

LA WOMEN

“DOIN’ IT IN PUBLIC: FEMINISM AND ART AND THE WOMAN’S BUILDING” AT BEN MALTZ GALLERY AT OTIS

BY TUCKER NEEL

“DOIN’ IT IN PUBLIC: FEMINISM AND ART and the Woman’s Building” is not a typical art exhibition that limits itself to presenting rarefied and canonized art objects for public contemplation. No, this show transforms the gallery into a museum, packed to the brim with hundreds of archival documents, video footage, photographs and other historical ephemera generated from one of the most important, yet conspicuously least-talked-about institutions in Los Angeles art history: The Woman’s Building (WB).

Displayed in dozens of Plexiglas-covered vitrines, this archival documentation charts the history of the Woman’s Building from its precedents in the 1893 Columbian exhibition in Chicago, to its founding in downtown LA in 1973, to eventual closure in 1991. The exhibition highlights the importance of the WB founders: artist Judy Chicago, designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and art historian Arlene Raven, and surveys educational, activist and exhibition programs undertaken by the hundreds of women who worked together under the WB program. Additionally, about one-third of the cavernous gallery is devoted to installations created by artist collectives that came out of the WB, like the Sisters of Survival and The Feminist Art Workers. The Waitresses, a group formed to address the exploitation of working women, presents an installation consisting of a short-order diner table with a juke box playing narratives from women about what it’s like to work in the food service business. Visitors are invited to listen to these audio tracks while enjoying place mats emblazoned with invented games — like word jumbles — about famous women throughout history.

I had the pleasure of touring this epic exhibition with its curators, Meg Linton and Sue Mayberry, who have spent the better part of the last four years, in conjunction with a selection of distinguished scholars, working to make all this temporary museological undertaking a reality. While walking through the exhibition I remark that, while many Pacific Standard Time exhibitions no doubt highlight the contributions of certain individual artists or curators, this show, while certainly foregrounding certain standouts (the WB founders and Suzanne Lacy are recurring figures throughout), is much more concerned with presenting the WB as a col-

lective endeavor. “The Woman’s Building had art stars and famous artists involved, but it was a movement, a center where different people could flow in and out,” Mayberry points out. Looking around at all the work unattributable to a singular creator, from documentary photographs to clandestine flyers alerting people to an unannounced protest, it becomes clear that the exhibition is more about the collective than the individual. “One of our challenges was how to present an entire building, all the activities, and the sense of an era,” Linton explains.

When I ask the curators what surprises they encountered during their extensive research, Mayberry, herself a veteran of the Woman’s Building, says that one significant experience was going through letters written to the WB from women who passed through its program, people like Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood. “We pored through all the letters at the Smithsonian, and they are all signed ‘In Sisterhood ... In Sisterhood ... In Sisterhood,’” Mayberry recalls. That recurring salutation articulates an emphatic solidarity, a positioning of one’s struggle as intrinsically linked to another’s.

We walk to a display case near the exhibition entrance holding a bronze work boot atop a small wooden stand with a plaque reading, “Through the Soles: My Struggles as a Woman Artist” With love, / Ten years later, / Faith and Suzanne, October 16, 1980.” This odd readymade object is resonant of a symbolic step in women’s art history, Mayberry explains: When Chicago taught the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State, she looked around the room at her students, all women dressed in sandals, and assigned them to go out and buy work boots. The message was clear: if women were going to make a space for themselves in the patriarchal art world, they would have to actually build it themselves — by hand, together. Like a gilded children’s bootie saved by nostalgic parents, this bronze clodhopper is something of a preserved reminder of a body in a developmental stage, a memento of potentiality. At the same time, as a working-class accoutrement providing both strength and protection to its user, the heavy boot stands as an apt metaphorical entry point to the exhibition, a silent testament to a story of women building a physical, social and psychological space of

force and support.

One grouping of documents highlights the Women’s Graphic Center (WGC), which housed the WB printing and design facilities. Headed by de Bretteville, the WGC gave women the tools to design their messages and get them out to the public at a time when the means to do so were limited and expensive. “Shelia designed a lot of the work for the WB. A lot of this was her aesthetic,” Mayberry points out. Looking at de Bretteville’s iconic WB poster, depicting her signature bolt and I-screw female icons receding infinitely into the distance on a gridded plane, one can see just how prescient and enduring her design practice was, and is.

Linton notes that while the show is filled with printed ephemera like posters and postcards, these documents are artworks in themselves. In support, she references the Private Conversations Public Announcements project, a workshop taught by de Bretteville that inspired women to create printed material about topics they were exploring during consciousness-raising sessions at the WB. “They are posters, developed out of their consciousness-raising, but then they are put into public places where they wanted their message to be seen,” Linton says, suggesting how all this printed matter pushed the boundaries of what exactly defines “art.” One work on display from this project is *The Chinese Woman* by Helene Ly from 1981, a diazo print of white text on a red background, with the “W” and “A” in the word “WOMAN” replaced with the Chinese character for woman. The artist glued this print in public places around Chinatown in LA, rewriting the urban landscape while commenting on nationality and hidden female identity; for example, changing a sign reading “Grand Opening” into “Grand Woman.”

Another section holds documents from GALAS, the Great American Lesbian Art Show, one of the first exhibitions to showcase work by lesbian artists and highlight lesbian identity as a subject appropriate for contemporary art. Mayberry points out the collective spirit underpinning this show: “They actually put a packet together letting people know how to put on the exhibition, so instead of doing just one exhibition at the WB, they wanted shows to happen all over the country, so that lesbian art shows hap-

pened all over the country at the same time... There hadn't been anything like that before." This kind of empowerment permeates the entire exhibition; the whole point being that if a space doesn't exist for a certain kind of artwork – or artist – the only thing to do is to pick up the tools you've got and get to work constructing it.

"I think it's cycling back around and I think more and more people are wanting these kind of experiences," Linton states as we discuss the legacy of the WB, how there really aren't many similar spaces like it left in America. In light of the recent Occupy Wall Street protests, which once again have people working together to build solutions from the rubble of failed policy, against a backdrop of rampant inequality, this show about the community generated by the WB seems quite timely. In this way the exhibition is not simply nostalgic, but instructional, providing the opportunity to engage distant or lost methodologies for demanding and creating change, a blueprint for how to carve out a space for divergent opinions and for ways of working through problems the dominant culture ignores or simply refuses to really address. ☺

"Do In' It In Public: Feminism and Art and the Woman's Building" at Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis through January 28, 2012, info: otis.edu



IF WOMEN WERE GOING TO MAKE A SPACE FOR THEMSELVES IN THE PATRIARCHAL ART WORLD, THEY WOULD HAVE TO ACTUALLY BUILD IT THEMSELVES

Right, Top: Performance Art Props and Memorabilia: Suzanne Lacy, "Through the Soles/My Struggles as a Woman Artist"/ With love,/Ten years later,/Faith and Suzanne, 1980; Everywoman, 1972; Soft Sculpture Props for the "Cock and Cunt Play" by Judy Chicago, 1971/2009

Right, bottom: exhibition view

