

WOMANHOUSE CATALOG ESSAY

BY JUDY CHICAGO AND MIRIAM SCHAPIRO, CO-DIRECTORS, THE FEMINIST ART PROGRAM

Womanhouse began early in the fall of 1971, Paula Harper, art historian in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, inspired us by suggesting the idea. The Program was just beginning again after an experimental year at Fresno State College. We became very excited about the possibility of starting the year with a large-scale collaborative project, rather than with the extended consciousness-raising sessions that had been held when the Program was in Fresno. There the women students had spent a lot of time talking about their problems as women before they began to do any work. We wondered if those same problems could be dealt with while working on a project.

Female art students often approach artmaking with a personality structure conditioned by an unwillingness to push themselves beyond their limits; a lack of familiarity with tools and artmaking processes; an inability to see themselves as working people; and a general lack of assertiveness and ambition. The aim of the Feminist Art Program is to help women restructure their personalities to be more consistent with their desires to be artists and to help them build their artmaking out of their experiences as women.

Womanhouse seemed to offer the perfect context for this educational process.

The women broke up into teams to look for a house that would be suitable to the dreams and fantasies they envisioned for what would be an exclusively female environment. Three women saw an old house on Mariposa Street in a run-down section of Hollywood. As they explored the deserted mansion, they knew that they had found **Womanhouse**. They knocked at the doors of several neighboring houses until they found someone at home. He informed them that the house was owned by an elderly woman who would

certainly not be interested in their project. With their customary ingenuity, the women went downtown to the Hall of Records to search out the name and address of the owner, a woman named Amanda Psalter. They wrote her a letter describing the Feminist Art Program, CalArts, and the project we wished to work on. The idea so intrigued the Psalter family that they donated the house to us for the project.

On November 8 1971, 23 women arrived at 533 Mariposa Street armed with mops, brooms, paint, buckets, rollers, sanding equipment and wallpaper. For two months we scraped walls, replaced windows, built partitions, sanded floors, made furniture, installed lights, and renovated the 75-year old dilapidated structure. One of the goals of the Program is to teach women to use power equipment, tools and building techniques. The House provided a natural context for the women to learn these things. When we found that we had to replace 25 broken windows, five women went to Redondo Beach, where the father of one of them owned a hardware store. All of the banisters in the stairway had been pulled out by vandals. The women laid in 330 dowels, then painted and varnished each one. At first the neighbors were shocked to see women in work clothes and boots sawing two-by-fours on the porch and carrying sheets of plywood up the steps. They thought that they were being invaded by hippies and they complained to the school about all of the “longhairs.” The school explained that the women usually wore their hair long. The neighbors replies: “If they’re women, why aren’t they wearing brassieres?”

Slowly the neighborhood got used to us and the women got used to working long hours. There was no hot water, no heat, and no plumbing. But the real difficulties in the **Womanhouse** project lay in the struggles of the individual women to push beyond their own limits, as artists and as women. In order to accomplish a project as demanding as **Womanhouse**, the women had to work in a manner that they were totally unaccustomed to. They had to do hard physical labor, use tools they knew nothing about, complete their projects by the opening date, work in a scale larger than most of them had ever tackled. At first they were very excited, but the excitement soon gave way to waves of resentment about having such intense demands placed upon them. They began to see us as monsters, terrible people asking impossible things of them. Many of them complained incessantly, sure that they would fail, that the House would be a failure, that we would never finish. Endurance became a dirty word.

We know that society fails women by not demanding excellence from them. We hung in there. We assured them that they could do it, that the House would be a success, that they were angry because they were being forced to work harder than they ever had before...that it was worth it. In the end, they came to agree with us, and they developed real pride in achieving what was, individually and collectively, an incredible feat. Each of the women, working singly or together, had made rooms or environments:

bedrooms, closets, bathrooms, hallways, gardens. The age-old female activity of homemaking was taken to fantasy proportions. **Womanhouse** became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away.

In an effort to reach out into the larger community of women artists—to make contact with already “established” women, as well as to provide our students with models of working artists other than ourselves, we invited three Los Angeles artists: Sherry Brody, Carol Edison Mitchell and Wanda Westcoast to participate in **Womanhouse**. They hung their work alongside all of ours, and we all loved it.

When you start a project like **Womanhouse**, especially when you’re a young woman art student, it is often difficult to take your fantasies and dreams and enthusiasms and turn them into a work of art. Our students were learning how to concentrate their energies and “push all the way,” but special thanks must be given to the following members of the community who assisted them in making **Womanhouse** a reality: Margery Kahn; the Home Silk Shop; Webb and Seward Pharmacy; George Richards, Importers and Wholesalers—Antiques; Steven L. Frank Antiques; and the involved staff and personnel of the California Institute of the Arts. Extra thanks to Paul Brach, Dean of the Art School, for his initial support and sustained encouragement. Last of all we want to thank and applaud those women photographers and filmmakers who donated their time and talents to document the art that we all had created. Among them are Susan Titleman and Mako Idemitsu. In addition, Johanna Demetrakas was so impressed and inspired by **Womanhouse** that she decided to produce and direct a one hour color documentary on the House—its art and its artists. Production on the film is well under way and we all anxiously await its release in the summer of 1972.

Fiscally sponsored by [NYFA](#). Images courtesy of the California Institute of the Arts Institute Archives.