Cowan
(1931-2017)

I first met Audrey in 1976 when she came to work on *The Dinner Party*. Actually, Diane Gelon (or Gelon as we all called her), the project administrator, probably met her first as many people came to my Santa Monica studio in hopes of participating in the creation of what would be the first major work of feminist art. Gelon interviewed the prospective volunteers and integrated those she accepted into the studio environment. Those were heady days; everyone involved realized that we were embarked on a great undertaking as we commemorated 1038 women, many of whom had almost been lost to history.

After *The Dinner Party* was finished, premiered and on its voyage around the world to six countries, three continents and a viewing audience of over one million people (not to mention the controversy it engendered), Audrey approached me to ask if I would consider working with her again. I didn't really know her that well then but over the next thirty five years this would definitely change. I'm sure her kids - Jon and Abby - remember me as the woman who kept taking their mother's attention away from them because they were still young when Audrey and I began our long weaving collaboration.

By then, I had become interested in the subject of birth and designed a monumental tapestry for Audrey to weave. She had amplified her already skilled techniques with a stint at the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop where the Entry banners for *The Dinner Party* were woven. Together, we modified the traditional Aubusson tapestry method by transforming the rote position of the weaver who - historically - had worked from the back of the tapestry with a series of threaded bobbins around (his) neck. Instead, Audrey worked from the front so that she could see and have input into the translation of my painted cartoons into the finished tapestry.

Over the next few decades, Donald and I became very close with Bob and Audrey. The Cowans came to our wedding in Santa Fe. We held memorials for my brother and my mother in the backyard of their Evanston house, a house that I commemorated with a drawing when it was sold because it held so many memories for us. Audrey became part of all my successive projects and I made regular trips to L.A. to check the progress of her weaving. She traveled with Donald and me on part of our trip through the 'landscape of the Holocaust' as we prepared for the long journey that would culminate in the *Holocaust Project*, in which Audrey's huge tapestry would

contribute to the understanding we were trying to create; that the Holocaust - far from being unique - had grown out of the very fabric of Western civilization, hence the use of tapestry. She also worked on a series of weavings related to some of my later series, *PowerPlay*, *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* and an odd project that I did in China.

Donald and I often cited Bob as the 'husband of the year' because whenever Audrey was finishing a tapestry, which often required 14 hour days, he would step in and handle all the life needs of their family. And for many years, she served on the board of Through the Flower which provided the only support I had as an artist in those long decades when I battled the art world which seemed intent on denying me and my work the place they deserve.

But all that began to change in 2007 when *The Dinner Party* was acquired and donated by Elizabeth Sackler to the Brooklyn Museum where - for ten years - it has served as the centerpiece of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. This past year, the museum has been celebrating the Sackler Center and the success of *The Dinner Party* as it is responsible for over 20% of the museum's traffic. In the fall, the first exhibition examining my creative process in *The Dinner Party* will take place at which time the museum is planning a gala dinner honoring me and my contributions.

I only wish that Audrey could be here to attend because whatever success I have achieved is - in no small part - the result of the staunch support provided by Audrey and Bob along with a small group of close friends and colleagues. Lastly, I am deeply grateful that Bob made it possible for our body of tapestries to become part of the collection of the Museum of Art and Design in New York where it will be a lasting commemoration of not only the weaving partnership between Audrey and me but of the deep ties between her, Bob, Donald and me.