When Historic Time Meets Julia Kristeva’s Women’s Time: The Reception of Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party in Australia

Kate MacNeill

One of the first visual arts events of the 1988 bicentennial year was the staging of The Dinner Party (1979), a monumental artwork by the North American artist Judy Chicago at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings. Completed in 1979, The Dinner Party has become emblematic of a particular form of feminist art practice: namely that which makes visible the body of women in both a literal and metaphoric sense. An enormous installation, The Dinner Party is a triangular table setting at which places are laid for the women that are missing from conventional historic narratives. The place settings include elaborate crockery with each plate adopting vaginal imagery that evokes particular characteristics of each woman's historic contribution.

While attracting extremely high visitor numbers whenever the work is exhibited, the artwork itself has been widely criticised. The Melbourne exhibition of this work was no exception. However on this occasion there was an added dimension to the criticism: a parochial resistance to the importation of a foreign artwork. In this paper I explore this specific instance of border crossing in feminist art practice, and the claims made by many Australian art critics that superior work was being produced by local women artists. These arguments involved assertions that The Dinner Party’s visual aesthetic was dated, that Australian artists had adopted a similar imagery prior to Chicago and that whatever impact the work might have had in 1979, by 1988 it could only be regarded as a relic.

Using Julia Kristeva’s notion of “women’s time” and its three generations of feminism, I take issue with the implied political impotence of The Dinner Party. While dated in art history’s teleological terms I argue that, in the context of the bicentenary, The Dinner Party’s aesthetic was on this occasion its strength. The political agency of The Dinner Party lay not in any contemporary aesthetic but in its intervention in the conventional representations of nation that dominated the bicentenary celebrations. The desire for an Australian art history that underpinned many of the criticisms of the work would seem to have ignored the strategic internationalism of the Australian women's art movement.
In section one I examine the critical responses to *The Dinner Party* in 1988. I argue that the characteristics that were so vigorously criticised in the work were the very attributes that enabled *The Dinner Party* to make such a strong statement amidst the bicentenary activities. In section two I focus on the way in which women’s contribution was acknowledged within the bicentenary celebrations. I argue that *The Dinner Party* played a particularly significant role in this respect in that the scale of the event ensured a prominence that smaller, more localised activities could not have hoped to achieve. Finally, in section three, I examine the cyclical and multifaceted nature of the feminist struggle encapsulated within Kristeva’s concept of women’s time. I argue that the specific feminist intervention made by *The Dinner Party* during the bicentenary can best be understood not so much as an avant-garde political or artistic activity but rather as an aspect of feminist activity that is, of necessity, iterative.

**Australia’s Reception of The Dinner Party**

In a 1980 Lip article, published shortly after *The Dinner Party’s* completion and initial exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, the Australian artist Isabel Davies described the work in the following terms:

*The Dinner Party* is a monumental sculpture conceived by Judy Chicago as a symbolic history of women’s achievements and struggles in Western civilisation. … The 39 women represented at the table are either historical or mythological figures chosen for their actual accomplishments and/or for their legendary powers. The images on the plates are not literal, but rather a blending of historical fact, iconographical sources, symbolic meaning and imagination (Davies 1980: 46).

The table settings that were created for each woman consisted of a handpainted ceramic plate accompanied by a goblet, cutlery and napkin. Each setting was placed on needlework runners which further identified the woman and provided a context for the plate. The table was an equilateral triangle – each side being 14.5 metres long – and within the table a tiled floor was inscribed with the names of an additional 999 women. Two Australian women were named amongst this larger group: Vida Goldstein and Mary Lee.

*The Dinner Party* has assumed an iconic status in the writing about feminist art of the 1970s. From the start it was controversial, but over time even more so, as history inevitably seeks representative works, and there are many aspects of *The Dinner Party* that illustrate tendencies in feminist art practices of the time. However, as Amelia Jones has argued in her thoughtful repositioning of the work, its artistic value is enhanced when it is located within the surrounding practices, rather than being elevated above them as an exemplar (Jones 1996: 20–38). Nonetheless, as I argue, its political value has endured.

Perhaps anticipating a critical reception from the Australian art world the organisers of the Melbourne exhibition highlighted the affirming aspects of the work rather than its status as a work of art, leading one columnist to note: “the organisers were reluctant to comment on the aesthetics of the piece” (Thompson 1988). Christina Thompson also reported that the head of the Board of Trustees of the Exhibition Building, Linton Lethlean, declined to comment on whether the work should be in the National Gallery rather than the Exhibition Building and the co-ordinator of the Women’s Art Register was quoted as saying: “As a Committee we haven’t made any statement about the work except that it celebrates women’s work.”

*The Dinner Party’s* status as a work of art had been, since its creation, the subject of heated disagreement within some sections of the artworld. It had been criticised as “clichéd” by Robert...
Hughes in Time magazine (1980: 85) and for “playing down” to its audience by Hal Fischer in Artforum (1979: 77). In 1988, Australian commentators criticised the work’s aesthetics on the basis that the vaginal imagery essentialised women. Terry Smith characterised Chicago’s project as seeking to “substitute a consummate statement of womenness for the driving masculinity of most art masterpieces” (1988: 31). Jill Carrick, in Art + Text, argued that Chicago’s sense of the subject was one of “unified, centralised subjectivity – unproblematic and whole” (1988: 89).

These comments were intended as criticisms of what were perceived to be the work’s outdated approach to questions of gender and representation. After all, by 1988 feminism had well and truly embraced notions of difference and indeed was considered by many to have fragmented along the fault lines of class, race and sexuality. But for specific purposes, the unity of women was still employed as a strategy to both affirm women’s experiences and to ensure the broadest possible constituency for feminist political visibility. It was for these purposes that Judy Chicago had conceived such an ambitious project, and in her speech in Melbourne Chicago described the work as enabling the viewer to understand their personal experience as “part of a larger, universal female experience” (Chicago 1988: 5–6). The exhibition catalogue referred in similar terms to The Dinner Party’s capacity to acknowledge “the themes that unite female experience, as well as to explore the diversity of women’s endeavour” (Royal Exhibition Building 1988).

On an occasion such as the bicentenary, it was The Dinner Party’s monumentalism and symbolic unity that ensured it was capable of making an emphatic challenge to the dominance of any singular national narrative. For not only did The Dinner Party challenge the masculinity of the historical record, some reviewers regarded the international aspect of the artwork as an affront to national pride. David Bromfield, at the time Head of Art at the University of Western Australia, displayed his provincial anxieties in a review of a speech that Judy Chicago gave at the Art Gallery of Western Australia: “I am always amazed that Australians are such easy marks for overseas cultural salespersons.” He continued: “Yet, there we were again last week at a lecture at the W.A. Art Gallery, sucked in by Judy Chicago’s moderate reclamation and a desperate need for approval” (Bromfield 1988: 38). Bromfield’s remarks attracted a number of heated replies in the media, many of which defended The Dinner Party’s art credentials. But my interest here is that part of Bromfield’s attack that referred to “overseas cultural salespersons” and his implication that Chicago’s visit was one more example of American cultural imperialism.

Bromfield also sought to compare Chicago’s work unfavourably with that of Australian women artists, and referred to the work of Julie Brown-Rrap, as she was then known, as an example of a far superior Australian feminist art. Terry Smith boasted that the Australian artist Vivienne Binns had explored central core imagery in the 1970s well in advance of Chicago (Smith 1988: 31). I do not want to suggest that it is important to determine who indeed did explore this imagery first – in fact Chicago and artists in Australia were both exploring such forms in the late 1960s and early 1970s – but rather to note that Smith felt the need to make such an assertion.

Many Australian artists and critics have consistently resisted the international blockbuster, believing these to be insulting to local artists and, more often than not, an example of US cultural imperialism and an of Australian cultural cringe. Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon and Terry Smith made this argument most forcefully in their 1977 article “Why do they keep coming?” which was directed specifically at the 1974 Museum of Modern Art exhibition Recent American Art, but also the unstoppable flow of solo exhibitions by artists visiting from the United States (1977: 20–25).

The feminist art writer and activist Lucy Lippard was included in Burn et al’s criticism, accused
of having an inadequate appreciation of her role as a cultural imperialist. Lippard’s visits to Australia in the 1970s and 1980s are regarded as having been extremely influential in the emergence of the women’s art movement in this country (Kirby 1992: 10–11). Lippard’s first visit in 1975 coincided with International Women’s Year, the launch of Lip, the Australian feminist arts journal, and the Women’s Art Register, and has come to be regarded as the beginning of the writing of a women’s art history in Australia (Kerr and Holder 1999: 166–67).

I do not want to suggest that the Australian women’s art movement is the direct result of Lippard’s visits, and indeed there are more sanguine and nationalistic approaches to prominence that she has received (see Grace 1981/82: 13 and Saniga 1984: 79–80). Nonetheless, a considerable number of Australian women artists would have seen themselves, at times, as belonging to an international community of women artists. It appeared that it was when faced with the threat to national pride, that Australian art writers loudly proclaimed the talents of women artists, in a patriotic display in the face of the nemesis of the Australian art world – the North American artist. Implicit in the comments of Bromfield and Smith is the view of women artists as a subset of Australian artists and with identical concerns to their male colleagues. In fact, much of the experience of the women’s movement more generally affirmed an international solidarity with concerns shared across national boundaries as much as, if not more than, within any one nation. Certainly in the context of the bicentenary, many Australian women could see the value of presenting a work by a high-profile international artist that so dramatically reinforced their own political demands for equality and recognition.

**Women and the Bicentenary**

Provincialism had also informed earlier reactions to *The Dinner Party* in Australia. At the time of *The Dinner Party*’s completion, a proposal to tour the work was circulated among the directors of the state and national art galleries. Bernice Murphy suggested that one reason the tour did not take place was that *The Dinner Party* did not sufficiently distinguish the “us” of Australian women from those of the movement in the United States (Anon 1980: 48–49). Murphy observed that the Australian women’s movement came out of a very different culture to that of the United States, and proposed that the Australian movement was more resistant to the approach adopted by Chicago, namely to answer stereotypes with a stereotype. Rather than bring The Dinner Party to Australia, Murphy suggested that a suitable response might be the creation here of a feminist collective piece of work, one more appropriate to Australia.

Some years later, in the lead up to the bicentenary the then head of the Australian government’s Office of the Status of Women, Anne Summers, proposed to the Australian Bicentennial Authority that there be an exhibition called “Women’s Saga” that would travel the length and breadth of the nation by rail (O’Brien 1991: 270–71). The “Women’s Saga” was not realized, in part because this substantial project would have consumed the entire budget of the women’s programs. Instead money was dispersed widely, with a total of $300,000 directed to over 300 communities throughout Australia. While this ensured much needed funding for community based activities, the dissipation of the funding ensured that there was no large symbolic gesture – of the sort that The Dinner Party was uniquely capable of making – that could match the scale of many other bicentenary activities.

Despite suggestions on Judy Chicago’s part, *The Dinner Party* was not part of the arts program or any other area of Australia’s formal bicentennial program. Had it been intended that *The Dinner Party* be part of the bicentenary formalities it is likely that an approach to the Bicentennial Authority for funding would have occurred much earlier, rather than as what appeared to be an afterthought in July 1987, and at that late stage all funds had been
committed. While the previous response to the proposal to bring the work to Australia might suggest that any request would not have been successful, it is likely that the gallery directors rejected the work, in part, because of its less than enthusiastic reception within the art world. The purpose of the work and the likely audience at audience for the work at the Exhibition Buildings was a very different one to that which would have encountered the work had it been exhibited in state galleries.

I have not yet referred to the popular reception that *The Dinner Party* received in Australia. By all accounts it was an extremely successful exhibition – and the opening hours were extended to accommodate the high attendances (Committee minutes 1988). While Helen Topliss characterised the work as a “white elephant” she too acknowledged its “Trojan horse” qualities as being evidenced by the large numbers of women it brought into spaces from which they habitually felt excluded (Topliss 1988: 3–4). Coinciding with the exhibition, the Women’s Art Register held a fundraising “Women’s Dinner” attended by over 1,000 women. This event was held in the main hall of the Exhibition Building, as *The Dinner Party* was exhibited in a more contemporary annex. The symbolism of this female presence would become more apparent during the 2001 Centenary of Federation, when we were reminded that the Exhibition Building was the setting for the Federation Convention, an occasion on which women were completely absent. For many, the success of this event and the queues to see the work itself were evidence enough of *The Dinner Party*’s political effectiveness.

*The Dinner Party* is, in many ways, the feminist equivalent of the masterpiece, a status that implies that it was both before, and after its time. By 1988, ten years on from its completion, its aesthetics had inevitably dated. For many, however, the work remained as relevant as it had ever been and provoked nostalgia for a time when, in their memories, there was a united women’s art movement, and a body politic of women. After attending the “Women’s Dinner” Janine Burke had observed, with dismay, that it reminded her of the lack of a visible feminist “we” in the art world: “There was no women’s art movement anymore ... no longer one, uniting vision” (Burke 1988: 6). In disparaging terms, Jill Carrick described the impetus for this nostalgia, *The Dinner Party*, as “a living relic of 1970s feminist culture, exhumed and placed on show before the gaze of adulating crowds” (Carrick 1988: 88). She continued: “Transposed through time and into another location and another age, to what extent can it be expected to live up to its reputation as an instrument of feminist critique?” Carrick’s criticism of the aesthetic aspects of *The Dinner Party*, which she described as “a naive but altogether serious imitation of pre-existing styles, completely devoid of satire or critical intent,” may well be accurate, but its popular reception suggests that it might be more productive to consider the tension between questions of artistic style and the necessity of political strategy. For *The Dinner Party* did not attempt postmodern parody, which according to Carrick would eschew notions of authority and origin. Nor was *The Dinner Party*’s presence in Melbourne in 1988 intended as an opportunity to expose a local audience to the latest in international art practice. Its primary value was to assert the absence of women from the dominant historical record. In fact contrary to Carrick’s assertion, *The Dinner Party* was capable of being transported to another location and age and remained a potent symbol of the universal and timeless nature of women’s politics.

In fact the criticism that Carrick levelled at *The Dinner Party* – that it was celebratory of, rather than undermining the notions of, authority and origin – ignored the fact that in this respect the spoke the very same language as the bicentenary. Julie Ewington had in 1985 succinctly stated that one way of reading *The Dinner Party* was as an attempt to fulfill an ambition on the part of “some American feminist artists” of “boarding official culture” (Moore 1994a: 114). Its perceived aesthetic weaknesses were for this purpose its strengths, and its literal form enabled an emphatic statement in relation to the gender gap in the official record.
While it may not have been the latest in contemporary art by women, in Australia or elsewhere, the presence of *The Dinner Party* at the commencement of the bicentennial year drove a wedge through the image of the “united” nation. It emphasised gender differences in a way that could not be ignored and made prominent the multiple subject positions of women in Australia, as citizens of the country and part of an international movement. The sheer *size* of *The Dinner Party* and the weight of its legacy conferred upon it a blockbuster status and its strategic impact as spectacle was reinforced by the promotional campaign that accompanied its exhibition. The slogan of the bicentennial protest movement was “White Australia has a Black history” and the organisers of a series of events around the staging of *The Dinner Party* adopted the slogan “Australia has a women’s history” (Women Now 1988). The opposition movements highlighted the fragmentary, distinct aspects of Australian society, ill-fitting pieces incapable of producing the unified and unifying identity so desired by the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Yet, in order to make this statement, both women and Indigenous peoples needed to make strong statements of unity among themselves and for women, *The Dinner Party* did just that.

**Women’s Time**

So how might we understand the way in which *The Dinner Party* had such political agency within the context of the bicentennial celebrations and yet, contemporary art aesthetic interventions were considered to be making a more critical contribution to the feminist cause? I would suggest that women’s struggle is of necessity served by multiple visual and discursive strategies. This is inevitable given the need to both redress existing disadvantage within dominant structures of power, and simultaneously to reframe the terms of the debate. Rather than solely enacting a linear trajectory, feminist struggle may follow multiple pathways.

It was in 1979, the year of *The Dinner Party*’s first public display, that in an attempt to track the stages of feminisms Julia Kristeva identified three generations of feminist struggle; generations that embraced the varying fronts on which political activity takes place (Kristeva 1982). In contrast to the tendency to associate generations in the feminist project as successive cohorts based on age and linear time, Kristeva emphasised the coexistence of these generations; indeed the title of the article, “Women’s Time,” was an assertion of a different teleology of feminist practice.

One of Kristeva’s generations of feminism sought a place for women in “linear time”, the time of history and of the development of nation states. For Kristeva it was inevitable that this movement should identify with “the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation state” (Kristeva 1982: 37). In other words, it did not seek to challenge the process of nation building, but sought to have women’s contributions recognized within the narratives of nation. We might think of Judy Chicago’s creation of *The Dinner Party* as having this motivation, as had Julie Ewington when she described Chicago’s desire to “board official culture.” This was also consistent with Chicago’s expressed desire to make the work “so far beyond judgment that it will enter the cultural pool and never be erased from history as women’s work has been” (Thompson 1988). *The Dinner Party*’s place within the program of bicentenary events can be considered as a strategic act of visual hijacking: designed to celebrate women’s contribution to the project of nation building and to write women into pre-existing, though partial, versions of Australian history.

Kristeva’s second generation of feminist projects was based on the notion that it is the pervasive discourse of patriarchal power itself that renders women silent and therefore apparently absent. This generation of feminism might then concern itself with the way in which the narrative of
nation, of patriotic achievements and pioneering activities might in itself exclude the contribution of women. It was this aspect of women’s lived experiences that Julie Rrap sought to critique in much of her work of the 1980s in which she stepped into the frame of the masters, but did not quite fit.

It was no surprise then that David Bromfield should have referred to Julie Rrap when he made his patriotic case for the superior nature of feminist art practices in Australia. Rrap was arguably the most prominent female artist, or artist for that matter, in the bicentennial visual arts programming. Her work was included in the Australian Biennale 1988, and the Australian Bicentennial Perspecta at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Reproductions of her images appeared in Paul Foss’ anthology commissioned for the bicentennial, *Island in the Stream*. Rrap was included in “Edge to Edge”, an exhibition jointly organised by four Japanese art museums, and was one of the four Australian artists featured in “Elsewhere”, an exhibition funded through the bicentennial arts program and shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and then Cambridge.

Through invoking strategies of mimicry and outright theft Rrap mimed Freud’s “riddle of the nature of femininity” (Moore 1994b: 123–24). The images that had cemented her status as a “feminist” artist involved Rrap placing her body in various works of the old masters, at times appearing to escape the frame, on other occasions being partially captured by it. In her series “Thief’s Journal” (1985–86), Rrap had implicated Degas, Balthus, Magritte and Delvaux by inserting her own body into their imagery in what Catriona Moore described as “using her body as a surrogate for modern masterpieces.” These works more than fulfilled Carrick’s demand for a feminist art practice that maintained a relevance to, and at the same time exceeded, the “shifting patriarchal discourse” (Carrick 1988: 91).

And yet, it was also in 1988 that Julie Rrap shifted the focus of her art practice as she attempted to avoid the persistent reading of her work as “feminist,” believing that this detracted from its reception, ensuring a particular binary reading. Rrap decided that if she wished to continue to challenge what she has described as “the problem of power and its affects in the world,” the manner in which she did this could not remain “static, dogmatic and as restrictive as the very situation that [her work sought] to criticise” (Rrap 1991). She would in future work no longer place her own body in her art, and would rarely depict the full form of a woman’s body again.

The strategy adopted by Rrap is consistent with Kristeva’s third approach, which she herself advocated. This was one in which “the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics” (Kristeva 1982: 51). This generation of feminism would resist the categorisation of male and female and seek alternative modes of expression that avoided being drawn back into the gender binary. In Kristeva’s third generation, feminism becomes, according to Elizabeth Grosz, “a movement about the liberation of the subject” (Grosz 1989: 97). It is this mode of representation that Rrap adopted after finding that the female body in a work was not capable of exceeding the binary of male and female. While Chicago had also aspired to a metaphysical engagement, her work was so grounded in a feminist politics that the imagery would not escape a literal reading – and, as I have argued, it was this literal quality that enabled *The Dinner Party* to inject gender into the celebration of historic achievements.

Ironically it was the reductive positioning of Julie Rrap’s work within the 1988 Sydney Biennale, the most substantial showing of Australian and international contemporary art during the bicentenary, that provoked her change in visual strategy. The Biennale curator, Nick Waterlow, approached Rrap asking her if she would “hop in” to a Bonnard, as he had just arranged a loan
from the National Gallery of Victoria of the recently purchased *La Sieste* (1900) for the Biennale (Alexander 1998: 120–21). This was presumably to serve Waterlow’s curatorial premise, which sought to identify the European precursors of contemporary Australian art. Rrap declined this specific invitation and so Waterlow chose to exhibit *Gradiva/Gravida* (1985–86) from the “Thief’s Journal” series, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales venue, alongside Pierre Bonnard’s *La Sieste* (1900), a (female) nude reclining on a bed, and Balthus’ *Nude with Cat* (1949), also from the National Gallery of Victoria collection.

The arrangement of these three works attracted criticism and confirmed Rrap’s concern that her work was now being over-determined by a reading that linked it explicitly to the feminist project of writing women into history. In fact, the nature of this criticism was (not) surprisingly similar to that which had been leveled at Chicago’s Dinner Party. Nicholas Baume described it as “heavy handed articulation crudely literal” and as inevitably producing a banal reading (Baume 1988: 99). Visiting critic Dan Cameron described Rrap’s work as a “type of critical forgery” which when shown in combination with the Bonnard and Balthus set up “a didactical charge” (Cameron 1988: 11).

The approach from Waterlow, and the manner of the positioning of her work in the Biennale, indicated to Rrap that not only had the mimicry that she had initially adopted as a subversive strategy now come to be seen as a style, but that it had also been incorporated into a wider feminist discourse of difference. As such, it was no longer capable of conveying anything “unthought.” Once the initial act of visual subversion had been absorbed every subsequent repetition of the female body reinforced the female as just that – a body.

The very different reception that Rrap’s work received – lauded as contemporary and ironic and yet at the same time capable of being reduced to didacticism – demonstrates the need for multiple and simultaneous strategies when making the feminine visible. While repetition, mimicry and masquerade as subversive strategies were familiar to certain viewers, others were confronted with either feminine excess or a very literal depiction of the female body being inserted into art history. Unified and unstable identities coexist, as different forms of activism will require different strategies. Imaging might secure a foothold within a dominant narrative of art or of history – as Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* has demonstrated, but at the same time the narrative itself must constantly be open to challenge.

**Conclusion**

The Australian Bicentennial was implicitly part of the project of nation building. It was also an occasion on which voices were competing to be heard. There was a heightened awareness of the importance of symbols and ideals in not only commemorating historic events but, in the process of so doing, according particular meaning and significance to them. In many ways then, *The Dinner Party* was perfectly suited to the occasion. Its celebratory visual language was consistent with the concept of identity being promoted by the Australian Bicentennial Authority – the bringing together of many to form the whole. The staging of *The Dinner Party* in Australia in the year of the bicentenary may have been a mere coincidence, however the symbolism of the work was significant for many who saw it as literally writing women into the narrative of the nation.

While the critical response to the work in Australia was far from favorable, this was of little significance. Judy Chicago did not assert that *The Dinner Party* was the only way in which women could be represented, and in fact Chicago’s own art practice explored many different aesthetics. In 1988 many artists were exploring more complex questions of identity and
representation, challenging the binary language of gender relations and the concept of the subject as a unified whole. At the same time as strident images of women claimed equal space in the public sphere, other images sought to challenge the very category of woman. All played their part in the iterative practice of feminist political struggle but few could have matched the capacity of The Dinner Party to politically unite women on an occasion when shows of strength were a political necessity. It may be a relic, but on the occasion of the bicentenary it was both a monument to a feminist movement extending beyond the boundaries of any one nation and a strategically timed reminder of the selective nature of the Australian nation’s own official history.

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