

Photography in the Fresno Feminist Arts Program

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In this echoing world, pinpointing precise moments when new photographic attitudes emerged is not a straightforward process. Photographic teachings are sometimes distilled to key educational figures such as Minor White in Rochester or Harry Callahan at the Rhode Island School of Design, or they are condensed to approaches or influences, such as the directorial constructions of Gregory Crewdson or the New York street photographers' style. In the sixties, the teacher became less important than a desire to use formalist and modernist photographic characteristics as an expression of a visual idea rather than as a motivation.¹ It was at this time that photography became recognized as a cultural tool, used less as a descriptive representation of a reality than as a sign symbolizing something else, a conflict made transparent by the 1969 "debate" between printmaker-turned-photographer Robert Heinecken and Ansel Adams at Occidental College in Los Angeles, when Heinecken announced his and others' desire to upend the "dominant modernist, objective concepts of photography."² The use of photography as a cultural tool, therefore, did not (and does not) necessarily stem from photography programs. And this idea was enthusiastically embraced by a group of arts educators in an innovative educational arts experiment in Fresno, California, in 1970, with a group of fifteen women hand-selected by a visiting art professor.

In spring 1970, Judy Chicago came to Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno), invited as a visiting artist to teach site-specific sculpture by then-chair of the Art Department, Heinz Kusel. She joined a faculty that included Charles Gaines, another innovative hire, who had arrived two years earlier. Well-read in feminist literature, Chicago brought these politics, her acclaim as a minimalist sculptor, and her roots in the Los Angeles arts scene to this rural city in the heart of California's Central Valley.³ At that time, Fresno had a population of 165,972⁴ and had been growing rapidly, bulldozing row upon row of orchard fields to achieve this rapid growth. Fresno State College was situated about seven miles from the city center and, in the seventies, was surrounded by fields

and rural areas. Fresno had, and still has, an awkward character: growth as a service town for the richest agricultural region in the world; access to places of beauty such as Yosemite National Park; home to the Fulton Mall, the nation's first acclaimed downtown revitalization scheme (a documentary of its success was screened for Lady Bird Johnson in 1968 but by 1970 the downtown area was once again abandoned in favor of a newer shopping mall outside the city center⁵); and stifling summer heat and smog.

Chicago proposed that an off-campus, all-women class would give women a spatial and ideological opportunity to immerse themselves in their art studies. This became the Feminist Art Program (FAP), the nation's first, and the precursor to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) program that Chicago subsequently developed with feminist artist Miriam Schapiro.⁶ Chicago interviewed and accepted women into this course on the condition that they view themselves as professional artists. Suzanne Lacy, who later developed a stellar career as a public practice artist, remembers having to convince Chicago that she did want to be a professional artist as, at the time, she was a graduate student studying psychology.⁷ Faith Wilding, who was already teaching a course on feminist theory and practice, acted as an unofficial teaching assistant and ran the art history and reading groups.⁸ Apart from Lacy and Wilding, who were well versed in feminist writings and critical theory, the other women accepted were undergraduate students from a variety of backgrounds: Nancy Youdelman, for example, was a theater major studying costume, and Vanalyne Green was a psychology student. Some were already studying art, like Dori Atlantis who was majoring in studio art with an emphasis in photography and ceramics. The course required a commitment of nine to fifteen units and by spring 1971 was a full-time program.

By creating the program, Chicago was riding a tide of interest in feminist issues. In 1970, the first women's studies program was developed at San Diego State College; on the Fresno campus,



Wilding proposed an experimental course titled "The Second Sex: On Women's Liberation"; and a group of women were actively working towards creating a women's studies program at Fresno State. It was also in 1970 that Chicago officially changed her name from Gerowitz, divesting "herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance."⁹ This was a deliberately political act; she placed a full-page advertisement in the October issue of *Artforum* announcing her name change together with an image of herself leaning against the ropes in a boxing ring in a pose that suggests confidence and swaggering bravado.

Outside of Fresno, critics were actively drawing attention to the lack of inclusion of women in major art collections. Artists Faith Ringgold, Poppy Johnson, and Lucy Lippard protested the low numbers of women artists included in Whitney Museum Annuals, which helped increase the inclusion of women artists in the 1970 Whitney Annual from around 6 percent the previous year to about 23 percent.¹⁰ Other exhibitions were still exclusively male; as art historian Laura Meyer points out, "not one of the sixty-four artists featured

in the blockbuster 1970 *Art and Technology* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art ... was a woman."¹¹ And the 1969 exhibition *Art by Telephone* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, was similarly exclusive.¹² It was against this backdrop that Chicago decided to create an incubator where women could be themselves and create art in a supportive environment separate from the university and men.

Moving the course off the Fresno College campus was an imperative for Chicago. Her goal was to give the young women the skills and confidence to be professional artists, and creating studio space was one of the needs of a professional artist. Chicago describes having to compete with men on male terms (materials, technique, and minimalist subject matter) to be taken seriously as an artist in the sixties before discovering more rounded feminine forms

in her imagery. Feminist Shulamith Firestone also described the nature of the creative arts thus: "In those cases where individual women have participated in male culture, they have had to do so on male terms."¹³ To this end, separating from the campus into an all-female group, finding the studio, dealing with the real estate agents, and then learning the mechanical and technical skills to fix up the studio were as essential to the students' development as artists as the actual learning of the artistic craft.¹⁴ The fifteen women repurposed a former community theater space, learning carpentry skills and how to apply sheet rock. Each made a major commitment to the program, contributing \$25 a month towards materials and rent.¹⁵ Schapiro, who visited the space, was impressed by the sense of empowerment that building the studio gave to the young women.¹⁶ Nine units of coursework required six hours of daily work, and many students spent much more time at the studio. It was in this space that Atlantis built a darkroom.

Art photography had already evolved in the fifties and sixties and was no longer exclusively romantic, abstract, or formalist. Robert Frank's book *The Americans* (1958) and Ed Ruscha's deadpan, emotionally void, conceptual photographic artist's books (published in the sixties) inspired many photographers. Urban and emotionally stripped landscape photography was made notable by William Jenkins's *New Topographics* exhibition in the mid-seventies. Conceptual

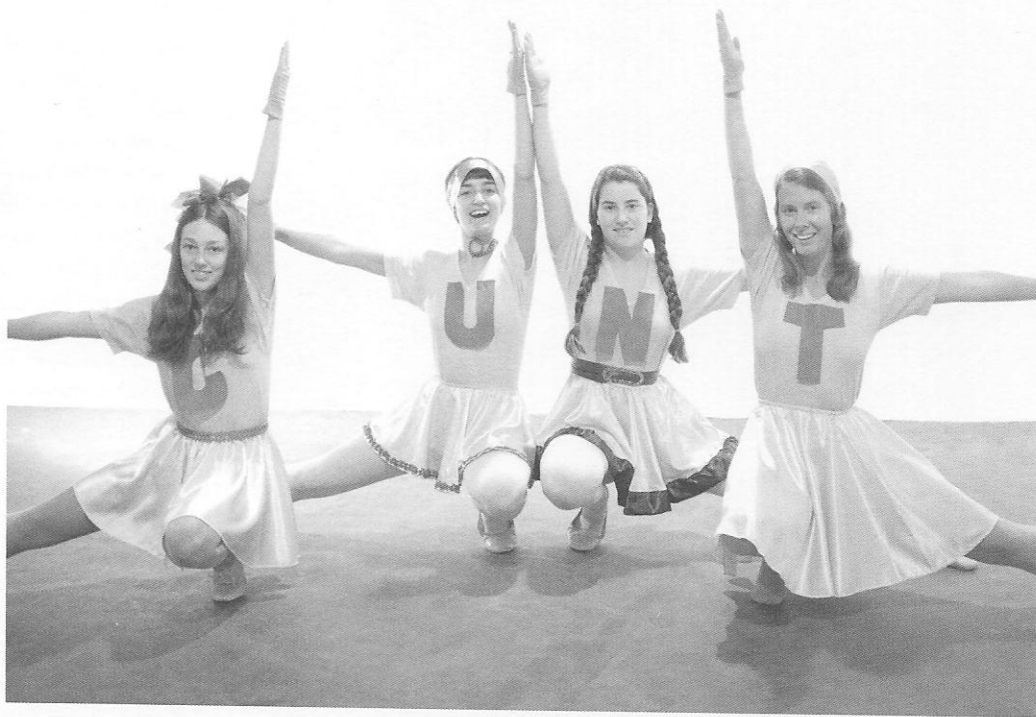
Above: Figure 1, *Miss Chicago and the California Girls*, 1971, photo by Dori Atlantis

Opposite: Figure 2, *Cunt Cheerleaders*, 1971, photo by Dori Atlantis.
Left to Right: Cay Lang, Banalyne Green, Dori Atlantis, Susan Boud

artists such as William Wegman, a sculptor by training, moved to Los Angeles and turned to photography. Chicago—moving to Fresno from Los Angeles—most certainly was aware of the changing role of photography in art practices; the photograph she used to announce her name change attests to this. Whether these new movements in photography had reached Fresno by the time Chicago arrived is open to discussion.

At Fresno State, two full-time professors taught photography: R. Gayle Smalley, who taught from 1963 to 1998, and Richard Delaney, who was on the faculty from 1968 to 2004. By all accounts, classes and course assignments were fairly traditional. The images of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams were studied alongside those made by Dorothea Lange and Julia Margaret Cameron. The two instructors had differing teaching styles: the projects and work in Smalley's classes could be described as more interpretive.¹⁷ Delaney emphasized technical skills: how to use medium-format cameras, the sunny-sixteen rule,¹⁸ and the large-format camera. In both classes, there was a strong affinity with Sierra Club photography due to Fresno's proximity to Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon national parks. Atlantis spoke of going on field trips with Delaney and photographing the California coastal landscape or Gold Country with the view camera. A colleague described Delaney's students' work as having an abstract and impersonal, formalist aesthetic.

Members of FAP were freed from the strictures of formalism and, instead of photographing that which can be observed in nature, they used photography as a cultural tool to document and to express their ideas about gender roles and personal experiences. In addition, Chicago was very aware that the educational environment, and the work these young women were creating, was groundbreaking, and she wanted professional level photographic documentation.¹⁹ Apart from Atlantis, few of the fifteen students had any significant training in photography, yet because of the collaborative and experimental nature of the program, several of the students turned to photography and video to support their artistic ideas. Green, who later took up video art at CalArts, described the attraction as "a product of an education that valorized video [...] cheap, easy to learn, and unencumbered by



already threatening histories of male, hierarchical power and prestige [...] .Video came out of sculpture, performance, happenings. It was fertile. For me, video had to do with Judy's attitude that you must put women into nontraditional art forms. That way, she said, we would be able to say something interesting without being inhibited by 'Masteritus.'"²⁰

To develop their artistic practices, the women shared books, and created their own reading lists and even their history of women in the arts. In the spirit of many feminist programs, they had consciousness-raising (rap) sessions.²¹ The experimental space was an incubator with a focus on experience and female discourse; excellence was expected. As Lacy recalled, "Judy would give us assignments having to do with topics [...] like rage. You know, like, how do you feel when you're walking down the street with men leering at you? [...] She intentionally steered us away from anything that was conceptual, that was removed from a direct engagement with our feelings. We made art of our experience."²² Chicago's intention was that the students should make art about what really interested them. Medium became a secondary consideration.

Collaboration was another frequently used strategy along with the use of "low-art" —feminine craft techniques like needlework. In the series *Costumed Images of Women* (1971), a collaborative team would dress up and assume roles that represented stereotypical representations of women. Youdelman created the costumes, Atlantis took the photo-



Above: Figure 3, *Kewpie Doll*, 1971, photo by Dori Atlantis, costume by Nancy Youdelman. Model: Cheryl Zurilgen.

Opposite: Figure 4, *Kewpie Doll*, 1971, photo by Dori Atlantis, costume by Nancy Youdelman. Model: Judy Schaefer.

graphs, and Jan Lester (now Janice Martin), Shawnee Wollenman, Cheryl Zurilgen, Chris Rush, and Karen LeCocq also created costumes or acted as the models. Youdelman described the process:

Jan Lester and I began the very first costume series rather spontaneously. One night in my apartment, we decided to just dress up, put makeup on and take pictures. We had an inexpensive instamatic camera with the little flash cubes that turned around. We had the pictures developed, but at first we were afraid to show them to Judy. We thought she would say something like, "Oh these are really sexist. This is not good," and then be mad at us. But when we did show them to her she was enthusiastic. She said, "This is a great start; now get a better camera, focus your ideas and get back-drop paper."²³

By encouraging the students to use a plain background and decent lighting, Chicago demonstrated her unacknowledged bias for conventional photographic standards that was possibly determined by her drive toward professionalism. These costumed images pre-date the groundbreaking work by Judith Golden and, later, Cindy Sherman that also recontextualized the female role. By making art about female stereotypes, the FAP students were responding to their lived experiences and to the highly coded representations of women in popular culture as described by artist John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Firestone wrote that "because the cultural dicta are set by men, presenting only the male view...women are kept from achieving an authentic picture of their reality."²⁴ For the character *Kewpie Doll* (1971), Youdelman created a costume of feathers, ribbons, and boas. (Fig. 3) Beneath the fringed skirt, strands of blue feathers emerge from the pubic area. Her cheeks are rouged and her mouth forms perfect Clara Bow lips. Zurilgen, the model, twists a finger into her cheek and looks coyly heavenward as though unaware of the viewer. In looking at other photographs from this series—*Bride*, *Victorian Whore*, *Veiled Woman* and *High Society*—the averted eyes are a common theme. The viewer is invited in to inspect these women, much as they are scrutinized in life.

Feminist art critics have questioned whether self-representation through photography was or is narcissistic in nature. But art historian Amelia Jones argues that the interpretation of women by a male-dominated society necessitated narcissism: "[T]he overt expression of women's fully embodied, desiring experiences and (narcissistic) self-involvement was seen as the surest way to repudiate the objectification of women and to politicize personal experience."²⁵ In the FAP discussing, reflecting, and ascertaining female stereotypes and then using this material to perform the role for photographic purposes did exactly this. In acting out a number of roles, the FAP women demonstrated the fragmentation of women's roles and created a more complex image. Of a later generation of female photographers, artist Diane Neumaier writes that "historically women have been 'framed' through a process of representation and can be 'reframed' through the same process"

and that “self-representation [is] a vigilant response to oppressive patriarchal methods of representation.”²⁶

In another project, the students created cheerleaders to celebrate the word cunt. Atlantis participated in and photographed the *Cunt Cheerleaders* (1971), despite being “so innocent that I hadn’t heard that word.”²⁷ (Fig. 2) The group (Atlantis, Green, Susan Boud, and Cay Lang) created pink cheerleading outfits with T-shirts that spelled out C-U-N-T and practiced their humorous and enthusiastic cheers in the off-campus studio. The women performed an ebullient cunt cheer at the airport to greet Ti-Grace Atkinson who was coming to speak at the university (captured on film by Judith Dancoff). Atlantis also performed the cheer on her own, displaying all four letters on her T-shirt, at a renowned Los Angeles performance venue. The exuberance, wit, and personal engagement with which these women approached this and other projects are important to note. Too often, feminist works of this era are instilled with a didactic sense of righteousness. Art historian Margo Hobbs Thompson pinpoints the feminists’ articulation on “central core” imagery as emerging from the FAP group:

Sexual desire had become an incendiary topic for feminists just at the moment feminist artists began to develop a visual language with which to represent it: vaginal imagery, otherwise known as “central core” or female imagery. This sort of imagery was highly developed and encouraged on the West Coast [...and] played a crucial role in feminist art criticism beginning in 1971, when the [Fresno] Feminist Art Program students and faculty edited a special issue of the feminist journal *Everywoman II*.²⁸

Atlantis’s photographs documenting the Cunt Cheerleaders are not typical of the more casual, 35mm performance photographs that typify early performance art (think of Carolee Schneeman’s *Scroll* [1975] or Chris Burden’s *Shoot* [1971] where just one image stands for the entire performance). As a participant, Atlantis was not able to photograph the actual live cheers. By staging the cheerleaders in a studio-type environment, Atlantis removed the audience and was able to take the photographs in a controlled manner. The staged appearance of the photographs prevents them having a deeper creative resonance. Yet, despite the detached nature of the performed poses, the cheerleaders’ ebullience is still apparent, as is their fresh-faced courage. The cheerleading outfits appear demure, even if the message is loud.

It was only through Atlantis’s formal photographic training that she was able to produce such images, and she often felt the pressure of being the group’s official photographer. When the group created *Miss Chicago and the California Girls* (1971), Atlantis recalled how little time she was given to create the photograph and that she always felt that the photograph was a rush job.²⁹ (Fig. 1) In this image, the women have taken on the roles of beauty queens, albeit with belligerent grins and armpit hair proudly displayed. In order to get a completely white background, Atlantis had to paint the negative to block out the back-



ground and then print the image on a high-contrast paper to achieve a passable result. She then created twelve 16 x 20-inch images that the participants then embellished with their autographs and parodic lipstick kisses. *Miss Chicago and the California Girls* was a direct response to an invitation from artist Tom Marioni to participate in a show titled *California Girls*. As Gail Levin wrote, “Although she thought the title was condescending, Chicago invited her students to think of a collaborative piece, and Jan Lester suggested a beauty pageant spoof—complete with their work boots and hairy legs.”³⁰ Parody, humor, and satiric skits were common themes among the students’ work.

Judy Dancoff, who came to Fresno to create a film about Chicago and the FAP experiment, introduced the students to filmmaking. Dancoff filmed the first public performance of Chicago’s *Cock and Cunt* (1971), a play performed by Lester and Wilding with Wollenman’s soft sculptures. Inspired to create films, Youdelman mined her theatre background and wrote, costumed, directed, and filmed Lester and Rush in *Rivalry Play* (1970-1971), which explored jealousies between women. The film was edited but was not shown until Laura Meyer’s 2009 exhibition *A Studio of Their Own*. The over-the-top acting and theatrical way in which the women tore their clothing apart adds to the humor inherent in this film. Once again, the women were working with stereotypes



Figure 5, exhibition view of *I Tried Everything*, featuring Suzanne Lacy, Dori Atlantis, Jan Lester, and Nancy Youdelman, 1972, photo by Michael Karibian, 2009.

When Chicago created the program in Fresno, she told the department chair, “I’m very concerned about the fact that so many young women go into the college art system and so few come out the other end into professional life. I would like to address this.”

that they presented as a form of opposition to their collaborative work efforts. As Youdelman describes it, “The play was funny because it was so stereotypical and so opposite of how we actually were: because we were hippies, because we did not wear make-up or shave our legs or armpits.”³¹ Lester also often used humor in her work. In *The Steak Film* (1971), Lester directed Youdelman to be very animated. Youdelman leaps out of bed, pedals her bicycle through the streets of Fresno, buys a steak, returns home to cook and then eat the meat with gusto. The film, which expresses a sense of purpose and single-mindedness and an ability to be one’s self, “was sort of a portrait of Nancy ... I’ve always admired her ability to get an idea and immediately follow through on it.”³² It also expresses an unabashed food indulgence experience. Prior

to making the film, Lester had no film experience and had to take out a student loan to buy the camera.

Although the Fresno Feminists Art Program continued for another twenty-five years, principally under the guidance of Professor Joyce Aiken, ten of the women transferred to CalArts (where many were part of the group that created WomanHouse) to complete their education with Chicago (who left Fresno to teach at CalArts in fall 1971), Sheila de Bretteville, and Shapiro. Youdelman described the transition to Los Angeles: “in Fresno it was very internal — influenced by Judy — there [in Los Angeles] it was very external.”³³ In Los Angeles the students were exposed to many more artists including Eleanor Antin,

Barbara T. Smith, and Lynn Herschman (Leeson). Despite the new environment, the group continued to work collaboratively. In the summer of 1971, prior to starting at CalArts, Atlantis and Youdelman created a performative photographic series probing the role of the housewife. In 1972 Lacy, Atlantis, Lester and Youdelman created the installation *I Tried Everything*, a response to the advertisements in magazines and newspapers selling products to enhance the bust. (Fig. 5) "All of us were kind of amazed that a woman could be reduced to the size of her breasts," Atlantis recalled. They wrote to the manufacturers, explaining their predicament and shame for having small breasts and purchasing the breast-enhancing products. Atlantis photographed Youdelman daily, trying the products or measuring her breasts. Youdelman's demeanor is entirely serious and yet the overall effect of the work is both poignant and humorous. The installation included the original advertisements, the products, Youdelman's diary entries, and the letters written to and received from the manufacturers. The piece brings to mind other sequential and serial projects such as Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) or Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971).

Experimental arts environments are not new, and some interesting educational environments still resonate. However, in a public institution today it may be difficult to create an experimental program solely for women in an off-campus workspace, or a situation wherein students are required to contribute to the rent. At the 2010 College Art Association National Conference, Bethany Taylor, declaring "I don't teach art, I teach artists," spoke of the Workshop on Art Research and Practice (WARP), part of the Art Program at the University of Florida. Since 2003, this foundation level course is taught in an off-campus, 6,000-square-foot warehouse where engagement, collaboration, experimentation, and research are all part of the introductory learning environment.³⁴ The non-media-specific environment of Chicago's FAP resulted in pointed, political, and context-rich art. By creating an off-campus space where the students were free to experiment and develop their artistic ideas in a collaborative and noncompetitive environment, Chicago developed educational programming ideas that in some ways are still ahead of their time. When Chicago created the program in Fresno, she told the department chair, "I'm very concerned about the fact that so many young women go into the college art system and so few come out the other end into professional life. I would like to address this."³⁵ Of the fifteen women who initially entered the program, nine are practicing professional artists forty years later.

1. Liz Wells, "On and Beyond the White Walls," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2000), 280.

2. Robert Hirsch, *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Focal Press, 2008), 20.

3. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 71-92.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Table 20. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1970, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab20.txt>.

5. The Downtown Association of Fresno. *A City Reborn* film screening. Web. June 26, 2010, <http://downtownfresno.org/a-city-reborn-film-screening-aug-12th.html>.

6. Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 32-48.

7. Oral history interview with Suzanne Lacy, 1990 Mar. 16, 24 and Sept. 27, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lacy90.htm>.

8. Laura Meyer, *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Art Experiment* (Fresno: The Press at the California State University, 2009), 24. Meyer's scholarship and the recent symposium and exhibition of the same name are the source of much of the historical information about this program for this essay.

9. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 63.

10. Faith Ringgold, excerpt from *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 175-180; cited at Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/feminist_art_base/gallery/Faith_Ringgold.php.

11. Meyer, *A Studio of Their Own*, 6.

12. *Art by Telephone* (1969) phonograph served as both the exhibition and catalogue.

13. Shulamith Firestone, "(Male) Culture," in *Feminism Art Theory and Anthology 1968-2000*, edited by Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001), 14. Originally published in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1979 first pub. 1970).

14. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 63.

15. Oral history interview with Suzanne Lacy.

16. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Conversations with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro," in Broude and Garrard, 74.

17. Email from Jim Franklin (student of Gayle Smalley from 1974-1975) to Julia Bradshaw 29 May, 2010.

18. The "sunny-sixteen" rule is a method used to establish the necessary shutter speed given the light conditions, the film ISO and the chosen aperture setting without using an exposure meter.

19. Conversations with Dori Atlantis, April 8, 2010, and Nancy Youdelman, June 1, 2010.

20. Quoted in Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001), 154 - 160.

21. Oral history interview with Suzanne Lacy.

22. Ibid.

23. Faith Wilding, "Gestations in a Studio of Our Own," in *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Art Experiment*, edited by Laura Meyer (Fresno: The Press at the California State University, 2009), 93.

24. Firestone, "(Male) Culture," 14.

25. Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998), 48.

26. Diane Neumaier, ed., introduction, *Reframings. New American Feminist Photographers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 1-2.

27. Dori Atlantis conversation with the author April 8, 2010.

28. Margo Hobbs Thompson, "Agreeable Objects and Angry Paintings: 'Female Imagery' in Art by Hannah Wilke and Louise Fishman, 1970-1973," *Genders* 43 (2006), http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_margothompson.html.

29. To include herself in the image, Atlantis had to set the self-timer and run into the frame. She used a 4x5 view camera and developed the film herself. Unfortunately she exposed some of the film before it was fully fixed and only one image from the photo shoot survived.

30. Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 156.

31. Nancy Youdelman, conversation with the author June 1, 2010.

32. Janice Martin (née Lester), email correspondence with the author June 5, 2010.

33. Nancy Youdelman, conversation with the author June 1, 2010.

34. Bethany Taylor, "I Don't Want to Teach Art; I'd Rather Teach Artists," in panel discussion "Post-Duchamp, Post-Production: Delineations of Media in Art Theory and Pedagogy," College Arts Association Conference, February 11, 2010.

35. Broude and Garrard, "Conversations," 66.