

***A Contemporary Repository***  
***Judy Chicago's Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours***

VIKI D. THOMPSON WYLDER

ABSTRACT

During the course of her career Judy Chicago created ground-breaking artworks like the *Dinner Party* (1974-1979) and the *Holocaust Project* (1985-1993) to communicate social concerns. In her latest venture, *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* (2005), she extends her feminist principles to western culture's attitude toward animals. Here she utilizes a more modestly-sized, and generally more playful, concept than in those previous works. Nevertheless with seriousness of purpose she adapts a historic form known to have been created and used by women, the medieval Book of Hours. In so doing, Chicago creates a repository which holds and points to the numerous women's issues that have come to define her oeuvre. Specifically *Kitty City* points to a reclamation of the history of women and their art production, more particularly that of the Middle Ages. It points to feminist aesthetic issues and debates centering on concepts like expansion of the boundaries of art, collaboration, the artwork's connection to feminist principles or ideals, and the valuation or non-valuation of women's chosen subject matter. It points to a feminist theological critique of patriarchal Judeo-Christian hierarchical power relationships as well as the converse empowerment of "all who share this planet."

I like art, books, cats, and Judy Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Chicago's latest publication, *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* (2005), merges all these predilections. But I acknowledge a more personal interest. I have met many of the "Ca(ts)st of Characters" in this book (pp. 36-37).

During the years 1999 to 2002, the Florida State University (FSU) Museum of Fine Arts toured a retrospective of Chicago's works, primarily works on paper, titled *Trials and Tributes*. Necessary to the project were a number of curatorial visits to Chicago's home, offices, and studio at the Belen Hotel in Belen, New Mexico. I remember glimpses of the cats as they meandered or skedaddled through the restored rooms of the turn-of-the-century building. I yearned to pet Trio, the three-legged yellow-furred creature taken in by Chicago and her husband, Donald Woodman. I saw him once as he fled past at break-neck speed and again when Judy introduced him as he sought refuge in the closet. I favored Romeo. He seemed the least shy, perhaps because he was insistent that Judy feed him slices of turkey from the grocery-store deli. He sat on the tiled counter in the second-story kitchen next to the refrigerator while telepathing his message, "I want some turkey now!" And this was his place for enjoying the treat after it was offered. So with an excited sense of recognition I read Chicago's characterization of Trio as "fearful of people," (p. 39) and that he "race[d] around" in spite of his "liability" (p. 14). In the section "6 PM: Cute Tricks," Chicago included a drawing of Trio nestled under the clothes hanging from the rod in the closet. In the section titled "9 AM: Turkey Treats," I found her painted version of my own mental image, that of the gray and white long-haired Romeo leaning over the edge of the counter in anticipation of the slices taken from the storage drawer of the open refrigerator.

**Women and Cats**

Multiples of cats have resided in my household since 1972. I define my life as existing within a pride, although the actual term is a clowder of cats. When I was a child I thought all cats were girls and all dogs were boys. The term "feline" seemed appropriate since this appeared related to the term "female." However intuitive, or unsupported by concrete fact, it was fitting, in my judgment, that a foremost feminist artist of our time loves cats. In the Introduction to *Kitty City*, Chicago mentions a traditional association of cats with women, "from the Egyp-

tian goddess Bast, portrayed with a cat head, to manuscript illuminations showing cats drawing the wagon of the Nordic Goddess Freya, not to mention the medieval association with witches (most of whom were female)” (p. 27).

### Women in Western Culture

At first glance, Chicago's *Kitty City* may seem only destined to appeal to cat lovers, but there are complex reasons for its consideration beyond that circle of adherents. I plan to introduce the book to the women's studies class I teach each spring, *Women in Western Culture*, an introductory humanities class on the contributions of women from pre-history to our own time. Judy Chicago's body of work, with her interest in women's history and interdisciplinary feminist issues, provided one impetus for the founding of the class in the mid-80s by the FSU Women's Studies Program. Class content ends with a focus on Chicago and her oeuvre. *Kitty City* references the artist's previous works and concepts while bringing the hierarchical place of animals in western culture to the foreground. Feminists generally list their concerns as gender, race, age, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and the environment. With *Kitty City*, Chicago adds the place of animals prominently to the list, a topic which seemed, even in her work, to previously take a secondary position.

### Traditional Books of Hours

On the surface, *Kitty City* is a simple play on the Western European Gothic Book of Hours, a type of prayer book appearing in the later 1200s. It was commissioned by royalty, or the wealthy, to assist in daily rituals. In a traditional Book of Hours, the day was divided into eight sections or hours, beginning at midnight (*matins*), moving to sunrise (*lauds*), stretching through the morning, 6 a.m. (*prime*), then 9 a.m. (*terce*), picking up at noon (*sext*), continuing in the afternoon at 3 p.m. (*none*), and carrying into the evening, first at sunset (*vespers*) and finishing the cycle at 9 p.m. (*compline*). These hours were the opportunity for specified readings. The contents of Books of Hours came from various texts associated with Catholicism and the Mass and each edition was generally separated into a number of parts: a calendar, gospels, several set prayers to Mary, the sections known as the Hours (the Hours of the Virgin, the Hours of the

Cross, and the Hours of the Holy Spirit), followed by psalms as well as segments known as the Litany and the Office of the Dead, and a section on the sufferings of the saints.

The Book of Hours, a spiritual self-help book, also acted as a status symbol. As prized objects, Books of Hours were commonly listed in wills. The form was flexible and could be individualized according to the patron's wishes or the region in which it was produced. For example, the saints invoked in the last section of the Book might reflect either. Often, but not always, the Book of Hours was illuminated. The presence of gold and/or silver paint was required for a true “illumination” and devotional practice could include meditation on the imagery.

### Women and the Book Arts of the Middle Ages

Chicago's choice of a Book of Hours as a basis for this work acts as a semiotic referent for the growing attention to, and examination of, women's place in art history. Feminist inquiry has shown interest in the “Book Arts” of the Middle Ages. As Annemarie Weyl Carr suggests in a weighty compendium on women's art, the evidence for women's participation in the copying, designing, and illuminating of books has been available, but scattered. Occasionally the evidence was not believed. Carr suggests contemporary women challenge disbelievers through the further “assembly” and “interpretation” of this data (1997, p. 3).

With the inception of the women's movement in the late 1960s, early 1970s feminist art historians began to “assemble” the names of women artists from all historical periods and “interpret” the information and scholarship they found. Well-known comprehensive examples include catalogues like that accompanying the 1976 ground-breaking exhibition, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin (who cite Carr's scholarship), or Whitney Chadwick's 2002 publication (revised, original 1990), *Women, Art, and Society*. Material on women illuminators, like that in Harris and Nochlin's catalogue (pp. 17-20) and Chadwick's chapter on the Middle Ages (pp. 43-65), found its way into introductory classes on women's culture.

The writings of historians such as Carr, Harris, Nochlin, and Chadwick sometimes provided only artists' names, but occasionally a woman's name in connection with a work was substantiated, remarkable

in the anonymous world of the medieval. It is now characteristic to teach that evidence comes, from among other documents, the study of manuscripts and guild lists, that from the early institution of women's monasteries in the West (approximately 5th to 6th centuries), women participated in the activities of the scriptorium, acting as calligraphers of texts, rubricators of decorative letters, and illuminators of images. Commonly presented are the names of Ende (fl. 10th century), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Claricia (fl. 12th century), Guda (fl. 12th century), Bourgot (fl. 14th century), and Anastaise (fl. 14th/15th centuries). These names represent religious and secular illuminators. Hildegard, as the author and supervisor of the production of her own writings, would be considered the creator, rather than the painter, of images. Bourgot, Anastaise, and Claricia are examples of lay artists. Christine de Pizan, the author of pre-feminist treatises, *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and *Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405), mentions Anastaise whom she commissioned. Of these names, Anastaise is the one for whom images or an image has not been determined. Claricia was a student at her convent in Augsburg or a canoness, a resident of the monastery, but not a nun. This is surmised by the clothes she is wearing in her self-portrait. Among these illuminators, Bourgot, who worked with her father, Jean Le Noir, produced Books of Hours for patrons like Yolande of Flanders and Jean, Duc de Berry.

Chicago's choice points to additional involvement with Books of Hours by women of the Gothic era (and after). Mothers may have commissioned Books for daughters or willed their Books to daughters.<sup>2</sup> Since the section, Hours of the Virgin, was considered the most important even by the general populace, and was preceded by prayers to the Virgin, it is not surprising to find women were frequent users of Books of Hours and in a number of instances were patrons for these works. The aforementioned Yolande of Flanders, daughter-in-law of Jeanne II, Queen of Navarre, acquired her Book of Hours around 1353 seemingly in conjunction with her marriage to Phillippe, the Queen's son.

Mary's status, role, and place on the "Ave" side of the "Eva/Ave" dualistic view of women in the Middle Ages attracted women to Books of Hours. Mary's near divinity, the only woman in Catholicism to receive a heavenly crown, established her as the lone female representative in the Christian pantheon. In addition, Mary's humanity made her a poten-

tial intermediary and exemplar. In the illuminations associated with the Virgin it is significant that an image of a female owner might be included and that illuminations of the Virgin holding Jesus eventually evolved into images in which the Virgin's interaction with her child reflects ordinary mothering activity. For example, in the often illustrated image of the *Annunciation* from the *Petites Hueres of Jeanne d'Evreux* (c. 1325), Jeanne, the French queen, is shown in the illuminated lettering below. In the 2001 *Leaves of Gold* exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, an image by the Master of the Mazarin Hours, dated to about 1415-20, shows the Virgin casually holding a toddler-aged Jesus while he plays the common game of peek-a-boo with several angels. Among the possible illuminative choices for Mary's Hours, the medieval patron generally chose images from her life, beginning with the Annunciation and ending with her Coronation.

### **Judy Chicago and the Reclamation of Women's Art History**

As a referent to women's historical participation in medieval art, Chicago's *Feline Book of Hours* is useful, but overly subtle and indirect. This is regrettable since Chicago's most well-known work, the *Dinner Party* (1979), gives evidence of Chicago's own research and knowledge on the topic. On the Heritage Floor on which the triangular shaped *Dinner Party* table rests, she added all but two of these women to the 999 names streaming from underneath the 39 place settings of the table. Chicago even included the Virgin Mary, in association with the place setting for Eleanor of Aquitaine, a choice she explained in the biographical sketches in the first volume of the accompanying *Dinner Party* books, the book which focused on the ceramics found in the work. "During Eleanor's lifetime, the worship of Mary became increasingly manifest. ... The ancient reverence for a humane and nurturing female deity found its expression in the veneration of the 'Mother of God.' ... Mary was easier for the populace to accept ..." (1979, p. 140).

Although Bourgot's (and Jean Le Noir's) patron, Yolande of Flanders, is not to be found in the *Dinner Party* material, Chicago showed her awareness of the importance of historical patronage by women by including Isabella d'Este with a place at the table. Isabella, who commissioned and collected art during the Renaissance, brought fame to her court at

Mantua through the works she amassed. Under her place setting are the names of several other women who included patronage among their pursuits, for example Lucrezia Tournabuoni, wife of a Medici, and mother of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and Mahaut of Artois, a French noblewoman who lived a generation before Yolande.

Hildegard of Bingen is honored by a plate and runner at the table rather than with her name penned on the Heritage Floor. The other illuminators discussed, Ende, Claricia, and Guda, can be found with the names emanating from the Hrosvitha place setting. Anastaise and Bourgot can be found with those associated with Christine de Pizan.

In the second volume, which focused on the embroidery in the *Dinner Party*, Chicago included an image from a medieval illumination which shows a woman using her spindle and distaff in an attempt to impale a knight. Chicago used the image as evidence that women, at the end of the Middle Ages, did not accept their demise within the guild system quietly or their related declining participation with the high medieval arts of textiles and illumination. Chicago speculated that the image “may have been painted by nuns, who are documented as having worked as both illuminators and scribes” (1980, p. 104).

### Judy Chicago's Contemporary Book of Hours

As might be expected for a 21st century artist's Book of Hours, Chicago's interpretation takes many liberties with the form. Although *Kitty City* deviates widely from the original semi-prescribed format for a medieval Book of Hours, Chicago's practice is nevertheless also aligned with the format's intended flexibility. Carr, in her article on medieval women artists, speaks of the imagery in devotional books made and used by women of the time as representing “powerful affections of their own hearts in devotion” (1997, p. 13). In the Introduction to *Kitty City*, Chicago talks about her admiration for Books of Hours and how she “sometimes thought about trying to make a contemporary equivalent” (p. 20). Although she toyed with the idea of creating a Bestiary rather than a Book of Hours, she eventually saw *Kitty City* as a “devotional book” and the form therefore appropriate (p. 20). Chicago's *Feline Book of Hours* includes an “Introduction,” a middle section that is the actual “Feline Book of Hours,” an “Afterword,” and “Acknowledgments.” Those parts

not formally designated as the Book of Hours are primarily text with interspersed imagery. The formal Book of Hours section is primarily imagery with interspersed text. Gold frames the imagery throughout, designating this book as illuminated.

In the Introduction, Chicago covers a number of topics. She describes each of her cats, recounts her life with her cats, gives a condensed history of the cultural beliefs and treatment of cats, and provides a brief art historical overview of cat imagery as well as the symbolic use of cat imagery. She allows her complex reasons for pursuing this artwork to unfold as she writes, noting that some may see *Kitty City* as a deviation within a body of work that contains not only the monumental *Dinner Party*, but other groundbreaking series such as the *Birth Project* (1985), *Powerplay* (1986), the *Holocaust Project* (1993), and *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (2000).

In the Feline Book of Hours section, Chicago extends the devotional hour markers from eight to twenty-four, to coincide with the more obsessive time-marking practice of contemporary society. She begins with “6 AM: Cat Alarm Clocks” and ends with “5 AM: Home Is Where the Cats Are.” A particularly endearing Hour is “4 AM: Growing Up Is Hard To Do.” Chicago offers images of the twin-like brothers, Pete and Re-Pete, at various stages of maturation. My favorite image shows either Pete or Re-Pete as a kitten mimicking the stride of the older Romeo as they stroll down the hall together at the Belen Hotel. These Hours are interrupted at various points with introductory cat portraits, a recounting of the deaths of Poppy and Veronica, and segments titled “Irreconcilable Differences” and “Feline Facts I, II, and III.” The Hours end with a depiction of Chicago's and Woodman's cat cemetery, an illumination titled “Rest in Peace,” as well as the combined cat-portraits/self-portraits for “I Wish I Were a Cat.”

The Afterword tells of the deaths of Inka and Romeo, and is accompanied by the unusual image called *Inka/Judy Interstitial Sisters*. Chicago writes that she and this cat shared a disease, interstitial cystitis. The Acknowledgments list Chicago's thank yous, particularly to her photographer husband, Donald Woodman. (See Figures 1-9.)



Figure 1. **On Monday, March 11, 1996, He Left Us... Sebastian Dying**  
from *Kitty City Sketchbook*  
©Judy Chicago 1996  
Graphite on paper, 6" x 10"

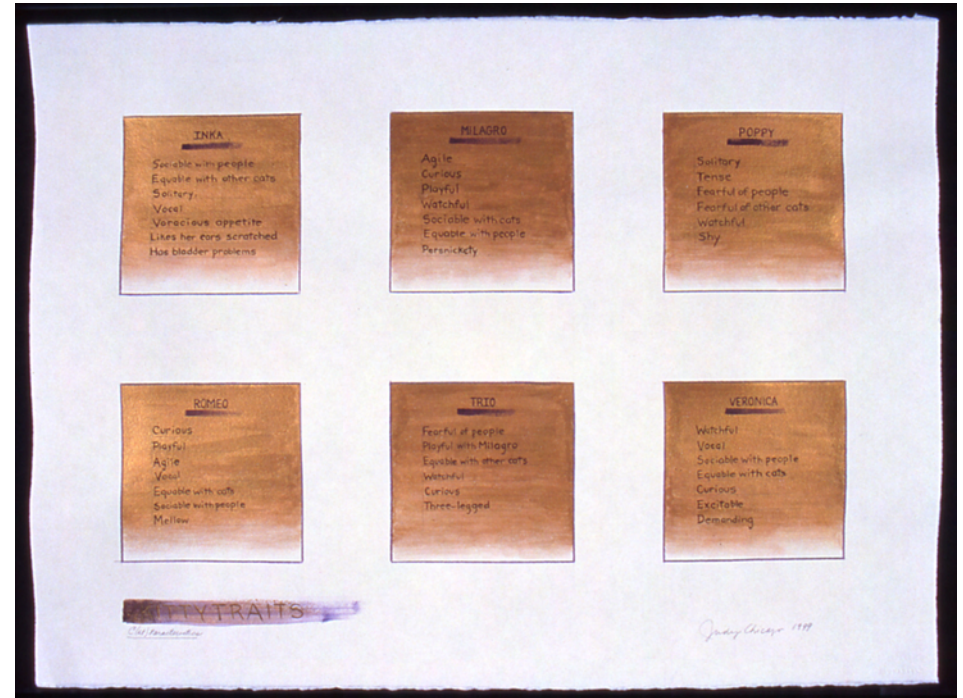


Figure 3. **C(at)haracteristics**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours 2000 - 2005*  
©Judy Chicago 1999  
watercolor and gouache on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 2. **Ca(ts)st of Characters**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours 2000 - 2005*  
©Judy Chicago 1999  
watercolor, white tempera and gouache on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 4. **8 AM: Kitty Clean Up**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* 2000 - 2005  
©Judy Chicago 2000  
watercolor on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 5. **9 AM: Turkey Treats**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* 2000 - 2005  
©Judy Chicago 2001  
watercolor on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 6. **2 PM: Take Your Cats to Work**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* 2000 - 2005  
©Judy Chicago 2001  
watercolor on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 7. **6 PM: Cute Tricks**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* 2000 - 2005  
©Judy Chicago 2001  
watercolor on Arches, 22" x 30"



Figure 8. **4 AM: Growing Up is Hard to Do**  
from *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours 2000 - 2005*  
©Judy Chicago 2003  
watercolor on Arches, 22" x 30"

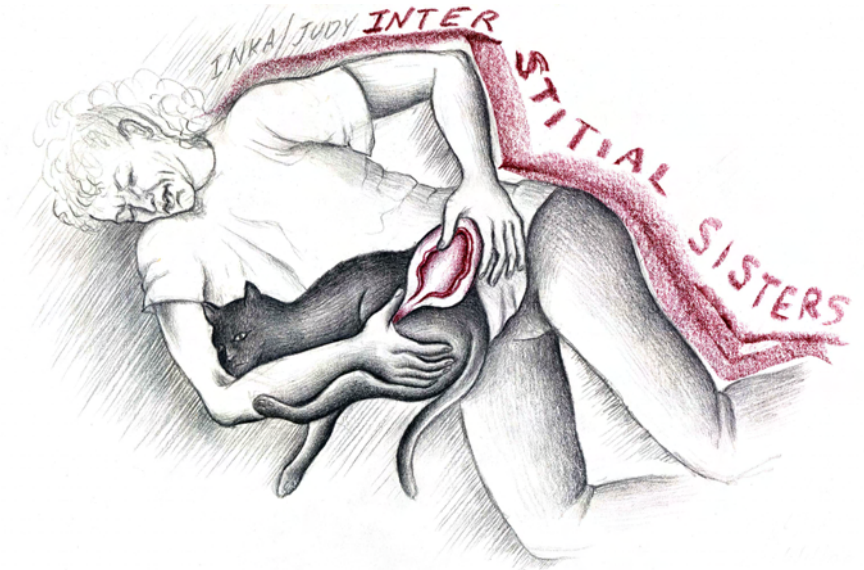


Figure 9. **Inka/Judy, Intersittial Sisters**  
from *Kitty City Sketchbook*  
©Judy Chicago 1999  
graphite and watercolor, 22" x 30"

#### **Book Arts or Art Books: Documentation or Part of the Art?**

Many of Chicago's projects include documentation in the form of books. The *Dinner Party* (1979, 1980), the *Birth Project* (1985), and the *Holocaust Project* (1993) books tend to merge with the art proper, some more and some less, in their conceptual interweaving of imagery and text. The documentation extends each artwork's medium and meaning. In addition, all three of these artworks were created and executed utilizing varying types and degrees of collaboration, an important feminist process and a feature of the messages communicated by the books. In spite of this flirtation with extending the boundaries of a work of art, these documentary books draw a distinct line between the visual works meant for exhibition and the books meant to document them. At the same time, in 20th century art practice, documentation often became "art."

In *Kitty City*, the boundaries and the distinction between work of art and book are even less clear. Chicago explains that the book is based



on 36 watercolors,<sup>3</sup> yet these original artworks were made with the book itself as their primary destination. A Book of Hours is meant as a work in its own right. Chicago and her publisher, HarperDesign, set up a tour for *Kitty City*. The watercolors were exhibited at selected venues with book signings, but some venues were strictly book signing affairs.<sup>4</sup>

### Cat Adoptions: Part of the Art?

Chicago arranged for cat adoptions at these events. The adoptions themselves may exist outside the art or may stretch the limits of events and actions called art. In art lexicon, the cat adoptions might classify *Kitty City* as “new genre public art,” a term coined in a book edited by Suzanne Lacy in 1995 called *Mapping the Terrain*. New genre public art was identified by characteristics such as existence outside the usual gallery/museum environment, relationship to audience, an activist approach, or a blending of aesthetics and social work. Chicago has long wanted her art to express a strong and meaningful connection to the lives we actually lead. She wants to effect change in the world itself. Her name and work is included in the final section of the book, *Directional Signs: A Compendium of Artists' Works*.

In “new genre public art” fashion, Chicago worked with animal rescue organizations, not for the sake of the art, but for the sake of the cats. The actual success of this effort is unknown. In the fall of 2005, Chicago estimated the number of adoptions at a low 20 to 25 but suggested that people who did not adopt at these events may have been nudged toward adoptions from animal shelters. Chicago kept no records on the number of cats placed in homes but she collected an occasional anecdotal story. For example, she tells in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Through the Flower* newsletter about

a beautiful white cat named “Captain” whose moniker had been bestowed upon him because he had stowed away on a ship sailing out of Istanbul. Luckily (miraculously, some might say) for this cat, there was a woman on board the ship whose daughter worked for Kitten Rescue. As I said at the book event, here is a cat who deserves a home; after all, he traveled all the way from Istanbul to Dutton's in Los Angeles in search of a family. (p. 2)

From a cat lover's point of view, 20 adoptions are better than no adoptions and the number of adoptions does not change Chicago's earnestness or the aesthetic question raised by sponsoring cat adoptions as part of an art event. Mary Jane Jacob, a contributor to *Mapping the Terrain*, described the new genre “artwork” and its “contextualizing program” as a totality, as all “part of the art” (pp. 56-57).

### Acknowledgments

In *Kitty City*, the original watercolors and text were researched, conceived, and executed only by Chicago. Yet any book published today, by its very nature, is a collaborative venture. Thus, Chicago elevates the Acknowledgments section of the book. The gesture may seem small, but even small gestures communicate. Rather than appearing as fine print in the non-numbered beginning pages of the usual book configuration, the Acknowledgments here appear at the end of the book in same size print as the Introduction, the major textual portion of the book. In addition they are placed prominently in the Table of Contents on a par in Part Two with the Book of Hours and Afterword sections.

The most prominent acknowledgment is given to Donald Woodman, Chicago's husband. As photographer of the watercolors, his substantial role raises feminist aesthetic questions. This Book of Hours is composed of photographed watercolors rather than watercolors. Should he be considered a major collaborator and given some place of authorship for the book?

Although Chicago states her position, “I am indebted to him for his conscientious efforts to translate my sketches and watercolors into close visual approximations of the originals” (p. 121), she nonetheless, and perhaps unintendedly, resurrects a debate that has “dogged” her for many years. In her group endeavors like the *Dinner Party* or the *Birth Project* or *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time*, Chicago faithfully documented and credited those with whom she “collaborated.” Her method stands in contrast to a number of past artists who chose to execute art through group processes without acknowledging the group. The famous, or infamous, case of Andy Warhol's “factory” is an example. Although a number of “factory workers” achieved recognition, writers cite his practice of taking entire credit for work sometimes by simply authorizing the use of

his name.

In the catalogue accompanying the 1996 exhibition of the *Dinner Party* in Los Angeles, curator Amelia Jones discusses the feminist controversy surrounding Chicago's collaborative methods (pp. 104-105). Jones cites a number of feminist critics who accused Chicago of maintaining a hierarchical attitude by continuing to privilege her position as artist while, in turn, assigning the role of helper to any with whom she worked. Chicago seemed to be making a double break of faith with important feminist principles. To many she was making a mockery of the feminist process of collaboration in which women were determinedly and democratically subverting the idea of the "genius" who received "divine inspiration" as "he" supposedly worked alone in "his" studio. Secondly, Chicago seemed to identify with this idea of genius. Jones noted that in the *Dinner Party* documentation, reporting her frustration with the time the project required, Chicago made commiserative comments about the twelve years Michelangelo spent on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Jones, 1996, p. 105; Chicago, 1979, p. 29).

Curator Amelia Jones' discussion of the critical argument surrounding Chicago's choice of group artmaking processes suggests an occasional feminist desire to adhere to a politically correct form of collaboration. In 1980, in the essay "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," Lucy Lippard listed "cooperative/collaborative/collective or anonymous artmaking" as feminist modes. Her characterization gave ample room for diverse methods within the form. Lippard also noted that her own discussion was an "idealizing" of this feminist approach, an indication that realities might offer forms at variance with the ideal (p. 179). The definition of the term, collaboration, simply means that work, or tasks, are done together. No matter the precise relationship between Chicago and her husband as they "worked together" or his exact "status" within the *Kitty City* project, Chicago's pronounced acknowledgment of her husband's participation challenges the hierarchical notion of isolated achievement.

### Cats and Art History

Chicago's watercolors and book fall within a history of cat artwork and artists who liked to produce images of cats. Chicago touches

on this past running quickly through points about Egyptian and medieval imagery, noting that cats rarely appeared in the manuscripts of the Middle Ages, but sometimes in their marginalia or in the bas-de-page areas. She observes that cats in 16th through 18th century artwork often held less than a respected position. She explains, for example, that in secular painting of the 16th and 17th centuries, cats were only found in "scenes with children" since "playing with animals was considered a childish thing to do" (p. 26). Although completed in the next century, the famed Goya painting of the noble boy, Don Manuel, holding a string tethered to a bird while three cats watch, in part seems a recipient of this thinking. She writes that cats appeared in French and English erotica in the 18th century. "In French erotic art, cats were often positioned under women's skirts, while in English erotica, they were associated with prostitutes" (p. 27). Chicago recently ventured into the cat erotica genre herself with works such as *Like a Giant Cat*, a 2001 watercolor that became part of her 2004 publication titled *Fragments From the Delta of Venus*. In the 19th century, the status of cats changed. Victorian households "parlorized" cats (O'Neill, 1981, p. 62). Chicago mentions that Manet (1832-1883) produced a "lithograph advertising a book on cats that helped the book [and cats] become extremely popular" (p. 27). Manet also contributed an engraving to *Les Chats*, the first important published study of felines written in 1870 by Jules Husson (O'Neill, 1981, p. 45).

This change in the cultural view may have influenced "a number of nineteenth century female painters [to choose] cats as their exclusive subject" (Chicago, 2005, p. 27). Chicago asks why these women are not remembered within the mainstream of the history of art. Are they omitted because the work was "considered bourgeois" (p. 27) or because these artists were women? Henriëtte Ronner-Knip (1821-1909), a Dutch/Flemish artist of the period, is an example. Although she was known to the Belgian queen and her work is currently housed in the collection of the regional Dutch institution, the Dordrechts Museum, she is generally unknown today. She first produced landscapes and paintings of dogs, but after 1870 turned mainly to cats as her subject. When contrasted with the work of Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899), another contemporary animal devotee whose work is remembered more favorably, Ronner-Knip's work might be judged by a contemporary audience as "feminine" and precious.

A male contemporary of both Ronner-Knip and Bonheur, Theophile-Alexandre Steinlen (1859-1923), is today generally remembered for his cat imagery. Many of Steinlen's cats exude dignity and elegant beauty, but some of his work can be viewed as "cute." His series of drawings titled *Awful End of a Goldfish* or *The Ball of Yarn* are cases in point. An example of his work in this "cute" category, *Cat and Boy*, a linocut which appeared in the French publication titled *Des Chats: Images Sans Parole*, was collected by the Metropolitan Museum.

### Chicago's Cats

Chicago's cat imagery stands in contrast to all these artists in style, technique, tone, and message. Ronner-Knip's traditionally styled paintings meshed with the Victorian bourgeoisie's infatuation with well-groomed and attractive pets. Bonheur's outlook climaxes in her approximately 16' oil on canvas masterpiece titled *The Horse Fair*. Bonheur's sentiments can be seen in her depiction of the high energy, nobility, and strength of the realistically rendered horses. In her work, people are present but secondary. Steinlen's graphic work shows appreciation for the line, shape, and movement of the cat. Steinlen's cats are to be observed and appreciated for their innate beauty and their antics.

In *Kitty City*, all the images are done in watercolor. Each cat's furry surface emerges through an extended stroking motion using a fine watercolor brush. This generally contrasts with the controlled liquid spread of color on the rest of the surface. Although this rhythmical stroking is often characteristic of Chicago's approach to drawing, here the process is translated to another medium and seems to hold special meaning. Her motions carry references to the stroking of the cat itself and encourage the viewer to visually do so. This is particularly emphasized in the section titled "8 AM: Kitty Clean Up," where Chicago includes an image of Romeo being groomed. The view is a close-up of the hand and brush as it moves through the hairs on the cat's body. Each hair is distinct and linear while the color of hand, brush, and background are formed primarily by gradient color, light to dark or the reverse. Chicago's style, as is typical for her, is schematic and abstracted (as was the style of most medieval illuminators). Indication of this style as a calculated development can be found in a contrast with her drawing of *Sebastian Dying*, a

realistic sketch, closer to the style of Steinlen's studies.

### A Serious Undertone

A serious tone pervades this Book of Hours even when it suggests humor, playfulness, or "cuteness." Chicago offers visions of the life and death of cats as they reside with humans. She paints their interspecies interaction with people or their interaction with each other. More importantly Chicago's style, medium, and subject emphasize her approach/viewpoint, a profound merger of concept and feeling. Judy and Donald are shown sleeping with the cats, holding the cats, nuzzling the cats, watching television with the cats, and exercising with them. In the "2 PM" Hour, titled "Take Your Cats to Work," Judy sits with Pete and Re-Pete on her lap, while Romeo, Inka, and Milagro lounge or sit on the work table. These cats are respected companions.

For Chicago, the overarching message of *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* is spiritual. Chicago sees all life, humans and other species, as evidence of the divine. In the Introduction she addresses this issue, "I believe everything that exists is a manifestation of God.... Thus to observe, render, and thereby honor any aspect of Godly life is my way of expressing awe and respect" (p. 20). Although this statement is broad, Chicago's practice in this book tends to be personal and specific. She presents particular life, the cats with whom she lives. In an interesting overlay, she places transparencies of portraits of Inka, Milagro, Poppy, Romeo, Trio, and Veronica over text that describes their distinct personalities. For Poppy, she lists "solitary, tense, fearful of people, fearful of other cats, watchful, and shy" (p. 38). In contrast, she describes Veronica as "watchful, vocal, sociable with people, equable with cats, curious, excitable, and demanding" (p. 38). Chicago identifies this book about cats as a "prosaic metaphor," one that expresses her "personal values," with an emphasis on "equality and respect for all who share this planet" (p. 9).

### Leveling the Hierarchy

In part, Chicago came to this belief in an immanent and equitable spirituality through her feminism. In their early writings, feminist theologians, like Carol Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (1986, pp. 123-124), and Naomi Goldenberg in *Changing of the Gods* (1979, p. 39),

mentioned Chicago's imagery as potential symbology for a radical spiritualism. Reflecting the feminist theological critique of patriarchal Judeo-Christian hierarchy, Chicago's work, over the years of her career, systematically leveled the positions of this hierarchy. Through visual means, Chicago's imagery sought to convey what Judith Plaskow and Christ referred to in *Weaving the Visions* as "sacred power ... present in the whole complex web of life," (1989, Introduction, p. 10) and what Rosemary Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk* termed the "primal matrix" where "spirit and matter are not dichotomized" (1983, p. 85). In other words, sacred power was seen in everyone and everything. Plaskow and Christ described this sacred power as "empowering," (p. 10) and a replacement for the "power-over" (p. 10) status of the Judeo-Christian hierarchical view of being that placed a male God at the top, man next, followed by woman, and inherently tended to continue the rankings by suppressing those described as others (for example, other ethnic groups and races or those classified by other sexual orientation or age), as well as nature and matter in general. Non-human species were situated at the bottom rung in contrast to a feminist spiritual view of the "sacred and empowered" place of phytological and zoological species in a "web of life."

The *Dinner Party* and the *Birth Project* dealt mainly with the top three categories, God, man, and woman. The *Holocaust Project* looked at this entire system of power inclusive of the treatment of animals. Chicago recalls how during her Holocaust research she

had stumbled upon information about assembly line techniques and learned that the first [animals] to be processed were pigs. When we were at Auschwitz, it came to me that it resembled a giant processing plant. But, here instead of processing pigs, the Nazis had processed people, as being no better than pigs. Suddenly I began to wonder about the ethics of 'processing' any living creature, recognizing what horrors it could lead to and questioning whether anyone had that right. (2005, p. 9)

This smaller project, this *Feline Book of Hours*, grew from these ruminations.

My lengthy investigation of the Holocaust brought me to the conclusion that our own relationship to each other, to other species, and to the planet itself must undergo a transformation in terms of human beings' sense of entitlement—that is the notion that the world and its creatures are ours to do with as we wish. (p. 9)

In individual pieces in the Holocaust Project series<sup>5</sup> and in single works like *Would You Wear Your Dog*, Chicago protested animal abuse and conveyed the suggestion of intrinsic animal rights.<sup>6</sup> However, *Kitty City* is Chicago's first extended project to focus solely on issues surrounding this lowest ranking in the hierarchy of power prevalent in western Judeo-Christian society.

### **Kitty City: A Repository**

The hierarchical bottom is frequently treated by activists in a formal, ecological concern for the environment and the plight of other than domestic species. Instead, Chicago chooses to state her position through the near and the everyday. I find this method needed. During the course of teaching *Women in Western Culture*, my class once had the good fortune to meet another pioneering feminist artist, Carolee Schneeman. Schneeman introduced a work, now owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, titled *Infinity Kisses* (1982-86). In this work Schneeman placed within a grid composition over a hundred photographs of her cat greeting her each morning with what looked like a kiss on the mouth. Several students in the class were repelled by what they termed "bestiality." They would undoubtedly have been offended by Chicago's own cat erotica but perhaps Chicago's *Kitty City* would have prepared them with a feminist conceptual construct for Schneeman's intimate regard for her cat.

Chicago's book has the potential to provide students with much more. This work, as does much of Chicago's oeuvre, folds the past into the feminist present. By adapting a historical form sometimes made and often used by medieval women, Chicago offers women in western society, in a small space, the continuum of their history and their concerns. The work is a repository that holds and points to a number of disciplines and issues. *Kitty City* alludes to the discipline of art history with special

attention given to women's creative position from the distant past to contemporary times as well as the reclamation of that art historical past. This includes Chicago's own role in that restoration. It references the discipline of aesthetics to include a focus on the expansion of the boundaries of art, use and acknowledgment of feminist principles and ideals like collaboration, as well as the culture's valuation or non-valuation of women's artwork and women's chosen subject matter. It implies the discipline of feminist theology with its critique of the system of power in place in western culture and its advocacy of a spiritual view of life as a matrix of empowerment. Chicago's *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* provides a unique opportunity for any reader or viewer, including a class like the one I teach. In this case, for a modest cost, and through accessible subject matter, the entire class, or anyone, can closely explore a visual work by a noted feminist artist, in the form it was intended.

## End Notes

1. The autobiographical tenor of this review, as well as its opening statement, are meant to parallel the autobiographical tenor and opening statement of Chicago's *Kitty City*.
2. A number of authors, for example Madeline H. Caviness in *Reframing Medieval Art: Difference, Margins, Boundaries* (2001), argue that Books of Hours played a role in the construction of gender in medieval society.
3. In a brief conversation with Chicago on August 30, 2005, she indicated the sizes of each of the watercolors. No such information is provided in the book. In the *Feline Book of Hours* proper, all original watercolors are 22" x 30". All other watercolors are 12" x 9".
4. The Chicago project closest to *Kitty City* in process is *Fragments from the Delta of Venus*. For this book, published in 2004, Chicago also created a series of watercolors. *Fragments* features erotic images produced in commemoration of, and homage to, the work of Chicago's friend and mentor, Anaïs Nin. In a strategy similar to that for *Kitty City*, Chicago and her publisher, *PowerHouse Books*, arranged for a tour which included exhibitions and book signings.
5. In the *Holocaust Project*, Chicago created a work directly questioning the use and ethics of animal experimentation. *Where Should the Line Be Drawn* became the first

work in a series of four called *Four Questions*. In the documentary *Holocaust Project* book, the artist devotes a number of pages to her exploration of the subject (1993, pp. 146-150). In a precursor to *Kitty City*, Chicago writes "all I have to do is think about my kitties and what medical researchers do to cats and I get weak in the knees and sick to my stomach" (p. 146).

6. Chicago donated the *Would You Wear Your Dog* image to be used by *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* (PETA) in an early 1990s campaign. In *Judy Chicago, An American Vision*, author Edward Lucie-Smith included a photograph of the display of the resultant poster at a Washington, D.C. bus shelter (2000, p. 143).

## References

- Cameron, D. (Ed.) (1996). *Carolee Schneeman: Up to and including her limits* [Exhibition Catalog]. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Carr, A. W. (1997). Women as artists in the middle ages: "The dark is light enough." In D. Gaze (Ed.), *Dictionary of women artists* (pp. 3-21). Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Caviness, M. H. (2001). *Reframing medieval art: difference, margins, boundaries*. Medford, MA: Tufts University. Retrieved June 26, 2006, from the Digital Collection and Archives at the Tisch Library, <http://nils.lib.tufts.edu/Caviness>
- Chadwick, W. (2002). *Women, art, and society* (Rev. ed.). London: Thames & Hudson.
- Chicago, J. (1979). *The Dinner Party: A symbol of our heritage*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Chicago, J. (1980). *Embroidering our heritage: The Dinner Party needlework*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Chicago, J. (1985). *The Birth Project*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Chicago, J. (1993). *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light*. New York: Penguin.
- Chicago, J. (2004). *Fragments from the Delta of Venus*. New York: Powerhouse Books.
- Chicago, J. (2005). *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours*. New York: HarperDesign.
- Chicago, J. (2005). *The Chicago corner. Through the flower, making connections through art* [Newsletter.] Belen, NM: Through the Flower.
- Christ, C. P. (1986). *Diving deep and surfacing* (2nd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.

- De Pizan, C. (1999). *The book of the city of ladies* (R. Brown-Grant, Trans.). London: Penguin. (Original work published 1405)
- De Pizan, C. (2003). *The treasure of the city of ladies* (S. Lawson, Trans.). London: Penguin. (Original work published 1405)
- Goldenberg, N. R. (1979). *Changing of the gods, feminism and the end of traditional religions*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Harper, P. (1986). *Powerplay* [Exhibition Catalog]. New York: ACA Galleries.
- Harris, A. S., & Nochlin, L. (1976). *Women artists: 1550-1950*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art & New York: Knopf.
- Henriëtte Ronner-Knip. *The cat cabinet*. Retrieved August 30, 2005, from [http://www.kattenkabinet.nl/html/ronnerenglish\\_2.html](http://www.kattenkabinet.nl/html/ronnerenglish_2.html)
- Jacob, M. J. (1995). An unfashionable audience. In S. Lacy (Ed.), *Mapping the terrain, new genre public art* (pp. 50-59). Seattle: Bay Press.
- Jones, A. (1996). The "sexual politics" of The Dinner Party: a critical context. In A. Jones (Ed.), *Sexual politics, Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in feminist art history* (pp. 82-118). Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center and the University of California Press.
- Lacy, S. (Ed.). (1995). *Mapping the terrain, new genre public art*. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Lippard, L. R. (1980). *The pink glass swan, selected feminist essays on art*. New York: The New Press.
- Lucie-Smith, E. (2000). *Judy Chicago: An American vision*. New York: Watson-Guptill.
- O'Neill, J. P., & Grossman, A. (1981). *Metropolitan cats*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art & Abrams.
- Philadelphia Museum of Art (2000-2002). *Leaves of gold, treasures of manuscript illumination from Philadelphia connections*. Retrieved March 31, 2006, from <http://www.leavesofgold.org>
- Plaskow, J., & Christ, C. (1989). Introduction. In J. Plaskow & C. Christ (Eds.), *Weaving the visions, new patterns in feminist spirituality* (pp. 1-13). San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Ruether, R. R. (1983). *Sexism and god-talk, toward a feminist theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Steinlen, A.-T. (1980). *Steinlen cats*. New York: Dover.
- Wylder, V. D. T. (1999). *Judy Chicago, trials and tributes* [Exhibition Catalog]. Tallahassee, FL: The Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts.

### About the Author

Dr. Thompson Wylder has served as a museum operations specialist at the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (FSU MoFA) since 1989. Her tenure has varied to include registrarial, publicity, education, and curatorial duties. In the 90s, she curated a Judy Chicago retrospective titled *Trials and Tributes*. The exhibition, focusing primarily on Chicago's works on paper, opened at the FSU MoFA in 1999 and traveled to seven additional venues through February, 2002. At the New Orleans Museum of Art, the exhibition was nominated by Edward Rubin for "Best Show Outside NYC," an award given by the International Association of Art Critics, The American Wing. The *Trials and Tributes* catalogue essay was abbreviated to become the primary essay for the 2002 catalogue (edited by Elizabeth Sackler) published in conjunction with the subsequent Chicago survey hosted by the National Museum of Women in the Arts (October 9, 2002 - January 5, 2003). Other Thompson Wylder articles include "A Conversation with Judy Chicago, 1997-1998," an interview printed in *Creating Women*, the anthology (edited by Bryant and Elder) published in 2005 to be used by Women's Studies classes. Dr. Thompson Wylder teaches the core Women's Studies class at FSU titled, *Women in Western Culture*.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at [vwylder@mailier.fsu.edu](mailto:vwylder@mailier.fsu.edu)