Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art

Ghosts of ethnicity

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2 Negotiating Jewishness in the 1970s

The work of Judy Chicago and Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Greenberg's nightmare: women artists breaking the rules

In the 1970s, US feminism's exploration of "who women are" had great ambitions, but was also powered by questioning the structure of various organized religions, local employment conditions, and US domestic relations, as well as the gender dynamics in the art world itself. In general, a disproportionate percentage of the artists involved in the feminist art movement on both coasts were secular Jews. Many of these Jewish feminist artists left their Jewishness at home and acted politically, as feminists, and as generic white Americans. In this respect, they followed earlier twentieth-century assimilationist paths whereby Jews joined the English-speaking socialist and communist parties instead of the Yiddish-speaking branches of their equivalents. A disproportionate number of the white communists in the 1930s and New Left members in the 1960s were Jewish, who identified politically as white while downplaying their ethnicity.

Whether women artists in the 1970s recognized each other as fellow Jews and whether that recognition provided a sense of commonality and belonging that enabled them to collaborate closely with each other even if they outwardly left behind their Jewish identity are still open questions. One can only assume that it was an important factor, but one that was not commented on at the time in print because many of these women were trying to get away from their Jewishness and their family background, and were moving toward a commitment to US social causes, in this case the women's movement.

Since there was a fair amount of traffic between the two coasts and other parts of the country, there was no simple geographical divide in how 1970s feminism played out, though California did attract many Jewish feminist artists and critics, among others, because of the high level of activity and opportunities it offered. Art school structures in California allowed for greater experimentation and faculties were openly hiring couples at places such as the California Institute of the Arts and the University of California, resulting in a relatively large number of

women in arts faculties. This hiring policy gave women artists an opening that did not exist for them in the East or the Midwest, and in some cases it led to the creation of feminist structures and spaces for Jewish women within universities. Some of the more sought-after programs included the Feminist Art Program that Judy Chicago developed at Fresno College, which served as a model for a subsequent program at California Institute of the Arts in 1971. It is also significant that some of the most influential feminist projects such as *Womanhouse* and *The Dinner Party* which were seen by more women internationally than any other feminist artwork of the 1970s came out of California.[1]

In what follows, I discuss how two very different Jewish women artists of some renown – Judy Chicago and Mierle Laderman Ukeles – negotiated their careers as artists and feminists in the 1970s. The point of comparing these two women's work is to give a critical account of different kinds of ethnically marked feminist practices coming out of that moment on different coasts. The chapter focuses on the suggestiveness of their work in exploring the ethnic, national, religious, and racial undertones in what were once seen as dominant white feminist art practices. For this reason the chapter begins by examining in some depth the significance of Chicago's name change from Gerowitz to Chicago. Then it proceeds to examine the different terms whereby the works of these two artists were accepted into the canon of US art. From its inception, the women's movement has been wary of the notion of the canon. Some have attacked or dismissed it altogether, whereas others want to add the names of women artists to the current histories of art. In this context, it is significant to follow how Judy Chicago, a leading US feminist artist engaged in large collaborative projects involving up to four hundred contributors, scripts herself into narratives of the art world. This process involved Chicago backgrounding her Jewishness – a very common gesture among secular Jews of her generation – and deploying accessible craft-based aesthetics in favor of a feminist universalizing mission, which ultimately ratifies some of the common assumptions in traditional art history. Her elevation of craft aesthetics including porcelain dinner plates as fine art went against the Greenbergian legacy with its emphasis on high art. Indeed, throughout the history of modernism, the decorative and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as "women's work," a form of "low art" from which "high art" has striven to separate itself. By embracing the decorative and domestic handicrafts in a transgressive way, Chicago's (and Schapiro's) work at that time was seen as a breakthrough and a significant contribution to the women's art movement. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work takes a different trajectory, for on the one hand she foregrounds her Jewishness, defined in a traditional way (as a religion), while on the other, she engages in a radical aesthetics like Chicago that departs from standard practices and assumptions of art history.

From Gerowitz to Chicago

Though the work of Judy Chicago has garnered much critical attention over the years internationally, most critics have examined Chicago's discourse as being only about gender, rather than about a whole set of identifications mediated through various social and national identities, all involving questions of power inequality.[2] This oversight is due in part to Chicago herself, who gained visibility in the 1970s as an artist by emphasizing her gender to the exclusion of all else. Yet ethnicity also played a central role in her self-construction as both a feminist and an artist, as evidenced in the following passage from her first autobiography, *Through the Flower*:

> I wanted my being a woman to be visible in the work and had thus decided to change my name from Judy Gerowitz to Judy Chicago as an act of identifying myself as an independent woman . . . My name change was on the wall directly across from the entrance. It said: *Judy Gerowitz* hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name, *Judy Chicago*.[3]

Her name change in 1970 from the ethnically marked Gerowitz to the more American-sounding Chicago is seemingly central to her scripting of herself in public as an autonomous feminist subject and artist. Thus from the outset the categories of gender, nation, and ethnicity speak to each other, although the erasure of her ethnic name in favor of a national identity was not seen at the time as a public rejection of her ethnic group so much as turning away from patriarchy in general. Yet, it is also hard to disentangle her allegiance to feminism from her ambition to have a career in the art world since conditions at that time and place might not have been propitious for someone identified as a middle-class Jewish woman.

Though Chicago did not necessarily disavow her Jewish identity, Chicago's name change did in some respects follow a common strategy among immigrants of adopting anglicized names, a practice that was already in place for several generations of Eastern European Jews in the United States. As historian Ronald Takaki writes:

> The desire to become American led to the changing of names for first generation Jewish immigrants. Russian – skis and – vitches were dropped, and names like Levinsky became Levin. But names were also anglicized: from Bochlowitz to Buckley, Jacobsen to Jackson, and Stepinsky to Stevens. Many young people adopted "American" first names in school: Dvoirah became Dora; Hyman, Howard; Moishe, Morris; Breina, Beatrice; and Rivka, Ruth.[4]

Among first-generation Eastern European Jewish immigrants, the goal was to blend in with American society. It was important for immigrants to assimilate if they wanted to become successful. Name-changing belonged to that process and was part of what scholar John Cuddihy termed "the price of admission." Overall this process worked well: consider, for example, the success of Bob Dylan, or Jewish baseball players like Sandy Koufax, who were of the same generation as Chicago and Ukeles. This practice of name-changing has a long history, since the distinctiveness of Jewish names even in Europe carried the mark of "difference." Given the emphasis on homogeneity within American culture, there was great pressure to conform to Anglo-Saxon standards. Changing one's name was a less painful way to assume the guise than having rhinoplastic surgery, which was also a common procedure in postwar America among Jews seeking to make their physical features conform to popular notions of Anglo-American beauty.

However, it is significant in Chicago's case that she chose a name that aligned her not with high WASPs but with working-class Americans. Her new working-class name was fitting, if unwittingly so, given her father's radicalism in the union movement. However, in the 1970s, Chicago is silent about her family's politics and her Jewishness. Her father, a Marxist and a labor organizer, was targeted by the FBI in the 1940s and became a victim of the anticommunist sentiments that preceded the McCarthy hearings. Chicago later recalled how an FBI agent forced his way into their house when she was six years old to ask her and her brother about their parents' political affiliations. Her father was subsequently driven out of the union by 1948. In her second autobiography, *Beyond the Flower*, Chicago reflects back on this extremely difficult period in her life:

> Shortly before my father's death, he and I had a conversation that left an indelible impression on me. He had apparently promised my mother that he would not tell me that he was a Communist. I do not exactly know why my mother extracted this pledge from my father, though I would imagine that, as this was the 1950s and anti-Communist fervor was at a high pitch, she was probably frightened. He spoke with me a short time before he left for the hospital. At one point he asked me if I knew what a Communist was, to which I replied, "I think so." Then, despite his vow to my mother he told me that he himself was a Communist and asked whether I believed that all Communists were "bad," as I was being taught in school. (The "Weekly Reader" at this time featured comics in which monstrous yellow Communists were pictured bayoneting handsome American boys.)[5]

Chicago recalls how this experience made her perceive herself as an outsider in American culture, even within the classroom. She writes:

> Another – and ultimately more far-reaching – effect of this interchange was

that from then on, when it was time to look at the "Weekly Reader" in school, I found myself in possession of a secret: that my father was one of those dreaded Communists.[6]

Despite the prevalence by the 1960s of anti-Jewish exclusionary actions (including quotas, housing convenants, social restrictions, and employment discrimination) and widespread caricatures of communists in everyday life (such as the images that appeared in Chicago's *Weekly Reader*) Jews such as Chicago were nevertheless able to move within mainstream US society, unlike African-Americans and Latinos who remained firmly on the social margins of society and had no means to "pass" within it. Because of the simultaneity of Jewish insider and outsider status, Chicago only later in her life felt able to publicly discuss her Jewishness and her father's radicalism, which was so much a part of her early sense of identity.

Chicago's autobiographical writing and self-portrait

Indeed, Chicago herself seems more influenced by feminist revisionist work of the 1980s and 1990s, acknowledging the oversimplification in her having given priority to gender over other forms of difference in the 1970s. She recently wrote: "We cast the dialogue incorrectly in the seventies. We cast it around gender, and we were also simplistic about the nature of identity. Identity is multiple."[7] Her awareness of opposition between gender identification and other modes of identification does not extend, however, to an examination of the conflicts inherent in a project that attempts to join feminist ideals of sisterhood with the traditional values of individualism and its emphasis on the artist as romantic genius.[8] Though she might not repudiate the importance she places on individualism, she does bring quite different values to her 1996 account of her individuality as a white ethnic woman artist and the complex motives underlying her decision to change her name to something that sounded all-American:

> I was a twenty-three-year-old widow with a different name – Gerowitz – taken not out of wifely duty, no way . . . When Jerry and I were wed, young proto-feminist that I was, I had kept my original surname, altering it only after noticing – while doing the "gallery stroll" every Saturday afternoon, which is what all the "cool" art people did – that there seemed to be too many other artists named Cohen. I soon exchanged one seemingly patriarchal name for another, my then young husband's seemingly less common. But after Jerry died, people kept mistaking me for the daughter of his parents; not that I didn't like them. It was just that two years of marriage hardly seemed sufficient reason to carry someone else's name for the rest of my life . . .
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> The upshot of this was that I felt as though I did not have a name that suited me. Still I had become somewhat known under the marital appellation, particularly after I started showing at the Rolf Nelson Gallery, one of the best spots in town. Rolf . . . started calling me Judy Chicago due in part to the strong Windy City accent I had retained, but also because he thought it suited the tough and aggressive stance I had felt obliged to take in order to make my way into the macho art scene that was LA in the 1960s. Rolf tried to convince me to take this name professionally, but I went only so far as to use it in the phone directory. This was, in fact, an "in" thing to do at the time, as there were several artists with "underground" names.[9]

Chicago's name change seems to have been important initially as a means of associating herself clearly with the dominant masculinist artistic culture of the 1960s in which "underground names" listed in the phone book were in keeping with the style of the local Los Angeles art community. Though Chicago is describing a gradual process, her comments above are not in keeping with her claims earlier in her career as a US feminist artist that she was "divesting herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance." These words would suggest that a strong and independent woman such as herself could not permit any male to mediate or authorize her declaration of a new feminist identity.

In retrospect, however, such a statement does not account for the role of men such as Rolf Nelson in her career, who, she suggests, not only knew how exclusionary and masculinist the LA art scene was at that time but also went so far as to support promising women artists like Chicago. His advice also protected her against the charge of being different by offering the built-in privilege of an anglicized last name that sounded more American, and more working-class. Other than through her name change, the idealized terms of Chicago's 1970s feminism did not allow her to acknowledge her ethnicity, her collaboration with men, or the ways in which her concepts of gender and ethnicity related to ideologies of race, nation, and class. As she writes in 1996,

> I sometimes joke that in the early days of the Women's Movement, we had not yet discovered (or invented, as the case may be) our own forms. Therefore we borrowed some, notably from the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps inspired by the radical stance of the Black Panthers, I decided to publicly "divest" myself of the name Gerowitz in favor of Judy Chicago.[10]

In such passages Chicago reveals the wide-ranging influences on her and suggests with hindsight that she might have called into question the universalism both of her feminism and of art world practices at that time. In her reference to the Black Panthers, she points out that feminists of the period in the United States aligned themselves with blackness, not so much to counter whiteness as to pursue the strategies and tactics of the civil rights movement which was making progress in effecting real social change.