

# WOMANHOUSE

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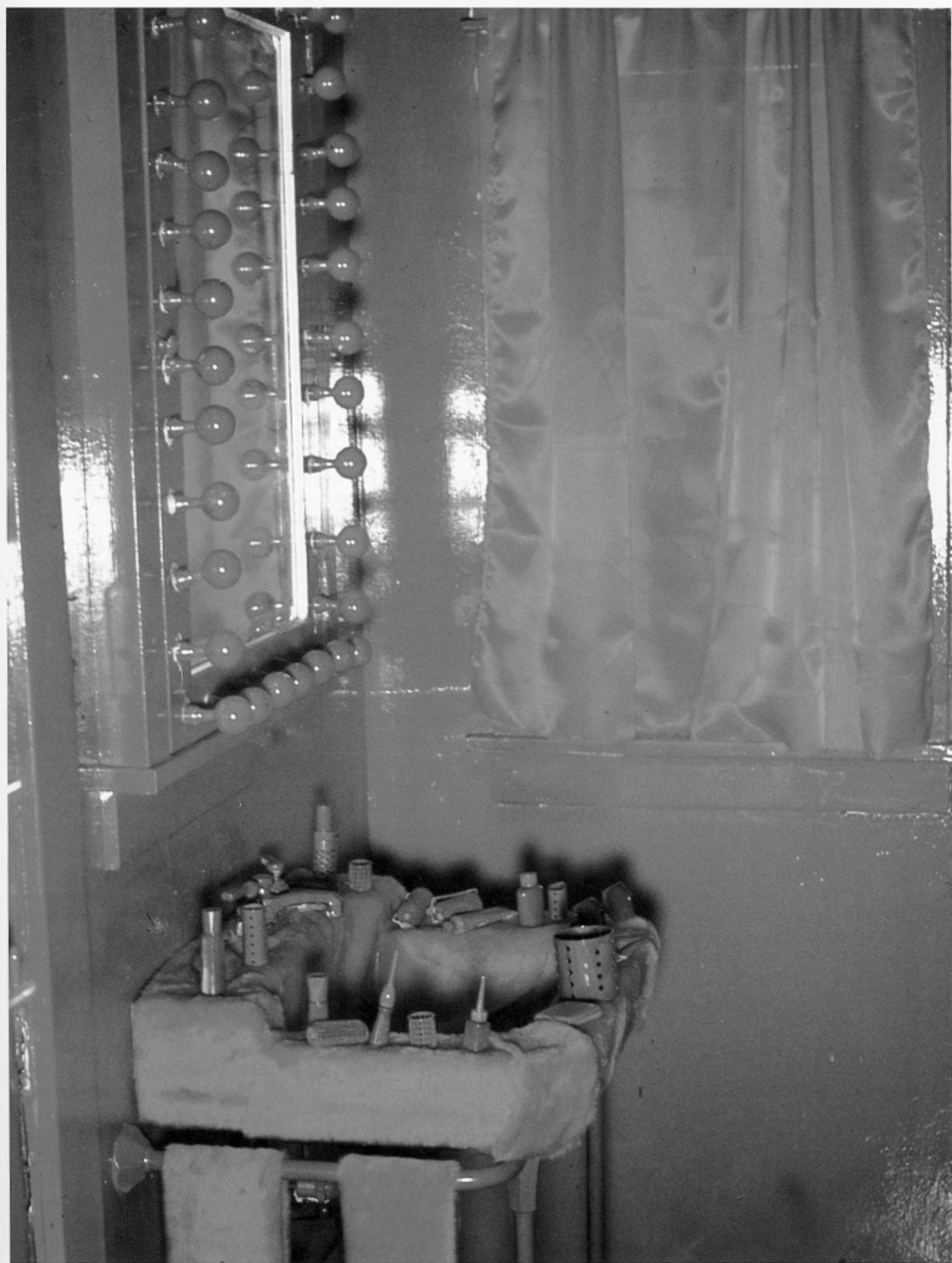
Womanhouse, a daring, avant-garde site installation in an actual house and an unexpected happening during one month in 1972 in residential Hollywood, directly addressed the everyday life of an ordinary housewife. The collaborative art environment was created by twenty-one students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts under the direction of artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. For a brief, fanciful moment, a condemned mansion at 553 Mariposa Avenue was transformed into an artistic revelation about women in their homes.

Womanhouse was created in only six weeks in 1971 and then open to the public between January 30 and February 28, 1972. The abandoned house, which had been lent to the group by the city of Los Angeles, was eventually destroyed by the city as planned, but not before Womanhouse made a widespread difference in feminist art making and in all subsequent American art. Entirely new aesthetic subjects that had until then remained in the distant shadows in suburban American homes burst into the public sphere through the installation and performance art of Womanhouse. The suburban home, where the contents of a woman's concerns such as nurturance, sex, self-consciousness, rape, and murder had been imprisoned since the 1950s, was well known to the young artists who created Womanhouse. They had lived their childhood and adolescence right there.

Judy Chicago, a pioneer in feminist education, had demanded an all-female space for her art class at Fresno State College in 1970. She was convinced that no critical frame of reference yet existed that would allow for an understanding of a woman's struggle and suggest an appropriate way to respond to it.<sup>1</sup> "Womanhouse became both an environment that housed the work of women artists working out of their own experiences and the 'house' of female reality into which one entered to experience the real facts of women's lives, feelings, and concerns," Chicago summarized.<sup>2</sup> Miriam Schapiro was already a well-known painter who had shown her hard-edged works at the prestigious Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York and a feminist leader in the incipient women's movement in the arts in Los Angeles.

The initial idea to create Womanhouse was Paula Harper's, then staff art historian for the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Although Harper helped to conceptualize the project at the beginning of the 1971 academic year, the collaborative art environment was substantially developed and executed by the twenty-one female students of the program under the direction of Chicago and Schapiro. Los Angeles artists Wanda Westcott, Sherry Brody, and Carol Edson Mitchell also collaborated in the environments and exhibited their work in Womanhouse. Largely responsible for the successful completion of what proved to be a vast creative undertaking, students thus were granted the professional status of artists working among artists, not as trainees in an academic hothouse.

Faith Wilding, a weaver turned painter in Chicago's all-female class at California State University, Fresno, organized in 1970, had followed Chicago to CalArts in 1971 to be a graduate student/MFA candidate in the Feminist Art Program. In her essay for this book, Wilding describes in detail the hoped-for accomplishments laid out by the faculty, in which students were





Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago at Womanhouse. Womanhouse catalogue designed by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, 1971

encouraged to grapple with the emotional and conceptual issues of the project. A "learning by doing" educational method at Womanhouse put into practice the psychological self-discoveries offered by the consciousness-raising format of the women's movement. Designed to be a structured conversation, consciousness-raising allowed each contributor to speak about her experiences uninterrupted and to hear the testimonies of other women; in this way, women shared life experiences, instead of remaining isolated by their concerns and fears. The insights of the consciousness-raising circle were immediately put to use in the task at hand—building Womanhouse. Concrete and worldly applications meant goals and deadlines, expectations and measurable achievements.

Repairing and structuring the house as an independent exhibition space as well as a work of art in itself was a vital element in a course of study and work designed to build students' skills and to teach them to work cooperatively. This focus on collaboration cannot be over-emphasized, for collaboration as form or subject has characterized much of the feminist art created after Womanhouse in Southern California. Because the West Coast became a model and leader for feminist production nationally and internationally, the influence of the transitory collaboration at Womanhouse has been pervasive and lasting.

Moreover, every contributor to Womanhouse was forever changed by the experience. Each felt taken apart and put back together, but altogether differently. The profound alterations in self-image, self-esteem, and artistic identity affected the individuals in the group to such an extent that the majority were launched on challenging personal and professional paths.

Abandoned and condemned, the house on Mariposa Avenue was still architecturally imposing but also in need of extensive reconstruction. Vandals had broken windows. Fixtures and furnishings required replacement. The house had no hot water, heat, or plumbing. In November, when the twenty-one CalArts Program students began work on the house, they had a rude awakening. One surprise was the amount of work required to create the collaborative environment. Another astonishing realization was that the nature of the work ranged from cleaning to construction, labor that crossed not only class and gender lines, but that was outside of the scope of "art" experienced by the rest of the art school. Students enrolled in the conceptually oriented CalArts learned graphics and text display, electronic music and "idea art," in which an art object may not even be made. But for the Feminist Art Program workers, skills such as carpentry and window glazing became part of the creative process. Before picking up a paint brush, etching plate, sculpting tool, or video camera, each young artist had already used electric saws, drills, and sanders.

The seventeen rooms of the house increasingly inspired the group. One by one, the rooms became clean white cubes and rectangles for the presentation of a radical and complex contemporary art. As each young artist unclogged toilets or re-hinged doors, she imagined the transformed environment and eventually chose one of the spaces in the house for "her" room, wherein she created her own installation environment. Even the initial plans for the environmental artworks demanded a range of competence never remotely necessary in more conventional

art making or art-educational settings. But involving the art world, the local community, and the American feminist network of individuals and institutions was part of Chicago's and Schapiro's pedagogic plan.

Although all women working the stipulated eight-hour day had freely chosen to do so, most found the labor unbearably taxing. In other American art schools of the 1960s, these same students might never have learned the real and absolute necessity of consistent, hard work in the field of fine arts. And they might very well have been among the many women discouraged by art teachers from becoming artists at all.

Various meetings were necessary to air feelings, discuss plans for the art environments, or to prepare Womanhouse's eventual exhibition to the public. Group meetings were initiated to air the students' tangled feelings of anger at one another and themselves, anxiety about the successful completion of the project, and resentment of the authority of their female role models, which arose as their own emotional growth and physical dexterity increased. In these meetings, the frequent disputes over territory in the house and the articulation of ideas were often resolved, which in turn pushed forward the progress of the work. Smaller collaboration groups explored the possible forms and meanings they wanted to infuse into the environment. And because the group as a whole had decided to add special events and present performances during the exhibition, additional work groups were formed.

The relationship between biology and social roles underlay the content of Womanhouse, its rooms and activities. Moreover, Womanhouse presented a special kind of direct—even, some felt, obvious—representation of women in their homes. Most of the rooms replicated the conventional areas of a house—bathroom, dining room, kitchen—while at the same time they challenged the activity of that room and the meaning of that activity to women's self-image, through creative exaggeration of the ordinary physical and emotional elements of each space. Three different conceptual bathrooms, for example, were designed: Robbin Schiff's *Nightmare Bathroom*, Camille Grey's *Lipstick Bathroom*, and Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom*. Shawnee Wollenman's *Nursery*, with its giant-sized components, made the viewer feel like a child. Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* had a second wall or skin of a cavelike protective yet open fabric tent, much like a modern weaver's version of African tribal menstruation huts. Vicki Hodgett's kitchen, called *Eggs to Breasts*, featured a ceiling and walls covered with fried-egg "breasts" and innumerable plates of prepared food. Mannequins were also employed: one mannequin, in full bridal attire, paused on the staircase, her bridal train (which turned from white to dingy gray) trailing to the kitchen. Another mannequin represented a woman segmented and confined by the shelves of her linen closet. Beth Bachenheimer's many-shoed shoe closet conveyed ways a woman could change her identity. And there was much more. In every theme room, feelings raged in the striking colors chosen to represent household roles and arenas, in the many media colliding together, and in the surprising juxtapositions of abstract forms and representational images.

Womanhouse literally brought to life the ideas and viewpoints first articulated in Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine*

*Mystique* and soon to be developed in *Ms.* magazine, which was founded in 1972. The emphasis in these first feminist ideas and viewpoints concerning menstruation, sexuality, marriage, and promiscuity, pregnancy and post-partum depression, psychic breakdown and suicide in middle-class suburban homes was one of frustration and despair.<sup>3</sup> This kind of bold looking at issues created an apprehensive tension in the audience for Womanhouse, provoking argument as well as revealing terrible pain.

The only two human figures one sees in Womanhouse are the bride and a mannequin literally closeted with her sheets (*Linen Closet* by Sandy Orgel, page 55)—the one sumptuously dressed in every convention of bridalwear and the other naked among her clean, pressed linens. They are, in fact, two cinematic aspects of the same woman, who squeezed herself into a cultural identity which finally dictated that, in the words of Betty Friedan, "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother."<sup>4</sup> Many white middle-class women were alone, confined in their homes, and didn't know who they were except in relationship to family members. How, then, was the American housewife to answer the cardinal existential question about twentieth-century identity established in the first years of the modern era—"Who am I?" She could only respond with "Tom's wife, . . . Mary's mother."<sup>5</sup>

Friedan saw in the feminine mystique the echo of Nazi Germany's imperative that women's realm consist only of "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*." It was with trepidation that Friedan described in the early 1960s a condition so hidden and censored that even the women affected could not name it. It became the problem that had no name.

In contrast to the linear nature of writing, the visual information of Womanhouse could be taken in all at once. Insight into the illogic of the prevailing division of work by gender was first introduced in 1971 by Jane O'Reilly in her article, "The Housewife's Moment of Truth:" "We are . . . clicking-things-into-place-angry, because we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things."<sup>6</sup> The instantaneousness of feminist insight could be felt as a completely pure personal moment of truth.

A year before Womanhouse was completed, *Ms.* author Judy Syfers pointed with irony to the advantage of being a person *with* a wife rather than a wife: "I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced . . . My God, who wouldn't want a wife?"<sup>7</sup> No husband appears in Womanhouse, but "husband" symbolically is the whole wider world of social relations and territory beyond the hearth.

Artist and historian Pat Mainardi specified housework as a political issue about which women had been coerced and brainwashed. "Probably too many years of seeing television women in ecstasy over their shiny waxed floors or breaking down over their dirty shirt collars. Men have no such conditioning. They recognize the essential fact of housework right from the beginning. Which is that it stinks."<sup>8</sup> Even more so, housework is presented in Womanhouse as the stinking fact that is also a mantle of identity.

The bride's train in Kathy Huberland's *Bridal Staircase*

makes no material connection to a bedroom—to consummation of the marriage vows or celebration of the marital union on a honeymoon directly following the wedding ceremony. Rather, we follow the filmy path down the staircase to the pantry, where we pass a row of plates on a sideboard, each illuminated by a bare hanging light bulb. On the plates are breakfast, lunch, and dinner, immediately followed by more of the same—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The linear, repetitive path of plates which represents the continuity of “women’s work” finally leads to the entrance of Robin Weltsch’s sensuous, pink *Kitchen*.

Through Wanda Westcoast’s vacu-formed plastic kitchen curtains, the warm light in which the room is bathed falls on Vicki Hodgetts’ plastic fried eggs mounted on the ceiling, which are transformed into equal numbers of breasts on the walls. Visually “traveling” to the frying pan on the stove, the small round images reassume the appearance of eggs. When Hodgetts, Weltsch, and Susan Frazier began work on the kitchen, they were stuck for images. Schapiro suggested a consciousness-raising session about feelings raised by the kitchens of their childhood memories. The flesh-pink kitchen, the institutional source of all mothers’ milk, had also been the war zone of the home. Struggles between mothers and daughters for psychological power were embedded in the gestures of giving and receiving food. Part of growing up and slipping back into childhood often revolved around who selected food—mother or self. The process of probing one’s own autobiography threw light on the personal origins of the social meanings of food. At the stove, the hearth of the kitchen, the egg is the image of nourishment that means food and that also signifies the hunger in many women’s hearts and lives. The food, made of plastic, is not edible. But because women have breasts, they are to be nourishers and must also cook the family meals. The dilemma between nature and culture, organic food and its plastic representation—the giving mother and the consuming daughter—is succinctly contained in that frying pan.

The *Womanhouse Dining Room*, a collaboration among Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Wilding, is a formal family room, but unoccupied (page 56). The table is elaborately laid, but with entirely inedible artificial food (such as treated bread dough) on sewn fabric plates. A mural interpretation of a still-life by Anna Peale on the wall features food more believable (although two-dimensional) than the chilly dinner on the table. The *Dining Room* is linked to other spaces by the passage of the viewer from room to room.

When moving from the kitchen, through the pantry, to the dining room, questions arise: How did the nurturing breast that becomes the emblem of the *Kitchen*, the plates of food prepared and placed in line in the pantry, conceptually move from the private rooms of food preparation to the social act of eating and breaking bread together? And how did this evolution become empty and perverted?

Faith Wilding’s *Crocheted Environment*, consciously based on the ancient female art of architecture, was adapted by Wilding as a formal mode in her sculptural environment (page 62). Wilding made forms inspired by and derived from those of the female body. *Crocheted Environment* has numerous meanings,



**Beth Bachenheimer.** *Shoe Closet.* Mixed media site installation at *Womanhouse*, 1972

**Kathy Huberland.** *Bridal Staircase.* Mixed media site installation at *Womanhouse*, 1972. The bride is portrayed as an offering—encased in lace, flowers, and dreamy sky blue. As she descends the stairs the blue slowly changes to gray. “The bride’s failure to look clearly where she is going leaves her up against the wall.” (Huberland)



