



A MAGAZINE OF FEMINIST, PROGRESSIVE THINKING

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Breaking Ground on Feminist Art: Elizabeth A. Sackler by Linda Stein

By establishing in 2007 the **Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art**, an 8,300-square-foot exhibition and education facility dedicated to feminist art, Elizabeth Sackler has dared to take on an art-world establishment that has consistently ignored or diminished the work of female and feminist artists.

A decade ago, using the word "feminist" to describe one's art in applying for an exhibition or grant, meant its death knell. Today, although the odds are still unfavorable, the feminist artist cannot be pushed aside with quite the same alacrity and disrespect. Feminist art exhibitions, such as **WACK! at the Museum of Contemporary Art**, Los Angeles, **Global Feminisms** at the Sackler Center, *Women's Work: Homage to Feminist Art* at **Tabla Rasa Gallery** in Brooklyn, and **Eccentric Bodies** at Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries in New Brunswick, NJ, are not uncommon these days, though hardly easy to fund, and many younger artists can hardly imagine a time when it was covertly or overtly banned. In addition to rotating exhibitions and programming, the Sackler Center, on the fourth floor of the Brooklyn Museum, houses **The Dinner Party**, an art installation created from 1974-1979 by feminist artist Judy Chicago. It consists of 39 place settings on a 48-foot triangular table, dedicated to women from history and mythology.

Sackler, with a Ph.D. in public history, is a social and arts activist, and American Indian advocate. She describes **her background on the website of the Sackler Center**: "Coming of age in the 1960s, my life was centered in protests of the Civil Rights Movement. That I eluded arrest or worse was a relief to my parents, but it was during those years the social activism in my marrow was ignited and shaped my actions and activities for more than five decades. Ultimately, financial resources have enabled me to create an enduring activist declaration. That is, of course, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art."

Dr. Sackler is down-to-earth and dedicated. She shows up and personally introduces many of the center's programs. What follows is an interview with her about the ideas for and building of the Sackler Center, and the role of feminist art.

LINDA STEIN: What was it like for you when you first were thinking of creating the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum? Did you look to any other museums or centers as role models?

ELIZABETH A. SACKLER: In the late 1990s I originally thought of starting an entire museum for feminist art. This would have been an enormous effort and project because I couldn't have settled for just an ordinary museum. It would have had to include large residencies and out-buildings with amphitheatres for plays like *Lysistrata*. You know, the whole nine yards! It took me a long time to realize what an effort this would take, and that I would have to spend the rest of my life doing it. At this point I determined it would be best to go to an already-existing and important institution and, in many ways, might even be better than starting a museum.

So I made a list of institutions, and a list of my requirements for institutional commitment: desired amount of space, necessary commitment to women, to community, to pushing the envelope, a commitment and desire to really want to lead in a whole new area—all required in order for me to offer **The Dinner Party and the Center for Feminist Art**. I sought a museum with, in a word,chutzpah. I then made a list of all the possible museums in the metropolitan area. (I felt it really had to be in New York City.) The Brooklyn Museum, hands down, checked off in every criteria. They even cleared an entire area as space for *The Dinner Party*, which showed their commitment. In the end, The Brooklyn Museum came up "shining."



@Mark D Phillips; Gloria Steinem and Elizabeth Sackler at the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

Gender Equity Statistics For the Visual Arts

Museum of Modern Art, New York City
Permanent Collection in 4th and 5th Floor Galleries: **5 percent female**
Source: Jerry Saltz, *Village Voice*, 9/19/06

Artforum Magazine preview of 2006 Solo Exhibits: **13 percent female**
Source: Jerry Saltz, *Village Voice*, 9/19/06

STEIN: From the get-go did you want the word "feminist" to be in the title of the Center?

SACKLER: Yes, definitely, it was always in my mind, whether I'd be starting a museum or going into an existing one. I always wanted it to be a center for *feminist art*. It was

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Guggenheim Solo Exhibits, Living Artists, 2000-2006: **14 percent female**

Source: Jerry Saltz, *Village Voice*, 9/19/06

Solo Exhibitions in New York Galleries, Fall 2006: **23 percent female**

Source: Jerry Saltz, *Village Voice*, 9/19/06

Whitney Biennial Artists in 2006: **32 percent female**

Source: Brainstormers Research 2007

Chelsea Galleries, Artists Represented: **34 percent female**

Source: Brainstormers Research 2006

Artists Space Gallery Open Slide Registry: **55 percent female**

Source: Brainstormers Research 2007

College Art Association Membership: **62 percent female**

Source: CAA, 7/15/09

SVA Graduate Art Students in 2008: **65 percent female**

Source: Ben Davis, *Artnet*, 3/22/09

Statistics collected by [Have Art, Will Travel! Inc.](#)

Also See: "Art World Insiders Struggle to Understand Disparity" by Linda Stein in this edition of On The Issues Magazine.

never to be a museum for women's art.

STEIN: So then after you did all your research and set your goals, you went to Arnold Lehman, Director of the Brooklyn Museum. Did he have any reaction to using the word feminist?

SACKLER: I went to Arnold for *The Dinner Party* and, ultimately, for the Center. He was fine with the word "feminist." There was one brief conversation with Mark Mayer (then Deputy Director) in which he said we want to talk to you about the use of the words *feminist art*. Mark was saying there were so many women artists who did not identify themselves as feminist artists and felt *feminist art* was ghettoizing, and that there was a group of people who might not identify with it. I said if those women who were not feminist artists could get wall space

and participate in institutional and gallery settings, that's great. That's a goal. That's highly desirable. But if they can't, they'll know there's a home for them here at the Center.

At one point we discussed the definition of feminism. For me, feminism is a way of life in order to reach a world of equality, equity and justice. At the point when we live in such a world, we won't need a Center for Feminist Art anymore; it could just be the Elizabeth A. Sackler Gallery. Feminism is a political construct for which we have to hold a place open, and be the beacon, and be available for women and feminist artists who have been put in back rooms and ignored.

STEIN: You took feminist art from "zero to one," and the rest of the world took notice. Did you or do you now find resistance to your goal of opening doors for feminist art?

SACKLER: I don't know and didn't know of people who resisted, or if they did, they did not express this to me. I occasionally hear conversations today amongst young people who don't identify with the definition of the word "feminism," but I feel this is a generational thing. Young women who have been out and about know there's not party. So feminism is a word they don't use. They just consider themselves activists. So I don't meet much resistance because I'm in the middle of where everyone is doing this kind of work. And so, to a certain extent, until the patriarchy is taken apart, I believe we have to consider women first, because women are never considered first.

STEIN: If you go to a party with people outside feminist circles, do you find some are surprised to find there is art-world discrimination against women?

SACKLER: People not involved in feminist art circles are mostly not aware of the enormous gender gap. Most people don't keep a lot of statistics in their heads, but they know, just from looking around, that there are, say, very few female museum directors. The statistics are startling. [See sidebar.] I don't know of any profession other than artists where there's a majority of women in the specialty schools, and then when these women go out into the world to become professionals, they automatically and immediately become the minority in that professional world.

STEIN: What is the Center's policy toward exhibiting men?

SACKLER: In the last exhibition, [Burning Down the House](#), there were two men exhibiting. Can there be male feminists? Yes. Can there be male feminist artists? Yes. It might be interesting in future to see how many men we bring in, but at this point in time it's not about men, it's about women. We don't have a policy of excluding men or including men. Since we're so nascent, we need to get our roots set very well, and we need to be a center for female feminist art.

STEIN: Now that you have created this groundbreaking Center, can you describe it and tell us about your goals for the future?

SACKLER: [The Center](#) is made up of four distinct areas: One, [The Dinner Party Gallery](#); two, [the Herstory Gallery](#); three, [the Feminist Gallery for Exhibitions](#); four, the Forum, featuring [lectures and panel discussions](#).

I'm hoping as we move forward, we can increase the number per year of exhibitions in both the Feminist and the Herstory Galleries. Our programming in the Forum has been excellent, and I want to continue that and keep the quality and the bar very high. Part of what I like to do in the Forum is to go beyond the boundaries of the artistic world to encompass the social and political. My feeling is that art and creativity reflect the world in which we live. We want to include very diverse and varied programming that speaks to a wide demographic and variety of people. My intention always is to blur boundaries and open doors.



©Mark D Phillips; Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum

By putting together this four-part Center within a world-class museum, I've created a model for other institutions to duplicate. Hopefully, other institutions would see the success of this Center and think that they, too, could set up centers of their own for feminist art or women's art within their existing institutions.

Linda Stein is the [Art Editor](#) of On The Issues Magazine. The concepts of Protection, Peace and Parity have permeated Stein's art, writing and lectures for the last three decades, culminating in *Knights*, her sculptural series of body-as-armor. She references icons from spiritual and pop culture, especially the superhero, Wonder Woman. More about her work and upcoming exhibitions is at www.lindastein.com.

Also See: "[Art World Insiders Struggle to Understand Disparity](#)" by **Linda Stein** in this edition of On The Issues Magazine.

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