

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



Opposite page: Susan King and Michele Kort (standing) in Woman's Building office in 1974 (top left); women in the "Madre Tierra" project print artwork in Women's Graphic Center (bottom left); Denise Yarfitz and Anne Gauldin (in breasts costume) perform as the Waitresses; this page: Women pose naked to request donations for Woman's Building thrift store.

others. "Some of the customers that were there... thought that the waitresses were actually revolting in the restaurant itself," says "waitress" Anne Gauldin.

The "Lesbian Art Project"—initiated by Raven (who died of cancer in 2006) and encompassing performances, exhibits and workshops—made lesbians more visible at a time when stepping outside the closet wasn't as safe or as common as it is today. And there was the "Incest Awareness Project," which put forth an exhibition that brought a painfully taboo subject to public attention. "One of the writers at the *Los Angeles Times* told me that the only reason she could write about incest is that we had a show about it," says de Bretteville.

Women artists, lesbian and otherwise, were also creating videos (often of themselves performing), injecting a new energy into the medium that has continued its growth to this day. "You can't go to a museum now without rooms dedicated to video art," says Kirsten Grimstad, co-author of *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, one of the early feminist must-have books, and a founding editor of *Chrysalis*, a magazine of feminist art and writing. "And using video art to explore your own experience was nurtured by the Woman's Building."

We certainly needed that nurturing, and a public space for women's art, because the mainstream art world—"the big ball game," as Judy Chicago (who famously went on to create "The Dinner Party") wryly put it—wasn't providing any room. In 1970, less than 5 percent of the artists featured in the prestigious Biennial at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art were female. Similarly, the L.A. County Museum of Art's huge "Art and Technology" exhibit, which ran from 1967 to 1971, was 100 percent white male. Don't even ask how few women were represented at big-name private art galleries. Those dismal gender ratios were what led women artists—most vocally in New York and Los Angeles, at the outset—to protest, form consciousness-raising

groups, curate their own shows and eventually start their own galleries and institutions.

With the Woman's Building, we could right the imbalances by, yes, *building* a feminist world with our own hands. Aside from making sure that the rent was paid and the books balanced, I was personally given the chance to curate a number of women's art shows—most excitingly, one featuring legendary photographer Imogen Cunningham's work. I was also able to hear great writers like Jill Johnston and Margaret Atwood read their work at our fervent little enclave. I even wrote and printed a self-made "artist's book" (one whose purpose is visual and conceptual as well as textual)—unknowingly the beginning of my future career. I was, proudly, part of feminist history.

That history still lives within each of us who spent time at the building, where we learned that not only was the personal political, but so was art. One sign of triumph for this art-history student: The newest edition of Janson's *Basic History of Western Art* has a painting by a woman, Artemisia Gentileschi, on its cover!

But I think artist/teacher/former FSW student and "waitress" Jerri Allyn perhaps says it best about what the Woman's Building meant to artists who were feminists: "I was constantly [going] back and forth—am I going to be an artist or a social activist lawyer? Feminist art really brought together those two things for me—that art could make an impact in the world, through aligning with activists. ...Coming upon the Woman's Building in Los Angeles..." Allyn continued, "It rocked my world." ■

If you missed those early days of feminist art—or if you miss them—you can catch up at "Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building," the retrospective that will fill the Ben Maltz Gallery at L.A.'s Otis College of Art and Design from Oct. 1, 2011 through Jan. 28, 2012. Curated by Sue Maberry (a longtime Woman's Building project director, now director of library and information technology at Otis) and Meg Linton (director of galleries and exhibitions at Otis), the gallery show will be accompanied by two scholarly books about the building and a series of public events. For further information, see <https://wbexhibit.otis.edu/>.

MICHELE KORT is senior editor of Ms. She is also the author of several books, including *Soul Picnic: The Music and Passion of Laura Nyro*.