

Archetypes and Icons: Materialising Victorian Womanhood in 1970s Feminist Art

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Abstract:

North American feminist artists working in the 1970s produced a corpus of visual culture that can be characterised as neo-Victorian, but has yet to be analysed as such. This article will analyse how performative role-playing, appropriation of Victoriana, experimentation with modes of 'women's work', and archival research presented opportunities for these artists to materialise Victorian gender norms while examining them through a feminist lens and forging links with their first wave feminist foremothers for political and aesthetic purposes. Finally, this article will consider the theoretical implications of this imperative to create a 'documentary trace' of the Victorian past, especially in relation to trauma studies.

Keywords: Eleanor Antin, Dori Atlantis, Judy Chicago, contemporary art, feminist art, femmage, Karen LeCocq, Betye Saar, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Youdelman.

Beginning with the founding of the Fresno Feminist Art Program (1970) and ending with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), this article tracks a decade's worth of North American aesthetic production by feminist artists Betye Saar, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Eleanor Antin, and others, all of which may be characterised as neo-Victorian.¹ Their works of art variously portray Victorian women as stereotypical archetypes identified by clothing and other props, or as historically specific icons rescued from patriarchal dominance to work through themes central to the feminist art movement, including female sexuality, women's labour, and domesticity.² This work has yet to be discussed in a neo-Victorian context, even though its critical relationship with the nineteenth-century past aligns it with the genre. Moreover, the works of art under discussion here are historically coincident with such neo-Victorian literary milestones as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection*

(1975).³ Whether or not the artists under consideration read or were aware of these texts, thematic similarities exist between the neo-Victorian visual art and literature of the 1970s that allow for a more interdisciplinary and deeply historicised view of neo-Victorian culture.⁴ Fowles's emphasis on Victorian female sexuality, Atwood's investigation of Victorian women's colonial history, or Moore's fetishisation of Victorian objects all resonate with 'visual' and textual references to the Victorian discussed here.

Importantly, however, the work featured in this article will also be used to show how the aesthetic choices that structure neo-Victorian artistic production have often been driven by specific theoretical concerns (see Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 1). Indeed, the second-wave feminist artists on whom I will focus choose their neo-Victorian materials (corsets, daguerreotypes, quilts) and visual references for their ability to symbolically and aesthetically communicate political ideals which could be mobilised as a means of rebelling against patriarchal power. This is to say that novel processes and representational strategies such as performative role-playing, the appropriation of Victorian objects, and experimentation with modes of 'women's work' redolent with Victorian associations, present opportunities for these artists to materialise and examine Victorian gender norms through a feminist lens. The result is 'syllogistic' work that construes the historical as personal and, therefore, as politically and aesthetically useful in challenging hierarchies of identity based on economic, racial, and gender privilege. Thus, 'materialising', as per this article's title, signifies both Victorian objects that appear in the works discussed, as well as the ways in which they are deployed to conjure the Victorian women to which they refer. Moreover, this representational strategy, which persistently utilises material, autobiographical, and embodied representational strategies, effectively creates a "documentary trace" to the past, as Kate Mitchell calls it (Mitchell 2008: 82). At the same time it combines, as if in layers, the identity of the artist with that of a Victorian woman or her material substitute, simultaneously positioning the artist as documentarian, archivist, performer, and medium).

In the three sections of the article that follow, I will examine the aesthetic dimensions and theoretical implications, especially in relation to trauma studies, of the contemporary feminist desire to create a 'documentary trace' to the Victorian past through artistic means, thereby constructing political art.⁵ First, I will show how the feminist art

programmes at California State University, Fresno, and California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) encouraged students to view themselves and their work in a broad historical context and thereby established the ‘documentary trace’ as both a pedagogy for feminist art teaching and as a process of feminist art production. Second, I will explore how artists deploy Victorian objects to simultaneously create material links to Victorian women, while challenging modernist masculinist prejudices against ‘women’s work’ as a viable art form. Finally, I will demonstrate how artists use quasi-documentary processes as an aesthetic strategy to re-present Victorian women’s history.

1. Discovering the Grandmother in the Attic

At their most optimistic, many artists of the so-called second wave perceived the nineteenth century as a repository of ‘herstory’, a productive space in which to explore the origins of modern Western feminism and recover its lineage through representations of emblematic figures such as Susan B. Anthony and more personal, unsung female heroines who struggled within and against patriarchy: anonymous artists, quietly heroic relatives, factory labourers, and so on. In *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, Cora Kaplan recalls the urgency and difficulty of working with Victorian material as a feminist in the 1960s and 1970s, noting that

the scorn with which the term [Victorian] was used implied that the ‘Victorian’ view of the world was so outmoded that to invoke its taboos amounted to the ludicrous and pitiable attempt to return to the world of one’s great-grandparents. (Kaplan 2007: 85)

Kaplan, however, also notes that the “productive incongruity” of working with Victorian material during the political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s prompted her to re-publish an edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 proto-feminist text, *Aurora Leigh* (Kaplan 2007: 4). For both Kaplan and the second-wave feminist artists discussed here, the Victorian era simultaneously signified the hope of the first modern, Western feminist movement (the so-called ‘first-wave’ of feminism from which they descended), and the trauma of patriarchal oppression and suppressed sexuality symbolised, for example, by the corset.⁶

The pedagogy of the first Fresno Feminist Art Program (1970-71) and its related programme at the California Institute of the Arts (1971-74) reflects the political significance of this historical pursuit, as well as its more personal inflections for feminist artists of the 1970s. An important component of the pedagogical programme established by Judy Chicago in Fresno, and at CalArts by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, combined art practice with the study of art history and feminist theory to generate work that challenged patriarchal modes of art production and representation. Art historian Paula Harper, who participated in both programmes by researching women artists and sharing her results with the students, recalls:

it was surprising and moving to realize how much inspiration and nourishment the young women artists drew from the discovery of their predecessors. The elucidation of a continuous tradition within which they could see their own lives and work was [...] valuable to them. (Harper 2012: 94)

Finding marginalised historical voices that speak to present concerns (even when they are discomfiting to a contemporary sensibility) is also a defining characteristic of neo-Victorian practice. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben identify the primary functions of neo-Victorian trauma fiction as “speaking for these speechless characters, recording their unrecorded thoughts, telling their untold stories, asserting their human rights to be recognised, to be given back a face, to have their suffering affirmed” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 31). By re-presenting images of and references to Victorian women, the work of 1970s feminist neo-Victorian artists performs a very similar function in the context of visual culture.

The artists at Fresno, CalArts, and elsewhere use embodied, performative practices to make the Victorian past tangible, thereby reclaiming the subjectivity of historical women and asserting their own. For example, when Karen LeCocq was a student in the Fresno programme in 1970, she met Nancy Youdelman of whom she has the following to relate:

[Youdelman was] dressing someone in an elaborate costume that reflected a role, some stereotype that women have played in society. Dori Atlantis would then photograph each woman in some kind of provocative pose. I was dressed up as a

Victorian whore. This was fun for me. It felt like playing dress up as a child. I enjoyed being made up, having my hair piled high on top of my head and wearing the delicate antique clothing. The corset, however, was not enjoyable. I could barely breathe and I wondered how many women in those days managed to even smile.⁷ (Youdelman and LeCocq 2012: 72, see Figure 1)



Figure 1: Photograph by Dori Atlantis, costume by Nancy Youdelman, *Victorian Whore* (Karen LeCocq, model), 1970. © Dori Atlantis and Nancy Youdelman, reproduced with kind permission of the artists.

As LeCocq describes it, by performing the role of a Victorian female stereotype, she was reminded of childhood, enjoyed tactile delights, and experienced a utopian female community with her Fresno companions. But donning a tight-laced corset viscerally alerted her to the somatic and sartorial oppression of her foremothers, a psychological turn not unlike the recollection of a painful long repressed memory. Wearing a corset

transported LeCocq imaginatively to the Victorian era and thus served, like many of the Victorian objects appropriated by feminist artists of this era, as a vehicle for transgenerational memory with complex and contradictory functions. These functions help us to remember both anonymous and acknowledged Victorian women, to celebrate the beauty of women's work and women's clothing, and to situate the era as a site of gender trauma that still impacted on women late in the twentieth century.⁸

When feminist artist Miriam Schapiro visited the Fresno programme in 1971, she likewise donned a Victorian costume, this time of a 'Victorian Lady', designed by Nancy Youdelman, and was then photographed by Dori Atlantis (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Exhibition catalogue for *The Shrine, the Computer, and the Dollhouse*, 1975. Cover photograph Dori Atlantis, costume by Nancy Youdelman, 1971. Catalogue collection of the author. Cover photograph. © **Dori Atlantis and Nancy Youdelman**, used with kind permission of the artists.

Schapiro has circulated this image in several forms, and the two photographs of Schapiro and LeCocq can be seen side by side illustrating *The Power of Feminist Art* (Broude and Garrard 1994: 36).⁹ Viewed in this manner, and in an influential text, they intentionally present exaggerated and polarised interpretations of Victorian femininity and sexuality that signify through clothing, body posture, and gaze. For example, LeCocq's personification (Figure 1) of a 'saloon girl' stands, wears only a corset and garters, holds ostrich feathers in front of her breasts and gazes upward. In contrast, Schapiro's 'lady' sits in a chair, her body slightly tilted to the right to expose the vegetal patterning of the chair's upholstery while her gaze points in the same direction, as she holds a fan and wears an elaborately plumed and veiled hat and a floor-length dress. Significantly, both LeCocq and Schapiro look away from the camera in their photographs, inviting the viewer to dwell on their costumes and bodies without confrontation from the sitter, unlike such famous and much discussed works as Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). In this way, the photographs reference the kind of objectification that typifies many nineteenth-century representations of women in visual culture. However, the historical and artistic context in which the photographs were made suggests that they simultaneously attempt to reclaim subjectivity for women, through the same objectifying gaze and costumes. Moreover, by looking away from the camera, the sitters re-direct attention to their extravagant costumes, thereby foregrounding transgenerational female connections, personal expression, aesthetic beauty, and tactile pleasure.

What is more, LeCocq and Schapiro both embody Victorian female archetypes in the photographs, rather than historical individuals, to explore and subvert the social construction of gender and the objectification of women for the male gaze. As such, their approach is aligned with 1970s scholarship on representations of women in Victorian art, demonstrating the simultaneity of feminist artistic and art historical inquiry. For example, in 1972, Helene E. Roberts published her influential essay 'Marriage, Redundancy or Sin: The Painter's View of Women in the First Twenty-Five Years of Victoria's Reign', which establishes discreet iconographic categories of womanhood such as 'respectable middle-class woman', 'the redundant woman' or 'the fallen woman' that are still used today and which fall in line with the photographs of LeCocq and Schapiro. In addition, these performances for the camera foreshadow Cindy Sherman's work with the

same directorial mode of photography that is often cited as the origin of contemporary feminist photographic explorations of gender construction. LeCocq and Schapiro's photographs thus expose some of the foundational principles of feminist art making in the 1970s, as well as the role of Victorian themes and their documentary evidence in establishing these principles as historically and artistically relevant.

2. Feminist Exhibitionary Encounters

Schapiro and LeCocq came together again as teacher and student in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, which launched in the Fall of 1971. Judy Chicago recruited some of her Fresno students for the programme and shared leadership responsibilities with Schapiro until 1972, and subsequently the programme ran until Schapiro returned to New York in 1975. Schapiro's willingness to take part in student activities during her visit to Fresno and to embrace the performative methods championed by Chicago signalled a collaborative levelling of teacher and student, as well as the continued importance of investigating women's history in feminist artistic pedagogy.

The most potent example of this is *Womanhouse*, the signature collaborative installation constructed in an abandoned Los Angeles mansion at the end of 1971, and opened to the public in 1972. Together with their teachers, students in the CalArts Feminist Art Program transformed decaying rooms into works of art that interrogated feminine domestic roles. Though most of the rooms in *Womanhouse* used contemporary visual and material idioms to explore this theme, the dining room excavated a deeper past. Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCocq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Wilding worked together to create a mural of a still-life and sculptural food for the central table (Figure 3). The women describe their work as follows:

The mural, patterned after a 19th century still life by Anna [Claypoole] Peale, was enlivened to make the mouth water. Many women, working side by side, painted the mural at the same time. It was a miracle, for as we painted, each in her own style, we made many mistakes, but the sheer bravado of willing it to work created a compellingly strong yet traditional image. The sensuously painted peaches, the

overripe watermelon, the freshly baked bread, the eggs, and the flowers all combined to make the lush illusion we hoped for. (*Womanhouse* 1972: n.p.)



Figure 3: Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCocq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding, *Dining Room*, mixed media installation at Womanhouse, 1972. Photograph by Lloyd Hamrol. © Lloyd Hamrol, used with kind permission of the photographer.

Thus, communion with a Victorian woman artist and her metier was achieved through the physical act of painting, as the women made an attempt to understand Peale's achievement by appropriating and translating a still life attributed to her at the time and by using their bodies to mediate the experience. (The Mead Art Museum owns the painting and no longer attributes it to Peale.) The *Womanhouse* artists assert their difference from Peale, while interpreting the past from a feminist perspective. However, by increasing the scale of the work, creating as a collaborative team, and emphasising the gendered, sexual symbolism of the still-life elements, especially the ripe red watermelon facing outward in the centre of the composition, this work resonates with Chicago and Schapiro's investment in

genitally referential imagery which came to be seen as the epitome of feminist artistic expression.¹⁰

One other feminist educational and exhibitionary venture merits mention in company with the historicist aims of the Fresno programme and the ambitious *Womanhouse* project, namely the founding of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in 1973. The history of the Los Angeles Women's Building and its links to the Victorian past have been thoroughly documented and analysed by Michelle Moravec, but I call attention here to the story of its origin as narrated by Suzanne Lacy:

I remember when Nancy Youdelman came to class [in Fresno] one time with the book of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the first Women's Building. [...] We pored over this and other books and found photographs in esoteric places. (Roth 2012: 80)

The seeds for the Women's Building and the knowledge of such nineteenth-century historical precedents were sown in the pedagogical methods of the Feminist Art Program that encouraged young women to find and make their own history. They were encouraged to, quite literally, put their hands on history through books and textiles and discarded domestic objects from the nineteenth century in order to activate transgenerational memories that would historicise and energise their feminist (art) movement.

3. Mobilising Victorian 'Things' for Feminist Art

In 1974 Miriam Schapiro and her Feminist Art Program students organised the Women's Art Festival, which demonstrated the pedagogical importance of documenting living history for posterity. Schapiro and her students solicited "letters to young women artists" with the goal of fulfilling Schapiro's youthful longing "to learn from **women** what it felt like to want to be an artist [...] to be less lonely, less frightened" (Anon. 1974: 54, original bold emphasis). More than seventy artists responded to the students' request, including Betye Saar. In her epistle, Saar proclaimed that "the most important thing, I feel, is to discover who we really are, what we're about, what we want to contribute, what we want to share, and what we want to *keep*" (Saar qtd. in Anon. 1974: 115, added emphasis). Saar is not necessarily referring to material goods in her statement, but it is useful

to read it this way when considering how she and other artists, including Miriam Schapiro, used Victorian relics such as daguerreotypes in their mixed media work. One wants to ask, for example, which elements of Victorian material signify most profoundly for feminists and, therefore, should be kept in circulation? Expounding on “thing theory,” Bill Brown separates “objects” from “things”:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. (Brown 2001: 4)¹¹

It seems to me that the fragments of Victoriana included in works by Saar and Schapiro defy Brown’s sundering of “objects” and “things”, and thereby speak urgently as symbols of contemporary feminism. Each object, whether a daguerreotype or a handkerchief, functions as a cultural signifier of femininity, while simultaneously maintaining its material presence as a thing that was touched, used, or made by a woman.

The fragmented nature of women’s histories available in the 1970s is reflected in these objects/things and their appearance as distinct elements in Saar’s and Schapiro’s compositions: they are discrete pieces of the past, emblematic of its gaps and fractures. As such, Saar’s and Schapiro’s works take a different approach to the quest for a ‘continuous history’ described in the section above but, true to the politics that inform the work, they are also reminders of the responsibility that a feminist artist has to the past and her connection to it.

In this light, it is not without significance that in 1974 Saar was in her late forties, roughly the same age as Schapiro, and a generation older than the artists she was addressing in her letter to the CalArts students. These more mature artists had links to the nineteenth century through their parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles. Moreover, issues of identity are paramount to both artists. Of mixed African-American, Irish, and Native American race, Saar was active in the Civil Rights and feminist movements

in Los Angeles, and Schapiro's feminist allegiances were linked to her Jewish heritage. During the early 1970s, Saar was working primarily in assemblage, a mixed media form she deployed to critique African-American stereotypes while exploring her racial and spiritual heritage.

At the same time, Schapiro was teaching at CalArts, allowing students to incorporate novel materials such as lace and glitter into their work and finding ways to demonstrate her own artistic commitment to feminism through mixed media paintings she would later call 'femmage'. As representational strategies, assemblage and its more overtly feminist companion 'femmage' allow artists to incorporate novel materials into works of art, and to break the traditional boundaries of modernist aesthetics that clearly distinguish between painting and sculpture, and art and craft, for example. This was significant to feminist artists who wished to depart from patriarchal modes of art making aligned with modernism, and to elevate craft (largely defined as women's work) to the realm of art, while creating works that would elicit transgenerational memories through Victorian objects in the service of contemporary feminism.

One of Saar's most celebrated pieces is also one of her earliest: *Black Girl's Window* from 1969 (Figure 4). Moved by an exhibition devoted to Joseph Cornell's box constructions that she viewed around 1966, Saar began making related sculptural works combining found objects, often photographs, and painted imagery. Like the students in the Feminist Art Program who followed in the next decade, Saar retrieved many of her materials from thrift stores and antique markets, sifting through junk to salvage links, sometimes unsavoury, to the past:

In the early 1960s, when I began to collect images depicting derogatory stereotypes of African Americans, I would often find photographs. [...] When a photo triggers something in me [...] I am inspired to create an alternative reality by integrating the photo with other media, materials, and objects. The process becomes a sort of unravelling of the mystery and a piecing together of forgotten lives. (Saar and Steward 2006: 9)

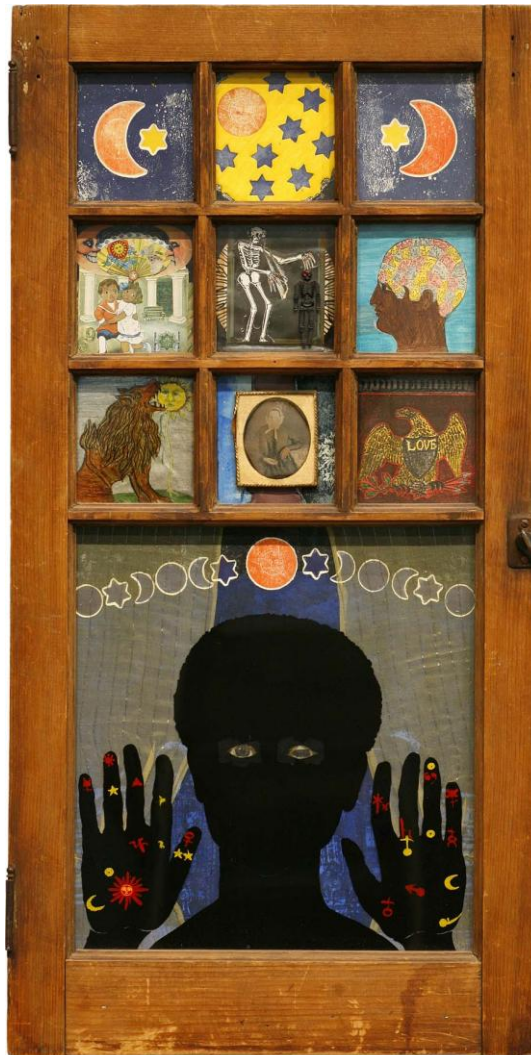


Figure 4: Betye Saar (b. 1926), *Black Girl's Window*, 1969, assemblage in window, 35 ¾ x 18 x 1 ½ inches, Collection of the artist. © Betye Saar, reproduced courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York.

Among the mystical symbols painted on the gridded surface of *Black Girl's Window*, directly in the centre of the composition, above the black girl with holographic eyes, is a daguerreotype of a white woman which, because of its silvered surface, also reveals and conceals the image

depending on how the viewer is positioned. Saar has stated that the photograph depicts “no one I know. It’s just something I found. But she’s white. My mother’s mother was white, Irish, and very beautiful. [...] And there’s the same mix on my father’s side. I feel that duality, the black and the white” (Saar qtd. in Reckitt and Phelan 2001: 72). The racial and ethnic political commentary of this piece is compounded by the image of a phrenological head situated on a right diagonal to the daguerreotype. In the Victorian period, these two technologies (photography and the quasi-science of phrenology) operated in tandem to produce classist and racist theories based on bodily features. Although these theories were primarily aimed at African-Americans, the Irish and other ethnic groups were often targeted as well. The presentation of the daguerreotype as a Victorian object that stands in for that period in Saar’s family history, and as a metaphor for spectral and hidden identities, allows the personal, the historical, and the political to converge and make an urgently poetic statement about the overlapping categories of oppression that have roots in the Victorian period and extend into the present: race, class, ethnicity, and gender.

Schapiro used many of the same materials as Saar in her work of the same period, but she took a more universal (and therefore, for contemporary feminists, a more problematic) approach to her subject, favouring a monolithic construction of womanhood that defies history, race, or class. This is apparent in her ‘femme’ manifesto, written with Melissa Meyer and published in the feminist journal *Heresies*’ winter 1977-78 issue, devoted to ‘Women’s Traditional Arts and the Politics of Aesthetics’. Meyer and Schapiro define “femme” as “a word invented by us to include [...] activities as they were practiced by women using traditional women’s techniques to achieve their art – sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking, and the like” (Meyer and Schapiro, 1977-78: 67). In her own femme work, which begins to appear around 1976, Schapiro appropriates examples of ‘women’s work’ into abstract compositions, combining conventionally categorised low and high, feminine and masculine forms to complicate these binaries and assert the dignity and artistry of embroidery and other textile arts. Like Saar, Schapiro kept the textiles in her works intact. Gluing handkerchiefs to a support in a grid-like formation or spreading an apron out like a veil over decoratively painted surface, she emphasised their symbolic and material significance as both objects and things productive of conceptual and tactile meaning. The art

historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson has explicitly linked Schapiro's work of this time to the Victorian period: "believing that the medium is the message, she did not wish to deal with domesticity 'minimally,' but with Victorian abundance of both sentiment and ornament" (Gouma-Peterson 2000: 81). Around this same time, and continuing into the present, Schapiro began to move away from using signifiers of anonymous and unacknowledged women's work such as handkerchiefs. Instead, she 'collaborated' with women artists including Mary Cassatt, in order to concretise the connection she felt to artists of the past, most of them women.

Collaboration Series: Mary Cassatt and Me from 1976 is one of the first in this series.¹² Made with spray paint, paper, and fabric on a paper support, the piece connects to Schapiro's *femmagages* through its use of fabric and its layering of past and present through materials and images. A reproduction of a Cassatt painting depicting a seated woman bathing a child is pasted into the lower half of the composition, and kept intact like the other objects that Schapiro used. A triangular-shaped fragment from a nineteenth-century fashion magazine is situated above the Cassatt; the woman in the image seems to be peering down imperiously at the figures in the Cassatt tableau. Surrounding and behind the Cassatt image are decorative patterns that echo those in the reproduced Cassatt work.

Schapiro has interrupted this coherence of pattern, however, with black spray painted marks that mirror the colour of the hair in the Cassatt and outline a ghostly head. Binaries collide here, as they do in Schapiro's other works from this period, including those pertaining to categories of womanhood. The woman tending to the child in the Cassatt image is dressed in a way that allows her to sit on the floor or a low stool unlike the woman represented in the fashion plate who is constrained by more formal and restrictive attire. Yet, the image from the fashion plate is cut into a triangle, which often symbolises equality. In a similarly complex meeting of presumed opposites the hazy, abstract spray paint, resonant of urban landscapes and industry, both frames and obscures the geometrically patterned fabric that supports it.

Schapiro's resistance to resolving these tensions between images and materials that signify past and present works functions simultaneously as a critique of the cultural dismissal of feminine subjects and as a reclamation of women's art like that of Cassatt being relevant to the twentieth century. Schapiro's collaborations migrate from exploring Victorian feminine

archetypes through material culture to constructing a specific lineage of Victorian icons. This tendency comes to fruition in the late 1970s in the work of Eleanor Antin and Judy Chicago.

4. Representing Victorian Heroines

The second issue of the Los Angeles based feminist periodical *Chrysalis*, published in 1977, features the article 'Selections from the First Wave: The Tyranny of Women's Clothes'. It comprises excerpts from primary documents on the topic by such Victorian luminaries as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Ida Harper together with editorial commentary by Joanne Parrent and Susan Rennie. This article signals a shift in feminist approaches to the nineteenth century that carries over into the visual arts. Rather than conjuring anonymous archetypes through material culture, artists began to name their Victorian feminist predecessors quite specifically in their work, and to use this historicist, quasi-documentary approach to make ambitious comments on their own position within art and history. Eleanor Antin's *The Angel of Mercy* (1977) and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979) are the culminating projects of this type, demonstrating both the depth of the aesthetic production of feminist knowledge by the end of the 1970s, and residual misgivings about of the Victorian period.

The same year that the *Chrysalis* article was published, the artist Eleanor Antin, also based in California, exhibited an extensive series of staged photographs and a video loosely based on aspects of the life of Florence Nightingale, collectively titled *The Angel of Mercy*, at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. By this time, Antin had become known for creating several identity-expanding 'performance-selves' for her feminist, multimedia work, including the (male) King of Solana Beach and the black ballerina Eleanora Antinova. In this 1977 exhibit, faithful to the neo-Victorian theme suggested by Florence Nightingale, the compositions of the photographs were primarily appropriated from Victorian visual sources. Gelatine silver prints were tinted with tea and other substances to suggest earlier photographic technologies, and the sixty-three photographs listed in the original exhibition catalogue were sorted into two sections that mimic Victorian taxonomies of the medium, such as family and documentary photographs, where were then assembled under the titles *Nightingale Family Album* and *My Tour of Duty in the Crimea* (Figures 5 and 6). To help ensure that the work would not be interpreted as simply nostalgic, and

to engage with the present politics and forms of contemporary art, Antin utilised performative role-playing and parody. In this regard, Antin's method of working with Victorian themes aligns her with the Feminist Art Program students, while her ambitious commitment to the process positions her as a leader in this field of artistic inquiry and as a precursor to such identity-bending performer/photographers as Cindy Sherman and Nikki Lee.



Figure 5: Eleanor Antin (b. 1935), *The New Arrival*, 1977. *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album*. Black and white tinted silver gelatin print mounted on hand made paper with text, 18 x 13 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo and the Photography Committee 95.67.4. Digital Image, © **Whitney Museum of American Art, NY**. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com.

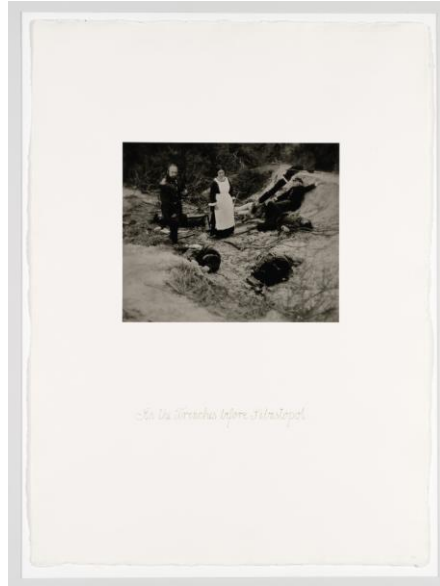


Figure 6: Eleanor Antin (b. 1935), *In the Trenches Before Sebastopol*, 1977. *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*. Black and white tinted silver gelatin print mounted on hand made paper with text, 30 3/8 x 22 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo and the Photography Committee 95.68.32. Digital Image, © Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com.

From the outset, Antin has been very pointed about the aims of *The Angel of Mercy*. In the catalogue for the exhibition she wrote that

in a set of videotapes I explored this ‘pop’ view of the Nurse, but I began to see its limitations. [...] At most, it clarified why they would choose a woman for the role: but it did not clarify why a woman would choose the role for herself. I thought perhaps if I went back to the beginnings, to the grand woman inventor of professional nursing, I might begin to explore the choice and approach its interior meaning. (Antin 1977: n.p.)

More recently she has articulated the ethical dimensions of the piece:

[The work] brought up many moral and ethical issues, not just about war, but about the meaning of service to others in the pursuit of war. If you're a nurse, and you save one soldier, and then he goes back and kills some more people, you have in reality become a multiple murderer. But if a man is bleeding, you have to bandage him. That's what a nurse does. (Antin qtd. in Fox 1999: 214)

Antin's pursuit of the meaning of work for Victorian women in *The Angel of Mercy* aligns with Saar's and Schapiro's work, in that Antin interrogates the stereotypes and inequalities of women's labour, artistic and otherwise, while attempting to visually animate that history. Compare the two photographs presented here, for example. *The New Arrival* depicts a group of middle-class women attending to a mother and her baby, wherein most of the women dote on the duo, but one woman stands off to the right, apart from the group. This is 'Eleanor Nightingale', with Eleanor Antin performing her alter ego's difference from other women of her class, race, and historical period as well as her discomfort with the traditional domestic roles available to her. In contrast, *In the Trenches Before Sebastopol* shows Nightingale in the centre of the composition, in the company of men, purposefully engaged with matters of life and death.

One avenue through which to explore the ethical dilemmas of nursing and war that occupy Antin in a neo-Victorian context is trauma studies. In this article I have pointed to other instances of artists situating the Victorian period as a site of gender trauma by way of objects. Antin identifies the period as a site of both gender trauma (Nightingale's alienation from traditional roles, for example) and the national trauma of war, which she recreates for the camera. Moreover, Antin's series was made in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War and, therefore, it references both that war and the Crimean War, while alluding to the problematic origins and unprecedented media coverage of both wars in photography and television. Whether or not Antin had these parallels in mind when making these images, it is useful to recall Marie-Luise Kohlke's suggestion that "many fictionalisations of specific historical traumas stand for indirect representations of, or analogical commentaries on, contemporary shocks and disasters" (Kohlke 2010: 11-12).

Antin's work also shares strategies of depicting the Crimean War with Beryl Bainbridge's later neo-Victorian novel *Master Georgie* (1988), which draws on marginalised voices and relies on photography as a representational device. Florence Nightingale does not have a large role in the novel; instead, according to Vanessa Guignery, she is "replaced by an emphasis on ordinary figures trying to cope with the grim surroundings, toiling away in under-equipped hospitals or dying from cholera" (Guignery 2010: 199). While Florence Nightingale is by no means a marginalised figure in history, Antin used Nightingale in her series in order to draw attention to the marginalised profession of nursing and, perhaps, to the important, underappreciated and ethically conflicted role played by nurses in the Vietnam War.

Photography, too, relates to ethics in Antin's work and Bainbridge's novel in which photography demonstrates its manipulative power. Guignery characterises it as presenting "a distorted view of domestic life and war, embellishing the truth for the sake of decorum. This warped representation of reality [...] brings to mind enduring processes of manipulation in contemporary representations of war situations" (Guignery 2010: 214-215). Similarly, a group of Antin's photographs are immediately recognisable as appropriations of Roger Fenton's Crimean War photographs, some of which were staged for the camera. By referring to these works Antin situates her subject historically through media by layering past and present, while interrogating the 'truth value' of photography, and tracing a line between the first photographs of war and the insidious media proliferation of images of the Vietnam War.

Finally, Antin paradoxically used artwork made by men as a basis for her feminist compositions, appropriating the work of Roger Fenton, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins and others to bring Eleanor Nightingale's Victorian history to life. While this latter strategy could be read as a capitulation to patriarchal cultural power, I see it rather as a subversive act that faithfully acknowledges the gendered power dynamics of the Victorian period, but simultaneously asserts the power of the contemporary feminist artist to reclaim female subjectivity through the act of appropriation.

In a related gesture, Chicago adapts specific histories of women and notions of women's work which animate *The Dinner Party*, her monumental homage to women's historical achievements. Chicago began the collaborative piece in 1975 and exhibited it for the first time in 1979, and it

now permanently resides in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where it stands as an icon of the feminist art movement of the 1970s.¹³ Chicago's massive sculpture comprises a triangular 'table', open at the centre, upon which she has arranged thirty-nine place settings for historical figures. Each place setting includes a painted ceramic plate featuring stylised vulval imagery, ceramic cutlery, and a runner with the woman's name and emblematic symbols of her life embroidered on it. A gleaming ceramic tile placed on the floor underneath the table bears the names of 999 other women.

Chicago's choice of materials was part of her conceptual programme to elevate craft to the level of fine art, as was her choice to collaborate with needle workers and ceramicists. Jane F. Gerhard has suggested that this collaborative process was a powerful catalyst of transgenerational memory for the women who worked to make the place settings of *The Dinner Party*:

sewing and needlework, quintessential elements of women's daily life in the past, became central activities in volunteers' own daily or weekly lives, and this shared activity fostered a sense of transhistorical sisterhood in the needlework loft. (Gerhard 2013: 112)

While much has been written about *The Dinner Party*, focusing on Chicago's representation of nineteenth-century women and placing it in the context of other Victorian-themed projects from the 1970s provides insights into how feminist artists continued to excavate the history of the period, to struggle with their knowledge of it, and to work through the body in order to further their comprehension and interpretation of Victorian women.

The Victorian women honoured with places at *The Dinner Party* table are Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Emily Dickinson: two activists, a medical doctor, and a poet. The plates representing these women are located on the far side of the table and are more sculptural than those recognising women from earlier historical periods. This was intentional on Chicago's part, as she meant to visualise women's movement towards liberation and equality by creating the illusion that the vulval forms are pushing up from the surface of the plates, becoming fully dimensional as women participate in activism and struggle against patriarchal boundaries. Painted on the floor below each table setting

is a cluster of women's names, each of which is identified with the achievements of the more privileged woman seated at the table, such as Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë who are aligned with Emily Dickinson.

As I have just described it the conceptual and visual program is very straightforward, but roiling beneath the idealised surface of *The Dinner Party*, especially in the Victorian section, are contradictions and conflicts that stem from the limitations of Chicago's historical imagination of the period, and from the visual language she has chosen to represent it. *The Dinner Party* alerts us to the blind spots of feminist history: Florence Nightingale, Antin's muse, is named on the floor below Elizabeth Blackwell, replicating the patriarchal hierarchy, questioned by Antin in 1977, that places more importance on doctors than nurses. A close look at the Emily Dickinson plate demonstrates other representational and conceptual issues (Figure 7).

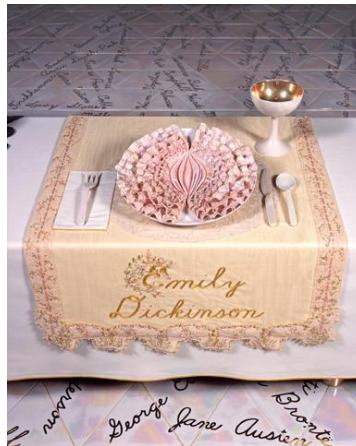


Figure 7: Judy Chicago, Detail – *The Dinner Party*, Emily Dickinson Place setting, 1979, Collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art © **Judy Chicago**, Photo © **Donald Woodman**. Reproduction, including downloading of Judy Chicago works, is prohibited by copyright laws and international conventions without express written permission of Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This is perhaps why Emily Dickinson's plate and runner have always made me uncomfortable: they are pink, lacy, and entirely unlike the one photographic image we have of the poet. In contrast, Susan B. Anthony's runner is in the form of a vividly hued crazy quilt, a much more

appealing and robust Victorian form. Chicago describes her striking choices this way:

Whenever I thought about the Victorian lady that a woman like Dickinson was expected to be, I envisioned lace. [...] Lace borders over netting with ruffles on the back provide an incongruous setting for a poet whose voice was as powerful as her will. The lace also embodies the tragedy of women's past: Endless hours were required to make these beautiful but unappreciated patterns by women who remain unknown. (Chicago 1979: 91)

Chicago's interpretation of Dickinson, and the visual symbols she chose to represent her (lace, flowers, the color pink), are limited by stereotypes of Victorian femininity and a bias towards examination of the lives of privileged women, even if Chicago notes the incongruity of the lace. Moreover, by presenting women's history in a modernist linear fashion that depends upon the notion of progress, Chicago runs into a wall in the Victorian period and falls back on the visual language of the archetype (lacy femininity) to characterise the individual. However, her transformation of lace into genital 'central core' imagery on the ceramic plate and her reference to the importance of the labour of lace workers suggests a method for resolving, but not relieving, tensions between Chicago's own feminist ideology and her discomfort with nineteenth-century femininity. Thus, what has become one of the typical features of the feminist neo-Victorian project can be traced back to feminist art of the 1970s.

5. Conclusion: Re-Interpreting Victorian Womanhood

In her recent examination of the role of history in the feminist activities of the Los Angeles Woman's Building in the 1970s, Michelle Moravec points out that

the past has inspired feminists in myriad ways – justifying women's activism, documenting heroines, providing intellectual lineages [...] and creating new histories that include women. However, none of this useful past was available to 1970s feminists. (Moravec 2011: 67)

What *was* available to these feminists, however, was an historical imagination that artists used in their work to connect with and to critique Victorian womanhood and its representations, so as to establish an aesthetic and political lineage for themselves. The feminist artists discussed in this article rummaged through attics and thrift shop bins, encountering history in discarded photograph albums, vintage clothing, painted china, and domestic textiles from the nineteenth century that sparked their creative endeavours and fuelled their political aesthetic. Their innovative materials and methods inexorably altered the accepted forms, content, and processes of art making, and their influence beyond the 1970s and beyond their gender has been broad. Starting with investigations of Victorian female archetypes through performative role-playing, and moving toward extended investigations of specific women's histories, these artists contributed invaluable to feminist (re-)interpretations of Victorian womanhood and its material and cultural histories, by demonstrating that understanding and excavating the feminist past was central to contemporary feminism and its artistic representation.

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Notes

1. While all of the artists considered in this piece are, or were, based in the United States, their subject matter encompasses a broader geography, including the United Kingdom. In addition, much of the work was produced in California, where feminist art pedagogy and progressive politics flourished, although many of the artists under discussion hailed

from elsewhere or eventually moved to the east coast. Geography, then, is a factor in the production of this work, but not a defining feature of its content. For more on the importance of California as a site for the production of feminist art, see Fuller and Salvioni 2002.

2. My use of the term archetype here is not to be construed in a Jungian context, but instead as a reference to how the artists surveyed in this article sought Victorian prototypes for their own feminist activity. In doing so, they often relied on visual and social stereotypes of Victorian women (sexually repressed and dressed in lacy clothing, for example) and thereby created generalised rather than historically and biographically specific representations.
3. Happily, there are many surveys of feminist art available to readers at the moment, most notably Norma Broude and Mary Garrard's *The Power of Feminist Art*; Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan's *Art and Feminism*, published in 2001 by Phaidon; and the exhibition catalogue accompanying Cornelia Butler's 2007 exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, published by the MIT Press. All of these texts include the artists discussed in this essay, but none interpret their use of Victorian themes and objects for feminist ends. Caroline Cason Barratt also comments on the dearth of contemporary art criticism on neo-Victorian or steampunk themes (see Barratt 2010: 167).
4. Marie-Luise Kohlke specifically advocates for this type of engagement (see Kohlke 2008: 5).
5. For a lucid and thought-provoking survey of the multi-faceted relationship between Women's and Gender Studies and its history, see Kolmar 2012.
6. Fashion historian Valerie Steele has traced cultural attitudes towards the corset, noting that the 1970s was a conflicted decade for this particular item of clothing. While many viewed it as a "symbol of oppression", punks and punk designers such as Vivienne Westwood reclaimed it as a marker of rebellion and difference (Steele 2001: 166).
7. Dori Atlantis, Karen LeCocq, and Nancy Youdelman continue to work as artists and teachers. Their work can be viewed at: <http://doriatlantis.com>; <http://karenlecocq.com/pages/home.html> and <http://www.nancyyoudelman.com>.
8. As the reader will discover, the artists featured in this article used the term 'Victorian' rather loosely to describe the nineteenth century. Therefore, I instead apply the term 'neo-Victorian' to their work, but still employ their taxonomy. For example, some readers may not identify historical figures

discussed in the essay as ‘Victorian’, but the artists did and I have treated them so. This strategy also responds to Kohlke’s description of the aims of this journal “to adopt the widest possible interpretation of ‘neo-Victorian’, so as to include the whole of the nineteenth century” and “to interpret neo-Victorianism outside of the limiting nationalistic and temporal identifications that ‘Victorian’, in itself or in conjunction with ‘neo-’, conjures up for some critics” (Kohlke 2008: 2).

9. The two photographs are also available for viewing on Nancy Youdelman’s website:
<http://www.nancyyoudelman.com/index.php/portfolios/2011-07-09-02-05-54>.
10. Still-life painting was at the bottom of the academic hierarchy of art in the nineteenth century and often the province of women, while history painting was most often produced on the grand scale of a mural and undertaken by male artists.
11. For a discussion of Brown and thing theory in a neo-Victorian context, see Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011.
12. This image was not available for reproduction in this article, but it can be viewed at: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/miriam-schapiro/mary-cassatt-and-me-1976>.

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