

WHEN FEMINIST ART WENT PUBLIC

An upcoming exhibition in Los Angeles will celebrate the Woman's Building and the remarkable artistic community it nurtured from 1973 to 1991. Our *Ms.* senior editor was there at the start.

BY MICHELE KORT

Below: Woman's Building founders Sheila de Bretteville (center), Arlene Raven (right) and Judy Chicago; opposite page: 1975 conference poster designed by de Bretteville (top); Chutney Gunderson and "driver" Cheryl Swannack in "An Oral History of Lesbianism" (bottom left); Cheri Gaulke's 1985 installation "This Is My Body"

A YOUNG WOMAN ARTIST, JAZZMIN MEINS, ENTERED THE LARGE room on roller skates, her body wrapped neck-to-knees in medical gauze. As she skated around in front of the audience, she slowly unwrapped the gauze—until she stood before us naked. Then she went into a crouch and laid an egg. Literally.

That was my introduction to performance art at the Woman's Building in downtown Los Angeles, the first public center in the U.S. devoted to feminist art. It was 1974, a revolutionary time for the "second sex," and when art met feminism the results were unlike what most of us had seen before: brash, raw, in your face, stripped-down (performance artists often disrobed, the metaphor of self-revelation inescapable) and all about the brilliant and messy realities of being a woman.

What a change from the art history I had studied at UCLA in the late 1960s/early '70s. Our hefty primary text—H.W. Janson's *History of Art*—included *no* woman artist. Not even Mary Cassatt, the American Impressionist known for her pretty portraits of mothers and daughters—inoffensive, acceptable female subject matter.

But what happened if young women artists wanted to bust out of that mold? My friend Paula Gray, who studied at L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute in the 1960s, was once snarled at by a teacher that her work was "so goddamn bold and crude." It would have been a high compliment to a male artist.

Or women art students were treated as fragile flowers. "A friend of mine told me I shouldn't take welding because I wasn't strong enough," says Susan King, who studied in university art schools before coming to the Woman's Building. "So I ended up in ceramics—where I had to lift 50-pound kiln shelves and 100-pound bags of clay."

Three disaffected teachers at the California Institute for the Arts (Cal Arts)—visual artist Judy Chicago, art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville—felt that they couldn't fully realize their feminist



PHOTOS COURTESY OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN; OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT: JO GOODWIN



ideals within institutional confines, so in the flush of the era's fervor started their own school: the Feminist Studio Workshop, the primary Woman's Building tenant.

"We were coming out of the late-1960s' organizing against authority that was oppressive and against overlooking of people who weren't white male," says de Bretteville (who went on to become the first woman tenured at the Yale University School of Art). "Some of my desires [in starting FSW] had to do with not having to go ask some guy whether I could do something I wanted to do!"

The charismatic Chicago (née Cohen—a number of women in the arts changed their names at the time, liberating themselves from male stereotypes and proclaiming new identities) had first developed her feminist teaching methodology at California State University in Fresno. Then she and artist Miriam Schapiro started the Cal Arts program just north of L.A. Pre-Woman's Building, their students famously transformed a derelict mansion in Hollywood into "Womanhouse"—complete with a crocheted womb room, menstruation bathroom, egg-breast kitchen and bridal staircase.

Raven (née Rubin)'s mission was to unearth and honor all the fabulous women artists that Janson left out; de Bretteville (her married surname) was eager to explore visual ways to promote equal participation and nurture conversations among people with diverse viewpoints. Together, the three could incubate their ideas with a group of young women who flocked to the building from around the U.S., Canada, Mexico and even Europe.

Aside from the FSW, the Woman's Building housed other women's art galleries and small businesses, including a feminist bookstore and the L.A. office of the National Organization for Women. It took its name from the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which was designed by a woman architect, Sophia Hayden. It was the perfect role model: That

building honored women's art, crafts and historical achievements, and was the site of speeches by suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone.

But the name "Woman's Building" proved surprisingly provocative in the early 1970s. Men would often ask us, "So where is the *men's* building?" I couldn't help but hear that as a combination of "How dare you make your own space?" and "*Waaah*, you're leaving us out!" But we had a simple answer: "Every other building in town."

Having followed up my art history B.A. with a masters in arts administration, my newfound feminism had led me right to the 20th century Woman's Building, where I became one of the first administrators, along with Susan King.

"At the building, there wasn't any limitation on what you could do—you could go from performance to sculpture to photography," says King, who had switched artistic media from ceramics to printing, creating "artist's books" at the building's Women's Graphics Center, which de Bretteville had set up with printing presses and silkscreen equipment. "At the Graphics Center," King adds, "you could write your book, design your book, print your book, bind your book."

The idea was to make your art public. De Bretteville encouraged women to take the books, postcards and posters they had created and disseminate them. In one project she led—"Private Conversations, Public Announcements"—artists and designers specifically designed and printed a poster for somewhere in L.A. where they felt uncomfortable, then negotiated to put it up *at that place*.

Equally public were performances and installations by art "collectives" that were formed by FSW students. Mother Art hung their work in a place where they felt sure to encounter other mothers—laundromats—while the Waitresses, sporting classic white uniforms with red aprons, performed humorous skits at restaurants that illuminated the exploitation and harassment faced by women "serving"

BOTTOM LEFT: LAURA AGUILAR

