

Ms. ON THE
ARTS



ART

**The I-Hate-
To-Cook
"Dinner Party"**

APRIL KINGSLEY

I wanted to make a relationship between dinner parties and how women give dinner parties, and the "Last Supper" . . . how women probably prepared the food but weren't in the picture . . . how great women have been served up and consumed by history.

—Judy Chicago

Will it change the world? Judy Chicago, its creator, expects no less from "The Dinner Party," but if it doesn't . . . it could be the biggest white elephant in the history of art." This mammoth, mixed-media work, elegantly installed in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (until June 17), symbolically re-presents "her-story" as a "First Supper" to which the artist has invited her personal pantheon of heroines.

Each of the 39 "guests" (mythological and real figures selected to stand for crucial phases in women's history and for basic female qualities) are represented on 14-inch china-painted porcelain plates (or patens) by images that grow out of the butterfly motif Chicago uses as a symbol of women's liberation and resurrection. Vaginal, vegetal, and floral forms are grafted onto the butterfly's winged symmetry to embody the

subject's role and personality, and decorative motifs from the art of her time are used on the plates as well as on the individualized needlework tablecloths (or runners) that frame them.

The plates become more three-dimensional as our history nears the present, the wings of the butterflies literally lifting off the plates in high relief to reflect the ever-nearing fulfillment of women's hopes for equality. The Susan B. Anthony image rises four inches from the plate and is an astonishing technical achievement that physically translates Anthony's rage and strength—and the enormity of her accomplishment—into visual form.

A golden chalice and pearl luster "silverware" complete each of the place settings, which are chronologically arranged 13 to a side around an open-centered triangular table, approximately 50 feet on each side. The table rests on a dais of pearlescent tiles inscribed in gold with the names of 999 important women from all periods, and the entire complex is illuminated to suggest ritual splendor.

An exhibit of traditional china-painting, historical photo-documentation panels, and an entryway lined with tapestry banners accompany the piece, and *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Anchor Press/Doubleday) has been written and illuminated by Chicago as a catalog, a reinterpretation of women's history, and a diary of the five years she and 400 co-workers spent making "The Dinner Party." A videotape

by Lisa Feinstein, showing the evolution of the project, will be screened concurrently with the exhibit, and a documentary by Johanna Demetrakas will be released in the fall.

While "The Dinner Party" is completely one woman's conception, and therefore not typical of feminist collective projects, it would not look or feel as it does without the interaction of the teams that Chicago organized to execute the ceramics, needlework, research, and installation. For instance, when Chicago discovered a red butterfly called Sangaris, and decided to make birth-control pioneer Margaret Sanger "all red and have her be a sacrificial figure . . . a goddess connected to blood sacrifice," she made a detailed drawing of the plate image, along with ideas for the needlework runner. Judy Keyes, on the ceramics team, made a prototype plate based on the drawing, but she felt "very unsatisfied with the results. I talked with Judy, and things fell into place. She wanted an image that was strong and pushed itself up off the plate with a lot of tension. I would imagine myself on the plate and say, 'Well, how would I push myself off? I'd grab onto the rim tightly and use every muscle.'"

{Not everyone was well suited for this kind of collaboration or for the psychological stress of group activity, constant sharing, open weekly rap sessions, self-motivation, the insensitivity to outside-the-project concerns, and constant panic-level pressure to get the

work done. Perhaps the best and the worst aspects of this environment were summed up in the studio's graffiti—"Don't talk to me. I'm working & if I stop Chicago will kill me.")

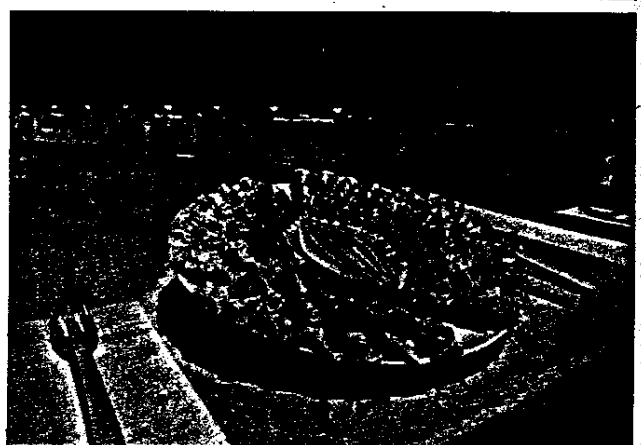
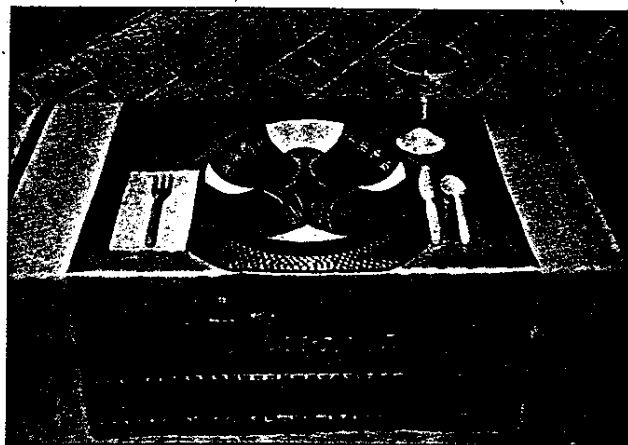
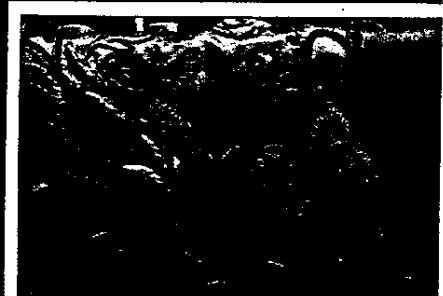
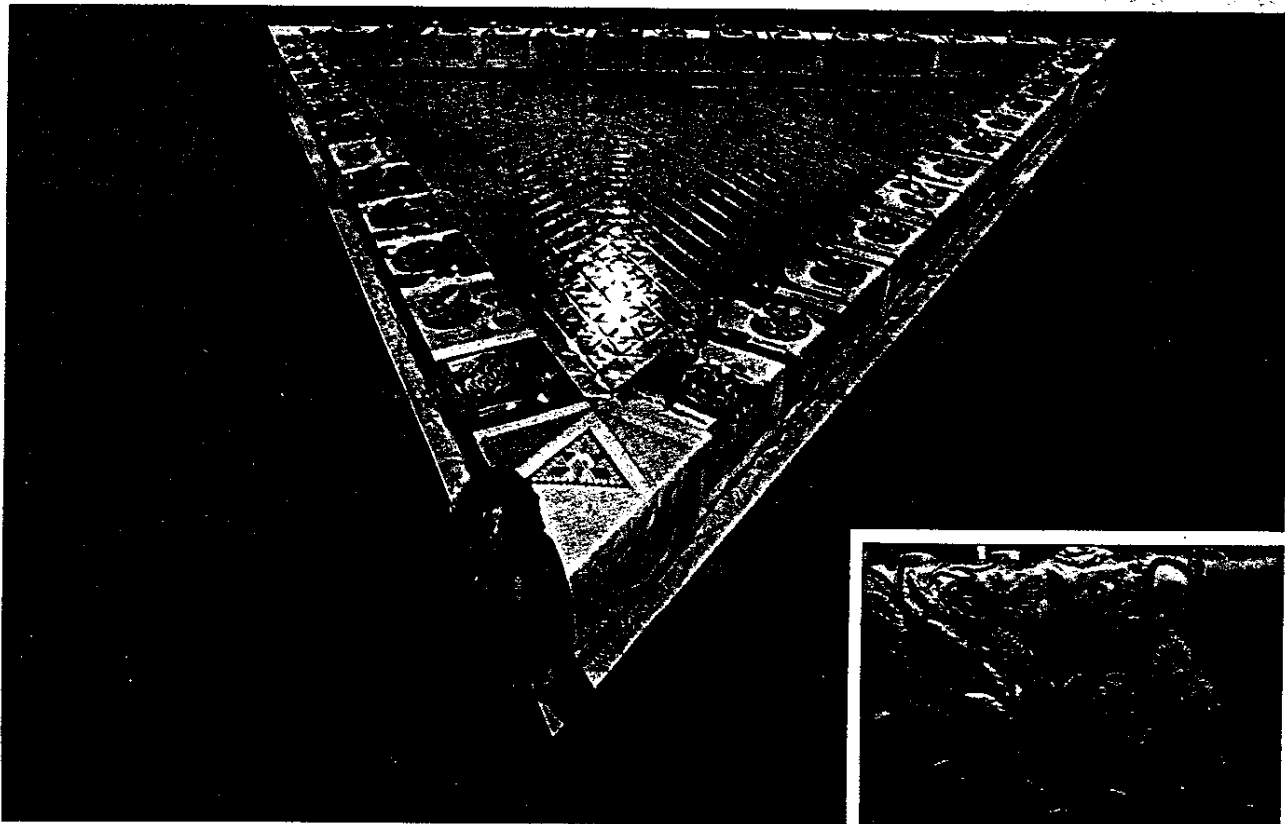
Unlike many artists, Judy Chicago has always proceeded from content to technique, but never before has her content been so deeply meaningful or her technique so complex. Surrounded by

skilled artisans and energetic apprentices (financed by \$150,000 in public and private donations) in a workshop the likes of which hasn't been seen since medieval monasteries or Renaissance ateliers, she has created the most ambitious exhibit ever undertaken by a woman artist. "The Dinner Party," which was "intended to challenge the values of society," will probably succeed because it is so

beautiful and profound that it leaps beyond art to life—and art can change the world when that happens.

April Kingsley is art critic for the "Village Voice."

For more information about the exhibit's traveling schedule and film distribution, write to "Through the Flower Corporation," P.O. Box 1876, Santa Monica, California 90406—or call (213) 828-6655.



Judy Chicago (top) celebrates the art of china-painting, needlework, and ceramics in "The Dinner Party," with a table set for 39 "lost" heroines. (Inset) Stump work—the technique that involves stuffing figures, dressing them, and applying them to other surfaces—covers the Mary Wollstonecraft runner as a symbol of women's "silken fetters." (Above left) the setting for Byzantine Empress Theodora; (right), Emily Dickinson's plate has layers of rigid lace, recalling the Victorian era. (Opposite page, left and right) Plates honoring Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first woman doctor, and Hypatia, a scholar of ancient Rome.