ART

RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

A landmark in feminism

The Woman's Building, which opened in L.A. in 1973, had a lasting influence on the women's movement.

JORI FINKEL

When Sheila de Bretteville was teaching graphic design at CalArts in the early 1970s, at a time when so much education was tailored to male students, she lobbied her male dean for the chance to devote her two days of teaching each week entirely to female students.

Surprisingly, she says, he eventually relented. It fueled an admittedly utopian idea: What would it look like to start a center for feminist culture and education run by women for women where she didn't need permission from that dean? De Bretteville soon found out when she teamed with artist Judy Chicago and art historian Arlene Raven to open the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in 1973, a cultural hub that continued in one form or another (in two locations) until 1991.

Considered Los Angeles' most influential feminist institution by many scholars, it was at the time dismissed as a lesbian conspiracy or celebrated for its diverse programming, depending on whom you asked. It was, almost all could agree, subversive: a place for self-discovery where women made messy artworks and upsetting statements about such taboo topics as sexual harassment and rape.

While Chicago left the program early to focus on her epic "Dinner Party" installation, De Bretteville continued to work at the Woman's Building in one manner or another for most of its run. She designed
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the letterhead, brochures and other key publications, and taught graphic design there.

A professor at Yale heading its graphic design program since 1990, De Bretteville returned to Otis College of Art and Design briefly this fall, where the school gallery is featuring the exhibition "Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building" through Feb. 26. The Times caught up with her and the school gallery director, Meg Linton, to talk about the multifaceted history of the Woman's Building.

Where did you get the name the Woman's Building?

SB: We took it from the Woman's Building at the 1893 Chicago World Fair — the word "woman's" and not "women's" was such a 19th century convention. The good part is that their building had crafts and women from all over the world. The bad part, from my perspective — and we took it on, but I should have been more resistant — is that they had a "board of lady governors." That's not quite the model I would have liked for us, because it set us apart from the collective at the heart of the women's movement and that building. And it put me in charge: We pulled straws to see who would be head of the corporation, and I drew the longest straw and became the president.

Were there any other historic models for what you were doing?

SB: We really weren't looking back — we were riding the huge wave of feminism taking place everywhere around us. The women's movement was the real model.

ML: There was this momentum with the National Organization for Women forming, and your sisterhood bookstores. And the books that Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad were putting together at the time — where they traveled 13,000 miles looking for every women-owned business, crisis center, bookstore.

Speaking of books, I understand the Woman's Building was many things to many people: along with the Feminist Studio Workshop, the main educational program that Sheila helped run, there were also feminist galleries, bookstores?

ML: The building housed a number of groups: a bookstore, galleries, a cafe, theater groups and a travel agency that specialized in women's tours. You could see an exhibition of Imogen Cunningham's work in one space and new paintings by a young artist in another. This was a place where women were coming to find their own voice, however they wanted to express themselves.

SB: The board of lady managers included representatives from every group, which is what made those meetings — let's say — discordant. My friend Jane said that at every meeting at some point I was lying down, and it wasn't because I was [physically]
that at every meeting at some point I was lying down, and it wasn't because I was [physically]
tired. It was just a bit much. Ultimately a tremendous amount of responsibility came with that long straw. I really cared about it, but I didn't really know how to handle it. I don't like to exclude anybody or anything. I've made an entire life's work out of that. So you can imagine how doing admissions at Yale is a big problem for me.

I also suspect it creates problems in terms of public perception. It must be hard for people to understand what the Woman's Building was, if it included so many things.

SB: I think the catalogs that Otis has published will do a great deal to demystify the Woman's Building and to give a variegated history of it, because in fact it was a creation of many people. It was a collective and collaborative activity. And it's always hard in American celebrity culture to understand anything that is a real upending of hierarchy and alternative to a patriarchal or heterosexist society.

ML: We consciously decided for the show to focus on the collaborative groups and not the art stars who came out of the building: They are the unheard voices, they are the ones that don't have a
are the ones that don't have a
market that is making sure there will be continued stewardship of this material. There is no individual buying this work and making sure it will get into museum collection — it has opened my eyes about how many things did get left out.

Usually we think about feminist art in terms of performance or self-representation, maybe in video or photography, but you taught printing workshops.

SB: Even though it's in danger right now, printing was a very hot way of making a lot of whatever you made and getting it into the hands of a lot of people. I still believe what I wrote on the first brochure for the Feminist Studio Workshop: If you can get the direct voices of members of society into society, that's the democratic process.

ML: Was there an economic point where all of a sudden printing presses became available, like the way video started reaching artists?

SB: Not really. When I taught at CalArts, I actually outfitted the print studio. I remember how much I was given: $55,000. And I bought a Vandercook press and a Roto press. That's where Suzanne Lacy did her rape book, at CalArts.

And how did you outfit or equip the Woman's Building?

SB: I did the same thing there: I took the money that students paid for the FSW [Feminist Studio Workshop] and took part of it to buy a Roto print press — an offset press — and a Chandler and Price press — a letter press. And we got other printing presses when we moved to Spring Street like the Vandercook, a flat bed press that lets you make much bigger things. Each of those offer different opportunities to artists.

Was there a lesson or exercise you used in Woman's Building that you still use or draw on in some way at Yale?

SB: I did this project called "Private Conversations/Public Announcements," and the main
SB: I did this project called "Private Conversations/Public Announcements," and the main
idea was to find a graphic way of inserting women into the public dialogue. The first stage was making a map of Los Angeles and locating places where you feel uncomfortable as a woman. Where do you go — and where do you want to go — that you don't feel welcome? People chose things like a particular coffee shop or a place that sold wedding garments or a public space in Union Station or a place where graffiti exists. Then the women made posters using a cheap blueprinting process that no longer exists called Diazo. The poster tells the public: "I as a woman don't feel comfortable here, or I would feel more comfortable here if this happened...." It's a reinsertion of women into the public sphere in places where they don't feel welcome. The third step is for the women to negotiate to put the poster up in that space in the city, and that would hopefully provoke a dialogue. It's not a fist, not something against something, but an effort to create understanding.

And you do a version of this at Yale?

SB: It has morphed for a different population; I make some adjustments. But I still start by asking students to explore their meaningful connection to things in the world. Now my assignment consists of asking them to choose a site that resonates with them and taking a picture of it. Or video, which many of them choose: They know less about the medium, so they feel freer using it. But the basic idea is the same. It's still about finding your identity and a way of expressing your relationship to your physical world.

Why didn't the Woman's Building last beyond 1991? Was the model not sustainable?

SB: We always had trouble with money. A utopian vision is not a very economic vision, by its very nature. We were always scratching for funds. CETA [the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973] helped us hire some people, but I remember CETA didn't always pay on time.

ML: The organization got a lot of funding, but they were restricted funds, project based. So once the project was done, the money went away, making it impossible to hire staff on a long-term basis. Also, they received support — like a lot of organizations in the 1970s — from the National Endowment for the Arts. But much of that funding dried up under Reagan in the '80s.

OK, let's end with one thing we haven't talked about. Tell me about the famous consciousness-
OK, let's end with one thing we haven't talked about. Tell me about the famous consciousness-
raising sessions, which sound like a very intense form of group therapy.

SB: I'm still inspired by how important the consciousness-raising work was. What strikes me most is that it was one woman talking to another to make change. The format was to have a dialogue where every woman gets equal time to speak, whatever their issues: money, power, your mother. I found out about all different kinds of experiences, from prostitutes to suburban housewives. It was a model for the newspaper I designed [called Everywoman]: every woman got equal space.

Were the sessions as traumatic as I've heard?

SB: Someone yelled at me once that I was dissembling. My mother was an extremely silent person traumatized by being a [Polish] refugee, and I had not been in therapy about it. So I didn't have something ready to deliver to the group. You're supposed to be left alone during consciousness raising. But it was OK — I didn't die. I survived.

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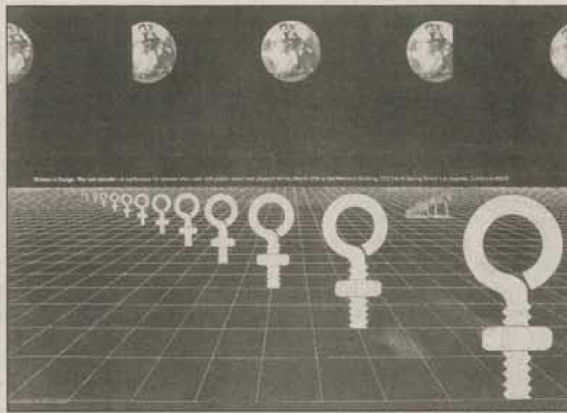
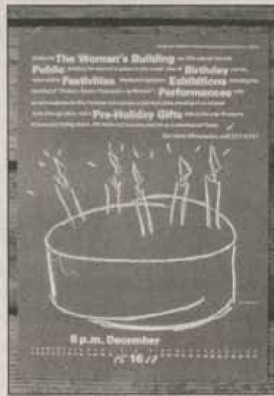


Woman's Building Image Archive

A POSTER from 1975. Printing workshops were held because the medium helped the women reach a broad audience.



Woman's Building Image Archive

THE ARTIST Phranc created a poster publicizing the center's fifth birthday celebration.
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