

Judy Chicago's Dinner Party

Feminist cuisine a sensuous feast

by Libby Drake

It was easy for me as a woman to sympathize with Judy Chicago when she spoke about her art in SUB Theatre Tuesday night. "Women's history has been distorted and swept under the rug for too long now," she said, "I want to end that once and for all with *The Dinner Party*."

Chicago's work is a reaction to a one-sided view of culture. She appropriates simple images and common symbols, using them to expose the hidden half of our culture. "*The Dinner Party*", Chicago's major work, testifies to the beauty, self-containment, and strength of women.

The work combines female imagery with the history of woman in Western civilization and crafts traditionally associated with female domestic roles, to create a piece of art that has been heralded as a masterpiece. Upon

scrutiny, with immaculate details, which tease the intellect and the eye, add to the hypnotic beauty of the piece, and provide it with much of its political/social impact.

The Dinner Party is an environment in itself. Set around an enormous triangular table, it represents a ceremonial gathering of 39 women who have each made a significant contribution to society, attempted to improve the condition of women, and whose life illuminated an aspect of women's experience or provided a model for the future.

The women are represented by sculpted ceramic plates set on intricately embroidered runners bearing their names. In the centre of the table/triangle a highly polished, white porcelain tile floor lays covered with the gold scripted names of 999 other socially significant women.



Judy Chicago and ceramicist Leonard Skura carving a plate.

This story is almost as fascinating as the work itself.

Documented in Chicago's film, *Right out of History: the Making of The Dinner Party*, shown Tuesday night in SUB theatre, sponsored by SU art gallery one sees how the organization of volunteers was instrumental in shaping the work. Chicago designed, directed and held ultimate control over the project, with the group functioning as a non-authoritarian, benevolent hierarchy, devoted to feminist ideals.

Consciousness raising of group members was incorporated into the assembly procedure. Chicago demanded that her co-workers be aware of the issues involved.

"That's the problem," Chicago says in the film, "Women are so fucking ignorant. No wonder we're walked over. You can't make any positive changes if you don't know what's going on, nobody has and nobody will. And as long as women remain fucking ignorant, we're not going to help liberate ourselves."

"My goal is to educate people; to

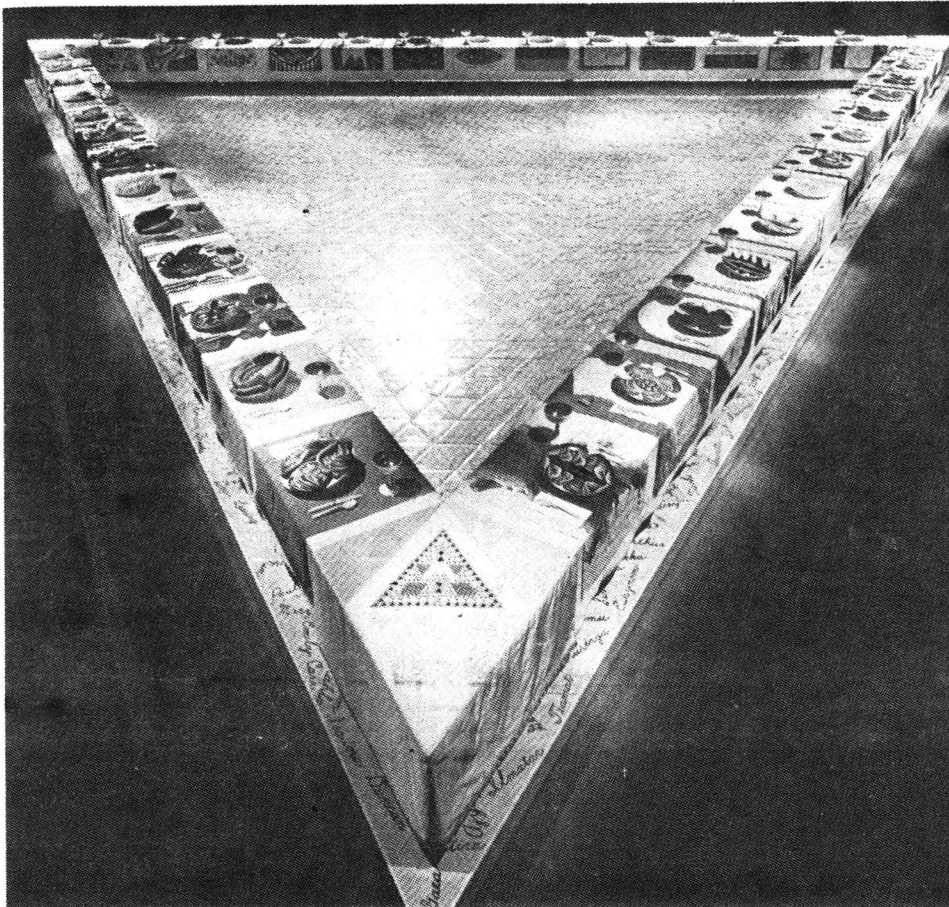
introduce women's art into the culture in a way that will expose as many people as possible to it, she explained.

And there is no doubt that she has accomplished this with *The Dinner Party*. Even if people do object to the vaginal imagery the piece contains, there is no missing her intent. She insists that women be heard and respected.

Similarly, there is no question that Chicago has had an impact.

Relying only on word-of-mouth to promote Chicago's film and lecture, the SU Art Gallery staff were able to pack SUB Theatre. Over 250,000 people have seen *The Dinner Party* in Brooklyn where it is currently shown, and at least that many saw it in San Francisco where it opened. It was in storage for a while after the San Francisco display because no galleries offered to display the enormous piece.

But public pressure kept it from dying and it is now on the road again. Hopefully more of us will get to see the piece. In recognizing our past, we can only hope to affirm our future.



The Dinner Party, five years in the making, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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