



current issue:  
Spring 2007  
Vol. 17, No. 2

[table of contents](#)

**NEW BOOK**  
**Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age**  
by Kay S. Hymowitz



**Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age**  
by Kay S. Hymowitz



EMAIL | PRINT | RESPOND | DIGG THIS

[Search b](#)

[Search b](#)

[Search b](#)

**More by K**

Why We I  
The Incre  
The New I  
*More . . .*

**Recent CJ**

Breaking ,  
Shop Til `  
Cheers—a  
Metropolit

**Kay S. Hymowitz**

**The Brooklyn Museum Strikes Again**  
Confusing hucksterism and art  
3 April 2007

The Brooklyn Museum, like its home borough, has always suffered from an acute case of class envy toward its richer and more glamorous counterpart across the East River. Manhattan has Gilded Age mansions, the Oyster Bar, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Brooklyn has dems-and-dose tenements, Nathan's Hot Dogs—and the museum that is its namesake. Its new Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art—the first site ever devoted entirely to the subject, with a permanent home for the classic late-1970s multimedia installation “The Dinner Party” and a temporary exhibit called “Global Feminisms”—must have struck administrators as a sure way to raise the museum’s standing.

Well, ain't that just like Brooklyn, confusing hoopla and art.

Not that the Sackler Center is the museum’s first or even loudest attempt at the high art of publicity. Remember “Sensation, Young British Artists of the Saatchi Collection,” the 1999 exhibit with the elephant-dung-dinged Madonna? It gave the aging institution so much tabloid coverage that after harrumphing against the provincialism of then-mayor Rudy Giuliani and the show’s outer-borough critics, Arnold Lehman, the museum’s busy director, must have closed his office door and gleefully lit up a victory cigar. (It’s worth noting that the Saatchi Collection is the private holding of advertising genius Charles Saatchi.) Determined to attract a younger, more multicultural crowd—to create “a meeting place and a place that represents everyone”—Lehman followed “Sensation” with similar heights of press-agentry: “Hip Hop Nation: Roots, Rhyme, and Rage” in 2000; “Star Wars” in 2002; last fall’s wildly popular exhibit of (mostly) celebrity photographs by Annie Leibovitz; and now, permanently, the Sackler Center.

With Jane Fonda and Gloria Steinem on hand, the Sackler Center’s opening night certainly had its share of buzz. Truth be told, though, it was largely jammed with brownstone Brooklynites, most of them pale of color and long of tooth, doubtless wanting to revisit the “Dinner Party” of their youth. Indeed, Judy Chicago’s installation is to Second Wave feminism what *Candide* was to the Enlightenment: the



quintessential artistic expression of the philosophy of its age. It consists of an enormous triangular banquet table (the triangle evidently being the earliest symbol of female power), with place settings for 39 women from mythology and history (three and its multipliers evidently being numbers redolent of femininity), beginning with the Primordial Goddess and ending with Georgia O'Keefe. Each place setting includes a plate with an individualized vaginal-floral motif, a runner with decorations inspired by the guest's life and achievement, eating utensils, and (Chicago's word) a chalice. On the milky, triangularly tiled floor, the names of 999 forgotten women of history appear in gold longhand.

Despite being laden with symbolism that it would take a medievalist to unknot fully, "The Dinner Party" is not without charm. Chicago's bold presumption—the exhibit's allusion to the Last Supper, its attempt at encyclopedic female history—is energized by a verve which, though it frequently descends into vulgar kitsch, is also quite engaging. You might even say that "The Dinner Party" is the perfect museum entertainment for a culture in the throes of ADHD. The room is magically lit with starlike lights that reflect off the dark glassy walls; the runners are often sumptuously opulent; and as they shuffle along, visitors have much to do as they puzzle over the details on the elaborately designed plates and runners and check Chicago's little guidebooks about the imagined guests. Some of them—Anne Hutchinson, Virginia Woolf—are familiar. Others—Tortula, an eleventh-century "Italian physician specializing in gynecology and obstetrics," and Hrosvitha, "the earliest known female poet in Germany"—are badly in need of exegesis, even after 30 years on Chicago's A-list.

But "The Dinner Party" is also a cautionary reminder of the excesses of Second Wave feminism, above all its reductiveness. Everything—all meaning, all cultural excellence, all artistic aspiration—shrivels, compared with the weighty fact of female identity. Even while claiming to revive her guests from invisibility, Chicago manages to kill them off, stripping them of all distinctiveness outside their X chromosomes. The plate that she puts at Emily Dickinson's seat—pink, vulval, made out of frilly lace—so completely misses the poet's oracular uniqueness that you have to conclude she's never read a word of her oeuvre. It makes perfect sense that Chicago's work should find its resting place at today's Brooklyn Museum. Both "The Dinner Party" and its new home are cultural entities that, mistrusting the power of art, fall back on sensation and no small measure of hucksterism.

Far from worrying about feminism's reductiveness, the curators of "Global Feminisms," the Sackler Center's other major exhibit, are fixated on the theme of female subjugation to the point of gender-studies agitprop. Throughout the cliché-ridden wall text, the curators allude to the subversiveness and

variety of “women’s cultural experiences across the globe [which] create different types of feminist art.” In reality, the works’ leaden sameness of imagery and theme is about as subversive as a Soviet tank. There are self-portraits of Japanese photographer Ryoko Suzuki with her head wrapped in a blood-soaked pigskin, faux crime-scene photos of half-naked women lying facedown in mud by Swiss artist Annika con Hasswolff, and a DVD of the half-naked and aggressively butch lesbian Mary Coble, an American who repeatedly binds and unbinds her breasts with duct tape until they become raw and red. There is the requisite gender-bending, including a photo of the Israeli Oreet Ashery, dressed as a bearded Hasidic man, fondling her exposed breast, and another photo by Japanese artist Hiroko Okada of two men with large pregnant-looking bellies. This is globalized—not to mention sensational—art, all right, as interchangeable as the McDonald’s in Cincinnati and Mumbai.

Still, though the show is largely cant, it isn’t entirely. “Global Feminisms” is devoted to the recent work of artists born after 1960—clearly another of the museum’s attempts to attract a younger, multicultural crowd—some of whom resist the narrow vision of their Second Wave elders. “I cannot say that my identity as a woman is a direct subject of my work,” says Macedonian artist Iskra Dimitrova in the text outside her installation. And her haunting work, a cast of her own body that glimmers eerily in a darkened, chant-filled space, goes far beyond ideological complaint. Similarly, a photo by German artist Melanie Manchot of her aging mother—her breasts exposed, her smiling face vibrant in front of an expansive but menacingly empty sky—is a joyous, unpretentious assertion of life in the face of certain death.

By Brooklyn standards, the Sackler Center must have cost a pretty penny—officials are playing coy about the exact amount—which makes its hyped-up pieties all the more depressing. Its donor, Elizabeth Sackler, is the daughter of philanthropist Arthur Sackler, whose own legacy is the elegant wing that houses the ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I imagine that I wasn’t the only Brooklynite thinking: “They get the Temple of Dendur; we get ‘The Dinner Party’ and ‘Global Feminisms.’ It figures.”

[EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#) | [RESPOND](#) | [DIGG THIS](#)

---

[Home](#) | [About \*City Journal\*](#) | [City Journal Books](#) | [Archives](#) | [Links](#)  
[Send Email](#) | [Subscribe Print](#) | [Subscribe Online](#) | [RSS](#) | [Advertise](#)

**CONTACT INFO:**

editorial: (212) 599-7000 • fax: (212) 599-0371 • subscriptions: (800) 562-1973