

for it represents a mother's woven nest of blood and everyone's "first" room, the sacred heart of the Virgin Mary, and the hearth of the home. The traditional housewife may have wanted to create this nest of her physical home most of all for herself. Often deprived of having been herself mothered, marrying young and having children before she could complete her own childhood or education, housewives of all ages needed to be nourished again—this time in the metaphorical womb of the home, to develop into fully adult humans. Feminism provided a second look at the all-encompassing needs of people for mothering. The birthing and nurturing nest that Wilding created was a representation of not only a site but a biological passage. And because intercourse, pregnancy, and birth can be accompanied by blood, actual menstrual blood and bloodlike color as well as images of body organs concerned with feminine biological events and roles appear with frequency in women's art.

*Menstruation Bathroom* is a blood relative of Wilding's *Crocheted Environment*, this time presenting women's blood as taboo and, by implication, puberty as the moment of shame when signs of womanhood appear and must be hidden behind a locked bathroom door. Pristine white, with feminine hygiene products double-wrapped, the bathroom was shrouded in silence and became a metaphor for the unspeakable (page 57). Judy Chicago recalls, "Under a shelf full of all the paraphernalia with which this culture 'cleans up' menstruation was a garbage can filled with the unmistakable marks of our animality. One could not walk into the room, but rather, one peered in through a thin veil of gauze, which made the room a sanctum."<sup>9</sup>

The black, green, and rust-colored *Nightmare Bathroom* depicted a woman in the bathtub (page 57). Made entirely of sand, she was literally erased by an audience that couldn't keep its hands off her during the six weeks of the exhibition. The vulnerability of the naked body in the unguarded setting of the bath cannot exist without the bather's awareness of a potential intruder. Sand-filled bottles that originally held toiletries serve as a residue and symbol of past losses to both the underside of vulnerability and the limiting nature of fear. A snake, reminiscent of the slimy creature who was the biblical corrupter of the once innocent Eve, crawls toward her on the ground. Who might come in through the window? Or open the door? Or thrust up from the toilet?

In addition to *The Nursery*, whose large scale, and in particular gigantic working rocking horse, makes adults feel child-sized, there are three other bedrooms—*Personal Space* by Janice Lester, *Painted Room* by Robin Mitchell, and *Leah's Room* by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman. Lester's and Mitchell's spaces look, appropriately, like college dormitory rooms, with small single beds and references to self and vocation. These two singular post-adolescent bedrooms avoid the decorative quality we associate with homemaking and the sexual and procreational functions of the marriage bed.

In contrast, the watermelon-pink *Leah's Room*, a tableau of the aging courtesan of Colette's novel, *Cheri*, is elaborate and fantastic (page 60). During the public viewing of Womanhouse, a young woman sat at the dressing table applying the makeup that transformed her from biological female to culturally-created woman. Fantasy far exceeds fact, we may conclude, in the night-



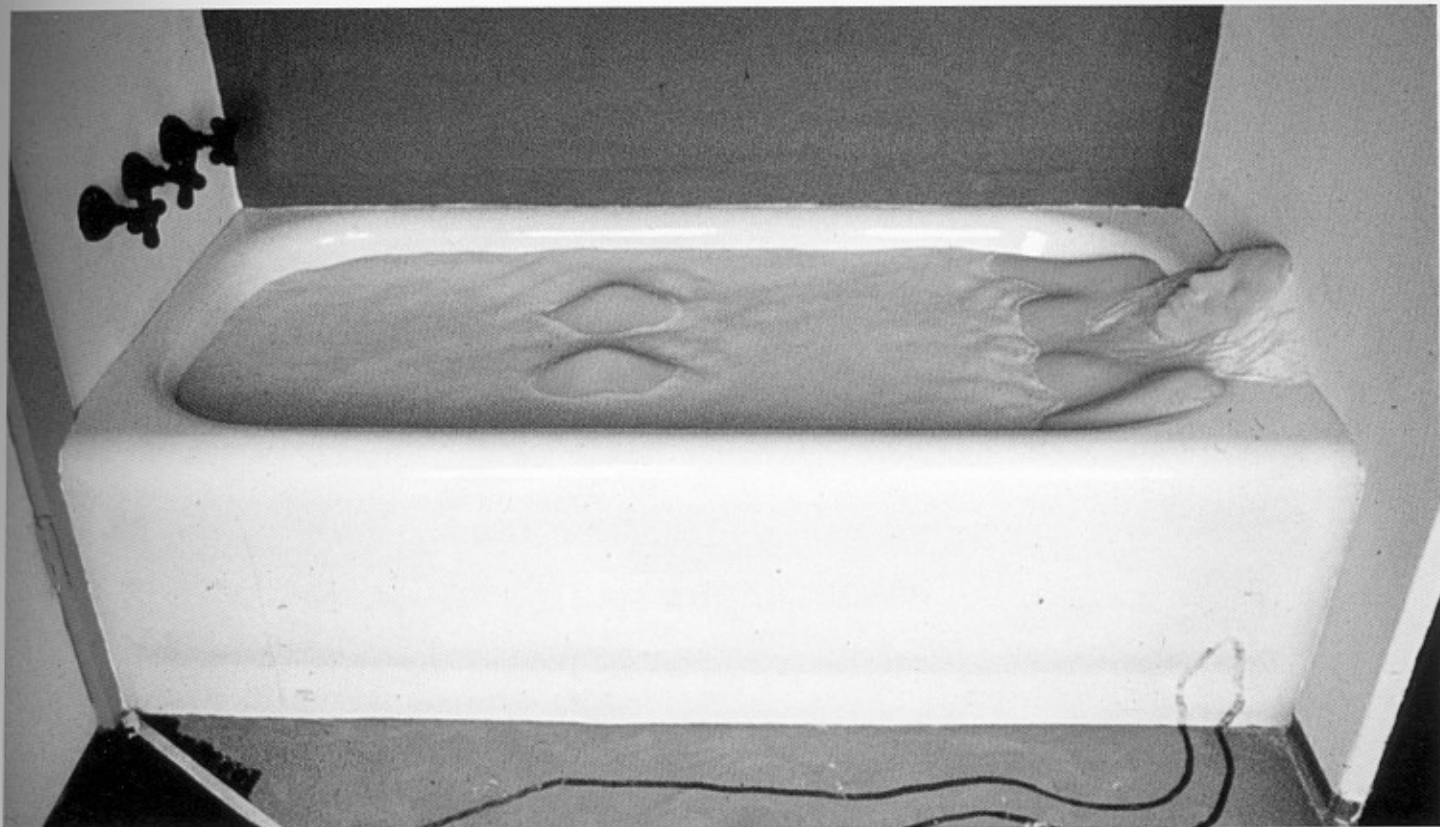
**Sandy Orgel.** *Linen Closet*. Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972. Orgel wrote: "As one woman visitor to my room commented, 'This is exactly where women have always been—in between the sheets and on the shelf.' It is time now to come out of the closet."

**Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch.** *Nurturant Kitchen* (detail). Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972



**Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding.** *Dining Room.*

Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972. This room was the most extensive collaborative effort of the Womanhouse students. Seven women painted walls, ceiling, mural (after a 19th-century still life by Anna Peale), molding; created the chandelier; sewed curtains, tablecloth, and plates; sculpted bread dough for the "food."



**Robbin Schiff.** *Nightmare Bathroom.* Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972



**Judy Chicago.** *Menstruation Bathroom.* Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972. Chicago described her room as "very, very white and clean and deodorized—deodorized except for the blood, the only thing that cannot be covered up. However we feel about our own menstruation is how we feel about seeing its image in front of us."



life of Leah and also of the average housewife. But there is no realistic, pedestrian portrayal of the bedroom. Fact meets fantasy only when one contemplates the two female character types embodied in the courtesan and the modern-day Mrs. Are both characters—kept women and working girls at the same time—not poles apart but two sides of the same coin?

Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody created *Dollhouse Room*, a house within a house, and a world within a world of its own (pages 64, 65). *Dollhouse* consisted of six rooms under a triangular roof. In each elaborately constructed and decorated room, safety and comfort associated with the home vied with the yet unnamed terrors of the domestic arena. Schapiro, who used fabrics in her paintings, and Brody, who made soft sculptures of sewn garments, employed the same materials, skills, and impulses in the *Dollhouse* that they did in their individual work. Conversely, the experience of creating art for Womanhouse also affected their subsequent art.

To arrive at the visual and verbal forms of the *Cock and Cunt* play, Judy Chicago followed the format of simple exercises developed during the previous year in her female art class at Fresno State College. The play was performed in the Womanhouse living room by two women wearing black leotards. The SHE character wore a gigantic pink vagina; HE wore a satiny outsized penis. At first this exaggeration of genitals seems comic. But as the dialogue between the two actors progresses, the truly grisly tone of the piece emerges. SHE is doing the dishes and asks for help. HE is shocked: "Help you do the dishes?" "Well," SHE replies, "They're your dishes as much as mine!" His retort emphasizes the traditional biology/culture dynamic: "But you don't have a cock! A cock means you don't wash dishes. You have a cunt. A cunt means you wash dishes." SHE questions him: "I don't see where it says that on my cunt." The scene then shifts from kitchen to bedroom, where sexual intercourse leads to a wistful statement by SHE—"You know, sometimes I wish I could come too"—and ultimately to the murder of SHE by HE.<sup>10</sup>

In this schematic dialogue between husband (played by Faith Wilding) and wife (Janice Lester), the deadly portrayal of the battle between the sexes demonstrates the culturally assumed connection between biological differences and sex roles. The *Cock and Cunt* play addresses the traditional relationship between white, middle-class men and women in their physical particulars and also in broad social terms—as an aspect of the balance of power within the political patriarchal institution. The play leaves no doubt in the minds of its audience that the personal and cultural uses to which biological differences have been put have had dire, indeed mortal consequences for women.

Also during this time, a number of prominent spokeswomen for female autonomy and women's rights pondered the dangerous dimensions of the social synergy between women and men. Ti-Grace Atkinson explained the interrelationship of the sexes as a political and economic structure.

*The class of women is one-half of a dichotomized class definition of society by sex. The class of women is formed by positioning another class in opposition: the class of men, or the male role. Women exist as the corollaries of men, and exist as*

*human beings only insofar as they are those corollaries . . . over thousands of years, men have created and maintained an enclosure of institutionalized oppression to fortify their domination of women by using many institutions and values as vehicles of oppression, e.g. marriage, family, sexual intercourse, love, religion, prostitution. Women are the victims of this oppression.*<sup>11</sup>

"The rationale which accompanies that imposition of male authority euphemistically referred to as 'the battle of the sexes'" Kate Millett wrote, "bears a certain resemblance to the formulas of nations at war, where any heinousness is justified on the grounds that the enemy is either an inferior species or really not human at all. The patriarchal mentality has concocted a whole series of rationales about women which accomplish this purpose tolerably well. And these traditional beliefs still invade our consciousness and affect our thinking to an extent few of us would be willing to admit."<sup>12</sup> Shulamith Firestone asked, "How does the sex class system based on the unequal power distribution of the biological family affect love between the sexes?"<sup>13</sup>

Chicago dramatized what Atkinson, Millett, Firestone, and other feminist theorists illuminated: women's most intimate relationships, including love and motherhood, are an intrinsic part of a "sex class system" in this country.

But Womanhouse is addressed to women's relationships with others primarily as internal dialogues in their/our own minds and as aspects of self. The housewife, whose role is evoked in Womanhouse, has but one clear relationship, and that is to her environment as a whole. In this relationship, she is unbearably lonely. The tasks and implications of the home surround her in a complex, unified yoke.

The environment packed with images and objects in every inch and corner of the spaces of the house on Mariposa Street suggests, ultimately, an overwhelming despair. The hundreds of lipsticks and shoes, sheets, plates of food, yards of material, rooms of color and stories and messages do not really offer much of a life. Even though we are told that our life is what we make of it, in fact for mid-century women, the same human existence seems excessively predetermined and prescribed. The Womanhouse protagonist is tortured from birth to death with these diametrically opposed states of being thrust in her face.

In the performance *Waiting*, Faith Wilding becomes the woman who maintains and seethes in her home. She exemplifies the consciousness-raising effort of the women's movement of the time—breaking silence by speaking, and thus revealing women's bitterness as a chorus of single voices. Wilding's *Waiting* is a litany that rhythmically described women's lives as reactive to the actions of others and as characterized by waiting—"Waiting for my breasts to develop/Waiting to get married/Waiting to hold my baby/Waiting for the first grey hair/Waiting for my body to break down, to get ugly/Waiting for my breasts to shrivel up/Waiting for a visit from my children, for letters/Waiting to get sick/Waiting for sleep. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Wilding's waiting woman rocks slowly in her chair and speaks in a low monotone from beginning to end. She is as immobile and expectant as the players of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. She presents herself—when all is said, done, seen, and



**Feminist Art Program Performance Group.** *Scrubbing.*  
Performed by Chris Rush at Womanhouse, 1972. Photograph  
by Lloyd Hamrol



**Faith Wilding.** *Waiting.* 1971. First performed by Faith  
Wilding at Womanhouse, Los Angeles, 1972. Photograph by  
Lloyd Hamrol



**Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman.** *Leah's Room*, based on Colette's *Chérie*. Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972. In this performance, a woman continually applied layers of makeup, expressing, the artists said, "the pain of aging, of losing beauty, pain of competition with other women. We wanted to deal with the way women are intimidated by the culture to constantly maintain their beauty and the feeling of desperation and helplessness once this beauty is lost."

heard—as a sign of Nothingness, which is a keystone of modern art and a part of the existential gestalt of our time. But her existential emptiness is overcrowded with mundane incident. In the act of waiting in the empty space which she attempts to fill with the litany of all she has waited for in her life, Wilding is the American female vernacular of existential modern "man," a lone figure whom we know in the spare sculptures of Alberto Giacometti or in the narrow space of the stripe of a Barnett Newman painting.

Beckett's singular figures waiting for God, an interpretation of human hope and futility based on Heidegger's philosophy and Sartre's fictional characters, somehow find courage and the

will to be in a world devoid of ultimate external meaning. But the housewife has not freely and fully committed herself to her own life, nor has she been invited by the structure of her existence to do so.

The housewife is a full-time solitary worker who has not, in her own mind, stood alone. Sitting and waiting, she still feels "stood up." And for the young women working on the Womanhouse project, even as they evoked her they bade her good-bye as an image of the women they would become. Their work had already led them into far different realms than the woefully stricken traditional female model they portrayed.

But what was the relationship between the woman addressed in Womanhouse and the young women students who created environments? Mostly in their late teens and early twenties, only a very few of the women had married. They had not experienced what they depicted in Womanhouse as wives and mothers, but rather as daughters.

*Three Women*, written by the Feminist Art Program Performance Group and performed by Nancy Youdelman, Shawnee Wollenman, and Jan Oxenberg, differed from most of the Womanhouse performances because it grew indirectly out of the experiences of those developing the piece. In their performance group, they asked themselves a hypothetical question: "What if our lives had taken a different turn?" In roleplaying sessions, they explored the psyche of three female stereotypes: a hippie, a prostitute (with a golden heart), and a mother (naive and still looking for a Mr. Right). Judy Chicago remembers:

*One evening, in the performance workshop we [Chicago, Kathy Huberland, Judy Huddleston, Sandy Orgel, Christine Rush, Nancy Youdelman, Faith Wilding, and Shawnee Wollenman], all dressed up, making up our faces, putting on wigs and outlandish costumes. Immediately, the room was transformed into a brothel, as if the act of self-decoration was seen as it really is, a kind of prostitution of the self to gain male approval. We related to each other "through" our roles, and out of that evening grew a piece called Three Women, based on the autobiographies of three women in the group. Each of them had reached crossroads in their lives when they had to make decisions about being "women" in the sense that society demanded, or defying society and being themselves. They had all made healthy choices, but it was easy for them to imagine what would have happened to them if they had accepted society's commands.<sup>15</sup>*

In fact, these students—each someone's daughter—had determined to make original choices in their lives. They wanted to break out of all previously defined roles and live in the world as artists. They were influenced not only by the content of feminist thought current in 1971, but by experiences in their own families. Their child's and adolescent's points of view formed the strong center of their oeuvre. Their visions, however, were still to some extent covert. Seldom did a real memory become a direct autobiographical subject, and in their communal work, the Feminist Art Program artists were less clear in articulating personal realities than they were in their individual efforts. Thus, in *Three Women*, the focus on fantasy, and the elaborate costuming



that concealed authentic individual identity in favor of cultural exaggeration, drew the text away from imagining the more probable futures of the players.

Since beginning to work together, the participants in Womanhouse shared in a new experience. They had interacted and created in an all-female community of artists, led by Schapiro and Chicago, female teachers who had become powerful role models. They were strong and resourceful—and still women!—synthesizing two qualities that had been nearly contradictions in terms. Relationships with their female peers and elders were given a name by feminist theorists: “woman-identification.” These new relationships were expressed in only one performance at Womanhouse.

*Birth Trilogy* was a ritual of rebirth and new identity symbolizing the community of women who attend their own and one another's birth. “It was a three-part piece,” Judy Chicago remarks:

*In the first part, six women stood in a line, legs spread, bodies close together, arms around each other's waists. Slowly, they began to push down with their legs, making them into a birth passage, through which the last woman in line was pushed, propelled by the thrusting legs of the other women. After three “babies” had been born, the three women playing “babies” lay down on the floor while the three other women sat down back to back. Then, the “babies” slowly crawled to the “mother” figures, who embraced them, rocked them, comforted them, and nurtured them. The third part was called “Wailing.” All six women knelt on the floor, heads together and arms around each other, forming a kind of dome shape with their bodies. One of the women began to hum, a slow, haunting melody. The other women joined in, and the humming became louder and louder, more and more rhythmic. The sound was like the danger cry made by Algerian and Tunisian women, and as it reached a higher and higher intensity, became the sound of orgasm, of labor, of joy, of ecstasy.<sup>16</sup>*

The ritual diagram of *Birth Trilogy* was almost identical to ancient wiccan initiation ceremonies. The consciousness-raising circle among feminist art performers was historically significant not only as “speaking bitterness,” a practice of modern Chinese culture, but also because it derived from an ancient Western tradition—dramatic ceremonies performed by witches’ covens at sacred sites. In the wiccan initiation ceremony, coven members stand one behind the other with legs spread apart, forming a birth canal. The initiates line up to pass through the canal, but each is first challenged by a coven member who places a knife at her breast, saying, “It is better for you to rush upon my blade than to enter with fear in your heart.” The initiate responds, “I enter the circle in perfect love and trust.” In *Birth Trilogy*, the circle was recast before an audience, from the private to the public realm and from a secret ceremony to an art performance.

“On the first night that Womanhouse was open,” Judy Chicago writes,

*we performed only for women. The response was overwhelming. The actresses could hardly get through the lines of the*

*Cock and Cunt play (a comedy), the laughter and applause was so loud. During the Three Women piece, women cried, laughed, and empathized, and the Waiting play caused a profound silence—everyone was deeply moved. After the performances, the acting group was ecstatic, and our ecstasy lasted until our next performance the following week, which was for a mixed audience. Through the evening, there was inappropriate silence, embarrassed laughter or muffled applause.<sup>17</sup>*

Womanhouse turned the house inside out, thereby making the private public. The anger that many women had felt in isolation in the single nuclear-family suburban American dwelling was flung out at the 10,000 people who came to see the environment and performances. The audience for Womanhouse became, after the fact, much larger than the sum of its eye witnesses. Johanna Demetrakas, who made a 40-minute color feature film about Womanhouse, provided those who were not at the site a dramatic view of the rooms and many of the performances, including the strong, spontaneous reactions of the audiences present. The hundreds of thousands of readers of *Time* magazine in 1972 got a sense of Womanhouse's startling effects in the magazine's lively report on the project.<sup>18</sup>

It would be impossible to overstate the impact of Womanhouse on its artists and audience. Those who did not see the installations or witness the performances (including this author) experienced Womanhouse through its visual and verbal documentation, and through its kinship with the work of female artists working in the early 1970s.

Looking back on Womanhouse more than two decades later, we can see this extraordinary student project as more than a mirror of the tone and concerns of the women's movement of that time. Womanhouse held the raw, explicit expression of an incipient feminist sensibility that has, to this day, provided a source and reference for a tradition of innovative and socially concerned contemporary art made by women.

The heritage and legacy of Womanhouse is a work-in-progress of its own. As the lives and works of female artists of the past are retrieved and incorporated into the canons of feminist art and so-called high art, the installations and performances produced for Womanhouse will be seen to rest on a broader, much richer base. And as Womanhouse is written into current history and criticism, its influence will be more fully acknowledged.

The kinship web among woman-made art over time embraces Louise Bourgeois, for instance, whose series of works in the mid-1940s called *Femme-Maison* (Woman House) merged the female form and the house form (page 20), to Miriam Schapiro, who extended the subject of home and the personal experience of community in Womanhouse when she created a group of paintings in the 1980s using collage elements and shaped canvases. A vintage embroidery that says “Welcome to Our House” is glued to the center of Schapiro's monumental canvas, *Wonderland* (page 84). Schapiro, always respectful of the so-called traditional female arts of sewing, quilt making, and embroidery, symbolically linked her contemporary collage-paintings with the handiwork of other women by incorporating the design, color, or even, as in *Wonderland*, the piecework itself, in her art.



*Birth Trilogy*, a group performance conceived and written by the Feminist Art Program Performance Group, and presented at Womanhouse, 1972. Photograph by Lloyd Hamrol

**Faith Wilding.** *Crocheted Environment*. Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, 1972. According to Wilding, this environment was a contemporary response to the round-shaped shelters built by female ancestors for themselves and families.

Sheila de Bretteville, director of the Women's Design Program at CalArts and, in 1973, a cofounder with Chicago and this author of the Los Angeles Woman's Building, made the 1972 catalogue for Womanhouse in the simple shape of a house. Schapiro's *The House That Miriam Built*, 1982 (part of my exhibition "At Home" held at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1983—two months of installations, performances, artists' books, poetry readings, and videotapes celebrating feminist art in Southern California), was also shaped like a schematic house. Schapiro recalled:

*Inspired by the theme of this ["At Home"] show, I have made several new paintings whose materiality is literally the fabric of the home. Augmenting my paintings is an installation worked on by a number of California artists close to me (friends, ex-students, mentors). Their contribution is a way of enlarging the scope of my room, making it symbolic of the larger framework of feminist connections.<sup>19</sup>*

Poet Adrienne Rich warned that "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."<sup>20</sup> Although the bedroom was represented in five incarnations in Womanhouse it was never actually occupied. The bedroom of sex and intimate secrets is probably the most tightly closed closet of all, yet has also been a persistent model for formulating feminist and humanistic artistic statements specifically from the female point of view about sex, sexuality, marriage, domesticity, and violence. Lesbians in the Feminist Art Program did not find rooms of their own in which to express their sexuality, much less their sexual practice. But a decade after Womanhouse, Nancy Fried, a participant in the community of the Woman's Building, created the lesbian bedroom—a double taboo—as the subject of her art. Made on plaques of bread dough, Fried's work depicts homey scenes of lesbian life, including sexual relationships, which serve to break the conspiracy of silence and calm the hysteria about lesbianism and lesbians, common to the Womanhouse project and subsequent educational feminist art programs.

The fertile shoes of the Womanhouse *Shoe Closet* are but one of literally hundreds of objects and images that found their way into women's art after Womanhouse. Artists such as Cheri Gaulke, Eleanor Antin, Anna Homler, Nancy Kay Turner, and Carole Caroompas are but a few of the feminist artists who were inspired by Womanhouse's shoe closet environment. Cheri Gaulke, who arrived in Los Angeles a few years after the Womanhouse project and had gone to study at the Feminist Studio Workshop, where she made this project a major part of her education, used shoes as a major metaphor in her work. Her shoe stories include *Golden Lotus*, 1977, a tiny artist-made book of printed images glued to gauze and wrapped in a rectangle on a wooden platform. *Golden Lotus* makes a connection between two kinds of distortion—Chinese footbinding and the bonsai tree, culture-directed nature cut back and twisted for



**Sherry Brody and Miriam**

**Schapiro.** "Artist's Studio," from *The Dollhouse*. Three-dimensional construction and mixed media for Womanhouse, 1972. Collection Miriam Schapiro

Opposite:

**Sherry Brody and Miriam**

**Schapiro.** *The Dollhouse*. Three-dimensional construction and mixed media, 48 x 41 x 8". Created for Womanhouse, 1972. Collection Miriam Schapiro. *The Dollhouse* juxtaposes the beauty, charm, and relative safety of the traditional home with the unspeakable terrors that actually exist there.



"beauty." Eleanor Antin's one hundred black boots "stood in" for the artist in 1971 as they became a character in a hybrid performance work of hers. Anna Homler's *Birthing Shoe* is an actual woman's high-heeled shoe containing numerous tiny plastic babies. Homler made a womb house of the shoe, with the proverbial old woman in the shoe or the modern working girl her implied but absent subject. Nancy Kay Turner's *Rubbing Her The Wrong Way*, a handmade one-of-a-kind artist's book, uses pictures of spike-heeled shoes culled from Japanese comic books, newspapers, magazines, 1930s-60s "how to" self-help books, and dream fragments, to retrace her steps and thus reflect on herself as an artist and woman. Los Angeles artist Carole Caroompas "shoe-walks" through time in a work titled *Remembrance of Things Past*.

From Womanhouse's repetitive washing and ironing, Mierle Laderman Ukeles took scrubbing into the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in July 1973, when she performed *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Maintenance Art Activity III*. Ukeles would wash several areas of the museum where visitors were sure to walk. She would then wait for spectators to soil the floor with their shoes. Then she would rewash the space, doing so in this fashion until the museum closed. The rags that she used were piled on the site, and the area was stamped with a Maintenance Art stamp as an artistic self-documentation.

Ukeles's *Maintenance*, broadly interpreted and applied to municipal, national, and global sites and issues, became the central concern of her art from that time.

In 1993, as I write this essay about Womanhouse, Rhonda Roland Shearer has placed eight colored nine-foot bronze statues of women vacuuming, caring for children, and cleaning the toilet at the foot of an imposing equestrian statue of George Washington in New York City's Union Square Park. "I want George to get off his high horse," Shearer told me, echoing the sentiments of the Womanhouse performer SHE, "and help with the dishes."

"If men had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning," Judy Chicago insisted on the logo of her *The Birth Project*. The Womanhouse dining room and kitchen had been expressed and expanded in a 1979 multimedia installation, *The Dinner Party*. *The Birth Project*, which merged fine arts and the traditionally female craft of needlework, was inspired most by *The Birth Trilogy* and executed in the early 1980s by women in their homes across the United States.

The outermost historical and conceptual perimeters of the great and complex tapestry of women's art, thought, and heart that draw from the threads first spun by Womanhouse are still spinning off. And the axial lineage of Womanhouse, back and forward in time, is not yet whole cloth.

