Brenda Bowman at Dinner with Judy Chicago: Feminism and Needlework in Carol Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman*

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Abstract

Like Judy Chicago's 1979 installation *The Dinner Party*, Carol Shields's 1982 novel *A Fairly Conventional Woman* has been criticized as too middle class, too domestic, and not truly feminist. This paper argues, in contrast, that like Chicago's installation, Shields's novel broke ground by exploring gendered aspects of the arts-crafts divide and the role of domestic activities such as quilting as impetuses for social change.

Résumé

Comme dans l'installation de Judy Chicago *The Dinner Party* en 1979, le roman de Carol Shields *A Fairly Conventional Woman* en 1982 a été critiquée en tant que trop classe moyenne, trop domestique et pas suffisamment féministe. Cet article discute, en contraste, que tout comme dans l'installation de Chicago, le roman de Shields fut révolutionnaire en explorant les aspects de la différences entre les sexes de la division des arts et de l'artisanat, et du rôle des activités domestiques telles que le ouatage comme des élans pour le changement social.

In 1979 the North American art world was galvanized by the unveiling of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Chicago's collaborative ceremonial table honoured often-forgotten women through such traditional women's arts as ceramics, weaving, embroidery, quilting, lacework, needlepoint, knitting, and crocheting. Although much of the effort of Chicago and her collaborators had gone into the production of fabric table runners that commemorated thirty-nine women, critics focused on the accompanying ceramic plates, which celebrated women's sexuality through stylized representations of vulvas. Conservative politicians called Chicago's plates "pornographic." Art critics condemned the exhibit as domestic "kitsch." Theoretical feminists criticized the work as essentialist in the way the "central-core" imagery reduced diverse women to their sexuality and thus their biology (Jones 1996c, 36; Kubitza 1996, 158; Meyer 1996, 48). But Chicago's *Dinner Party* was praised in almost adulatory terms by the hundreds and thousands of women who viewed the installation in art galleries throughout North America and Europe and who focused on the work's collaborative recuperation of a variety of women's arts and women's histories. Indeed, many women who lived too far away to visit the exhibit purchased Chicago's books, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (1979) and *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (1980), and pored over their photographs and accompanying text.

My mother, a needleworker and quilter in rural Saskatchewan, acquired one of those books for herself and the other for me, a daughter who was then just out of her teens.[1]

The plates and table runners of Chicago's *Dinner Party* were still very much in the North American political and artistic consciousness when Carol Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman* was first published in 1982. Shields's fourth novel, it evoked little analytical comment, especially by Canadian critics, perhaps because it is set in the United States rather than Canada (unlike earlier and later novels) and is a companion novel to the earlier *Happenstance* (1980). Aside from initial reviews, all published articles discuss *A Fairly Conventional Woman* in the context of Shields's other work.[2] However, like many of her other novels, this fourth book makes detailed and evocative comments about the coming to consciousness of a woman artist. Exploration of this idea is evident in *Small Ceremonies* (1976) through biographer and aspiring novelist Judith Gill; *The Box Garden* (1977) through poet Charleen Forrest; *Swann* (1987) through multiple women writers, including the title character poet Mary Swann, academic Sarah Maloney, and failed poet and editor Hildë Cruzzi; *The Republic of Love* (1992) through folklorist Fay McLeod; and most evidently and autobiographically, *Unless* (2002) through novelist and translator Reta Winters. But in contrast to all these novels, in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* that artist is a quilter rather than a writer. Shields's only other descriptions of needlework make up minor parts of her novels, and involve men as well as women: in *Small Ceremonies*, academic Martin Gill creates a tapestry to demonstrate the themes of *Paradise Lost*; in *The Box Garden*, Charleen's mother expresses herself by sewing curtains and slipcovers for her house; and in *Swann*, unmarried small-town librarian Rose Hindmarch highlights gender relations as she sets herself apart from her neighbours, "Mrs. Henry Cleary, Mrs. Al Lindquist," and so on, by embroidering both her first and last name on a Centennial quilt (1987, 160). In contrast to these brief mentions, quilting and other traditional women's needlework take centre stage in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*.

By making the predominantly feminine craft of quilting the core of this novel, Shields places her work within a continuum of other fictional narratives that use quilting for political and historical purposes, including Alice Walker's 1974 story "Everyday Use," Whitney Otto's 1991 *How to Make an American Quilt* (and the 1995 film adaptation), and Margaret Atwood's 1996 *Alias Grace*. The metaphorical use to which quilting is put in these narratives is by no means homogenous. In Walker's story, quilts stand in for African-American heritage; in Otto's book they suggest women's cross-cultural bonds; and in Atwood's novel they represent the pieced-together nature of the historical record. In *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, quilts provide an avenue for discussion of women's histories and women's place in the arts-crafts divide, as the novel's protagonist, a conventional woman from suburban Chicago, flies to a handicraft convention in Philadelphia.

Brenda Bowman appeared in the precursor *Happenstance* mostly as a kind of ghost figure: the absent wife whose attendance at an out-of-town meeting forces her historian husband to be temporarily responsible for household and parenting duties. *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, in contrast, focuses on Brenda's experiences at that convention as she becomes unconventional about her approach to quiltmaking. She is compelled to reinterpret quilting as an art rather than a craft and to view the resulting quilts as feminist statements rather than just "warm, attractive bed coverings" (1982, 102). At the conference, Brenda figuratively "has dinner" with Judy Chicago, who is never mentioned in the book but whose politically motivated art informs the discussions about quiltmaking in which Brenda participates. Indeed, Shields's book rearticulates and at

times humorously critiques Chicago's arguments about women's domestic lives, artistry, and sexuality, and at the same time comments on women's place in the historical record. In the process, the book draws on feminist theoreticians as diverse as Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan and anticipates feminist art critics such as Rozsika Parker.

In remarkably similar criticisms, works by both Chicago and Shields have been dismissed as too middle class, too domestic, and not truly feminist. Feminist art critic Amelia Jones notes that one of the persistent criticisms of Chicago's place settings is that they show "a unified womanhood that...is implicitly white, heterosexual, and middle or upper-middle class" (Jones 1996b, 35). Similarly, in an article about Shields in *Canadian Forum*, Laura Groening criticizes Shields's novels for their almost uniformly middle-class, white protagonists, arguing that "Class renders these people completely homogeneous" (Groening 1991, 14) - this despite the fact that *Happenstance* and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* refer to at least one joint character who is not middle class: Brenda's mother, an unmarried working woman. Jones quotes art critics' dismissal of *The Dinner Party* because it is not only "popular, loved by the masses" but also "associated with women's tastes and with domestic crafts" (1996c, 88), while in a parallel argument Maria Horvath complains about the "unnecessary attention to minutiae," the "tedious detail," and the "banality of real life" in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (Horvath 1982, 18-19). Even one of the book's editors, Shields wrote in a letter to her friend Blanche Howard, was "skittish about anything with a domestic tone. I know he thought A Fairly Conventional Woman [sic] was too housewifey." She then asked her friend, "Who does he think reads novels, I wonder"? (Shields 1985).[3]

Writing about Chicago's work, English scholar Michele Barrett argues that "the use of women's lives, histories and experience does not necessarily ensure [a] coherent, feminist, reading" (Barrett 1986, 162-63). She suggests, further, that *The Dinner Party* illustrates that "women's art is not necessarily feminist art'" (1986, 163). In a similar manner, Groening dismisses Shields's own claim to be a feminist when she writes that "to call Shields a feminist...is to place her distinctive fiction in an alien land. Although her novels celebrate the world of a certain kind of woman who is perhaps under-regarded in today's world, they most certainly do not welcome feminism as a way to alleviate frustration or powerlessness" (Groening 1991, 14). The subhead of Groening's article states this conclusion more bluntly and in wording similar to that of Barrett's: "Writing about women doesn't make an author a feminist" (1991, 14).

One of Groening's most pointed criticisms is that in both *A Fairly Conventional Woman* and *Swann*, Shields mocks 1970s and 1980s feminist rhetoric (1991, 16-17). Groening argues that Shields "defuses the seriousness of any kind of engaged behaviour by consistently coupling it with the ridiculous" (1991, 16). Just as in *Swann* Shields satirizes some aspects of feminist literary criticism (and indeed literary criticism in general), in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* she makes fun of some of the excesses of feminist art criticism of the kind provoked by Chicago's *Dinner Party*. But what Groening fails to acknowledge is that while critical rhetoric may be mocked in Shields's books, the value of feminist explorations of historical limitations on women's lives and women's artistry is clearly acknowledged. Indeed, as even Groening concedes, "Shields' focus is on the quiet, unappreciated lives of artistic women who have lost themselves (albeit quite willingly) in their attention to their families" (1991, 14). As with all Shields's novels, aspects of those explorations are distinctly humorous. Thus, while Brenda Bowman in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* may at first be so shocked by feminist approaches to needlework that her response is comedic, she ultimately finds

these ideas persuasive. In Shields's books, humour gently leads the way to political commentary.

The political implications of *A Fairly Conventional Woman* have been ignored by many readers and reviewers of the book. For example, early critic William French of the *Globe and Mail* dismissed *A Fairly Conventional Woman* as "a fairly conventional novel" about a woman's "crisis of fidelity at the age of 40" (Collins 1982; French 1982, P23; Wachtel 1982). He was responding to a plot twist that has Brenda encounter and become friendly with - but not have sex with - a man who is attending another convention in the same hotel. Of the other early reviewers, only Thelma Wheatley in *Writers' Quarterly* argued what I think is the book's real point: not Brenda's mid-life sexual crisis but "her growing awareness and acceptance of herself and the other 'housewives' at the convention as 'artists'" (Wheatley c.1982, 19). In other words, at the core of the book is a dawning artistic consciousness. As does Chicago's installation, Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman* explores needlework as an essential part of women's arts and history and questions the arts-crafts divide that traditionally relegated most of women's artistic productions to obscurity. The novel also considers two subjects that are integral to *The Dinner Party*: the way in which women come together over food and the methods through which they explore their sexuality. Indeed, several of these subjects are introduced in *Happenstance*, which may be one reason the books were often discussed together even before they were published in one volume in Great Britain in 1991 under the single title *Happenstance* - more on that republication and retitling later.[4]

The main character of the original *Happenstance*, Brenda's husband Jack, cannot remember why his wife started quilting but speculates that it was "perhaps a frenzied half-conforming, half-angry reaction to the many women's magazines she seemed to read at that time" (Shields 1980, 25). This reference to "women's magazines" evokes analyses by Betty Friedan about what she called the "mystique" that developed around middle-class women in the middle of the twentieth century. Friedan argued that "domestic aspects of feminine existence - as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, [and] bearing children" were turned into "a religion" promulgated by women's magazines (Friedan 1963, 38). Studies such as Valerie Korinek's *Roughing It In the Suburbs* (2000) have since challenged the idea that such magazines were entirely anti-feminist in their editorial approaches. Korinek takes issue with the "truism" developed as a result of Friedan's thesis "that women's magazines are backward, ultra conservative periodicals whose only function is to encourage consumption" (Korinek 2000, 11). She argues, in contrast, that reading a magazine, like "consuming other types of popular culture," involves readers in "a series of choices," and that women's magazines did not always present "a single dominant message, one that reinforced the hegemony of English-Canadian, suburban, middle-class women" (2000, 12&15). Shields takes a step toward a similar critique by noting that in taking up quilting, Brenda is not wholeheartedly adopting what Friedan termed a religion. Instead, through her "half-conforming, half-angry reaction" (Shields 1980, 25), she is resisting that impetus as she tries to find meaningful work that might solve what Friedan called "the problem that has no name, a vague undefined wish for 'something more' " (Friedan 1963, 54).

A Fairly Conventional Woman introduces ideas about women's magazines and women's work that Shields also explored in *Swann* (1987) and her award-winning novel *The Stone Diaries* (1993).[5] Shields said in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel that she herself was never able to "doze off quite the same again" after she read *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963,

the year it was published (Shields 1989, 20). She linked Friedan's book to her own representation of women's roles in *The Stone Diaries* when she wrote in an epistolary interview with Joan Thomas that the book's main character, Daisy Goodwill Flett, "believed what the women's magazines said about women's work," and when she noted that many middle-class wives and mothers did not consider paid work an option "before *The Feminine Mystique* was published" (Shields 1995, 127). *The Stone Diaries* refers directly to Friedan's book when it comments on a "good jabber about *The Feminine Mystique*" (Shields 1993, 242) between two of its secondary characters. One endorses Friedan's solution to "the problem that has no name" - work outside the home, such as the job as a gardening columnist that Daisy inherits from her husband and then loses to another man - when she says, "We are our work!...Work and self cannot be separated." The other, having worked at less-than-satisfying jobs all her life, "tak[es] issue with Betty Friedan's exaltation of work as salvation" (1993, 242).

In *The Stone Diaries*, Friedan's theories about the effects of magazines on women's lives during the 1940s and 1950s are evoked through references to Daisy's home decorating scheme, her sex life, and the food she cooks. In her living room is a glass-topped coffee table that displays photographs of her children and a copy of her marriage announcement (Shields 1993, 193-94) - a decorating touch inspired by a *Canadian Homes and Gardens* article ironically titled "Putting the Essential You Into Your Decor." During a sexual encounter with her husband, "Mrs. Flett tries, as through a helix of mixed print and distraction, to remember exactly what was advised in the latest issue of *McCalls*, something about a wife's responsibility for demonstrating a rise in ardor; that was it - ardor and surrender expressed simultaneously through a single subtle gesturing of the body; but how was that possible?" (1993, 191). And when Daisy prepares a cold supper for her family in the heat of a July day, she uses a recipe for jellied veal torn from *Ladies Home Journal*. In this section of the book, Daisy's kitchen is described as "hot as Hades" (1993, 157), and she says "Damn it" repeatedly under her breath (1993, 158-59). In contrast, earlier in the novel Daisy as narrator has depicted her mother preparing a dessert using a recipe passed on from another woman, and her experience is called "heavenly" and her "notion of paradise" (1993, 2). Daisy describes her mother's work in the kitchen as like that of an "artist" and adds that "years later this form of artistry is perfectly clear to me" (1993, 2).

This alternating celebration and critique of enforced domesticity is also explored in Shields's earlier novel, *Swann*. One of the book's main characters, literary critic Sarah Maloney, uses the domestic as an organizing principle in her work on Mary Swann's poems, but at the same time expresses profound disappointment that Mary's journal contains only "jottings" (Shields 1987, 49) about her very ordinary domestic life: "Creek down today," "Green beans up," or "Door latch broken" (1987, 55). But even as early as 1982, in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, Shields is explicit about the ways in which women can be bound up in a domesticity they at the same time long to escape. Before Brenda Bowman leaves for the convention, she conscientiously completes her domestic duties: making the beds, doing the laundry, preparing a casserole (1982, 9). Retrospective narrative forays into Brenda's life history allow for descriptions of the domestic as it pertained to young women of the 1950s. As was encouraged by the magazines of the day, Brenda and her colleagues in the typing pool discuss cooking "pork chops the new way with condensed cream-of-mushroom soup" and the merits of paste wax versus spray wax (1982, 107). The narrator notes that Brenda was enchanted by "the domesticity of the newly married...,its crisp, glazed magazine aura" (1982, 109). When asked years later

why she married so young her honest reply is: "'I was *dying* to have a pink kitchen.'...What, besides the pink kitchen, had she asked for? Nothing much, it seemed" (1982, 109, 113).

This lack of the ability to demand anything substantial is explored in detail in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (and again in *The Stone Diaries*, when the young Daisy "wants to want something but doesn't know what she is allowed" [Shields 1993, 117]). Brenda has missed the upheaval of the 1960s, including the burgeoning second-wave feminist movement, because she has been "diapering babies, buying groceries at the A & P, wallpapering bathrooms, while other women - who were these women? - fought for equal rights" (Shields 1982, 86). Now, the narrator says, Brenda is "assailed by a sense of opportunities missed" (1982, 49). She recognizes that "she had lost the habit of wanting....[T]hrough lack of practice she had simply forgotten how it was done, how to open her mouth and say: I want" (1982, 162). But now, "more was suddenly what she wanted. What she spent her time thinking about. *More*" (45). Although she has had "Forty years of creeping, of tiptoeing," by the time she strides down a street in Philadelphia on her way to a newspaper interview, she is filled with "Strength, purpose, certainty" (1982, 123).

By this time, of course, Brenda has sold several of her quilts, has made contact with other artists at the convention, and has begun to see that quilts can make political statements. In particular, she has begun to understand that theories by feminists such as Friedan and Woolf apply to her. Brenda has been looking forward to a room of her own in the convention hotel (1982, 55) and is disappointed to discover that because the hotel has accidentally double-booked the mostly female crafts conference with a meeting of mostly male metallurgists, she will have to share a room. At the opening reception, she overhears a fellow convention-goer point out that a woman artist is "expected to do her stuff between loads of wash" (1982, 79) when what is really needed is "A room of one's own" (1982, 80) - a reference, of course, to Virginia Woolf's famous book. But Brenda has already realized that need by turning the guest bedroom into her own "work space" (Shields 1980, 29). Her husband has a den where he is supposed to be writing a history of First Nations trading practices, but Brenda has taken the warmest, brightest, most comfortable room for her own. That this is an artist's room is reinforced when it is compared in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* to the painting of "Van Gogh's bedroom, a golden cube" (1982, 12). Brenda deserves this beautiful room, the third-person narrator states, because she is, in fact, "more serious than Jack about her work" (1982, 165).

The serious work of quiltmaking brings benefits that as a late 1970s housewife Brenda has never been able to claim. First, it allows her the "artist's right to interpret and name" (1982, 17). As Brenda muses, "Naming was a form of possession. It was a privilege; there were lots of people who never had a chance to bestow names" (1982, 18). A second claim that quilting allows Brenda is economic. She has discovered that many people are willing to spend what she once considered "exorbitant sums" for her quilts and to pay "cheerfully, no dickering" (1982, 31). Indeed, as the narrator emphasizes, now that she is making enough money to file her own income tax returns and to buy things for herself, Brenda feels "a glimpse of a dazzling new kind of power" (1982, 32). This of course is the power of the income of one's own, an idea at which Friedan hinted but never stated outright. Although such power is recognized by fellow craftswomen, it is not yet acknowledged by Brenda's family. When her parents-in-law give her a card containing a folded ten-dollar bill and tell her to have a nice meal on her holiday, she is barely able to contain her anger and tears: "She was going to a national exhibit; she was one of the exhibitors; she had been *invited* to participate. Ma and Dad Bowman

didn't present Jack with ten-dollar bills when he went off to Milwaukee or Detroit to present papers" (1982, 49).

At the convention, Brenda is part of a collective of women who are demanding rights and considerations that as an individual she is just beginning to perceive. One of her fellow convention-goers calls the fact that they have been bumped out of their hotel rooms by the male metallurgists a "violation of our rights as women" (1982, 59). Another objects to the make-up kit in their convention package as a "gratuitous tribute to traditional female vanity" (1982, 61). And a third notices that while the craftspeople at the convention are mostly women, the droning keynote speaker is, inevitably, a man (1982, 76-77 & 98-99). Groening suggests that the comedic elements of these scenes - and they are funny - indicate that Shields has "gently mocked and humorously dismissed" anything that "threatens the supremacy of domestic contentment" (Groening 1991, 16). Shields's humorous presentation does contain an element of critique, especially of the excesses of 1970s feminist rhetoric. But while Brenda may be initially resistant to demands related to perceived gender inequalities, like Shields and many of her readers she is ultimately persuaded.

Brenda participates in discussions of the nature of artistry that contain elements of the feminism evident in Chicago's *Dinner Party*. Chicago pointed out that women are often responsible for preparing and serving dinner parties but are rarely their honoured guests (Chicago 1979, 11). *A Fairly Conventional Woman* includes conversations about whether traditionally feminine activities such as cooking can be considered art. Such conversations have since been made in more detail, for example in the introduction to Edna Alford and Clare Harris's *Kitchen Talk* (1992) as well as in Shields's own *The Stone Diaries* (1993). In *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, Brenda's husband asserts that cooking is not an art because "it lacked permanence, even the pretence of permanence." In contrast, Brenda argues, increasingly skillfully, that cooking is a form of artistry because it "appealed directly to the aesthetic sense and it involved aesthetic deliberations" (Shields 1982, 77). Indeed, at the convention, much of the important work of talking about arts, crafts, and feminist politics happens over *hors d'oeuvres* and meals. When Brenda misses a conference banquet, she feels a keen sense of loss. Mealtime conversations are quoted - including the conversation about the need for a room of one's own - and the food eaten is described in detail (as are, Donna Smyth points out about *Swann*, Sarah's cheese on pita and Rose's double porkchop platter [Smyth 1989, 144]). One *hors d'oeuvre* takes on particular meaning for Brenda; in her hotel bed, she "dreams of the pale-green artichoke heart, its leaves pushed apart, the sharpened oval of an almond embedded in its centre" (Shields 1982, 81). In her dreams at least, Brenda recognizes the hard core of artistry and feminism at the centre of her quilt-making, as well as the "central core" of sexuality that her quilting expresses.

During her waking hours, however, Brenda is incredulous when a convention guest speaker discusses traditional quilts as exhibiting a kind of Judy Chicagoan feminist sexuality: The Star of Bethlehem is either "an orgasmic explosion" or "an immense, quivering vulva" while the Log Cabin quilt is "a seamless field of phallic symbols, so tightly bound together that there is no room at all for female genitalia" (1982, 138). "Poppycock," responds one of the other convention-goers, described as the "Grandma Moses of the quilt world" (1982, 139). Groening argues that through comedic passages such as these, quilting in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* functions as "a metaphor that allows Shields both to attack all she dislikes about the world of art and its critics and to satirize the more esoteric efforts of a feminist search for distinctively female creativity" (Groening 1991, 15-16). Anne Collins states even more explicitly that in these passages Brenda "rejects entirely

the Judy Chicagoan possibilities in traditional quilt designs" (Collins 1982, 78). Clearly, Shields's work here is in part a criticism of the way some feminist approaches to art reduce women to their sexuality and thus their biology - what art critic Rozsika Parker calls "an essentialist feminist position" (Parker 1984, 29). Yet Brenda also imagines her own inspiration in terms of human physiology and reproduction, as "a vibrating organ, half-heart, half-placenta" (Shields 1982, 17). Her quilt that wins honorable mention at the exhibit is titled *The Second Coming* - and the sexual rather than religious overtones of the title are reinforced by the description of the quilt as having "a blocked bed of colour," "a frenetic heat rising from one end," and "dark-purple stains printed at the edges with shapes that resembled mouths" (1982, 18). In other words, the quilt is a visual orgasm that presents viewers with a vulva-like central core similar to those in Chicago's dinner plates.

Sexuality is discussed in detail in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, in particular the way in which Brenda's early sexual expression is constrained by her reading of articles in magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which "had recently done a series of interviews on the current state of sex in America" (1982, 153). Such magazines, Friedan argues in *The Feminine Mystique* and the narrator suggests in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, promoted the idea that women should be virgins at marriage but that men should have "some previous sexual experience" (Shields 1982, 154), and that sex should centre around male experience. The narrator of Shields's novel says of Brenda that, like Daisy later in *The Stone Diaries*,

> She had read too many articles, many of them damaging. A man wants to experience the feeling of a woman surrendering to him. But how was she to express this message of surrender? The timing of the climax was crucial. Was she moving her hips too much or not enough? She was constantly thinking, evaluating, planning, counting, asking herself what was the next move? And the next? (1982, 155)

Brenda's quilts, in contrast, are presented as organic and spontaneous expressions of a more confident mature sexuality. Indeed, one of Brenda's friends describes *The Second Coming* as exhibiting both sensuality and a contained sexual energy (1982, 18-19).

Far from dismissing the women at the conference who interpret art through feminist lenses and who exhibit feminist commitments, Brenda is impressed by their energy. She expresses this idea to a fellow convention-goer, who replies "I myself am not political." Brenda is preparing to say that she, too, is a-political when she is interrupted (1982, 100). As this interruption makes clear, the statement is no longer true because the convention has acted to dismantle some of Brenda's conventional ideas and in the process has politicized her. She has a new understanding of the arts-crafts divide and her own arguments about confronting that divide. Although she dismisses as "pompous junk" and "pretentious hogwash" the comments about quilting as art she makes to a newspaper reporter (1982, 146), she is persuasive when she suggests that art poses "a moral question" to which craft then responds (1982, 145). As Susan Grove Hall argues, "Shields's novel in many ways asserts" these ideas (Hall 1997, 43).

Even the "Grandma Moses of the quilt world" eventually admits her own gradual politicization, especially her realization of the destabilized sense of history provided by quilts. She concedes that her "story" quilts are misleading because in art as in life there is always more than one possible ending. And when a woman in one session says that she is interested in "Hacking out new forms," Brenda concludes, borrowing from Flaubert,

that "What sets quilting apart from other crafts is the built-in shiver of history" (1982, 102). She makes a detailed connection between quilting, narrative, and history when she interprets history, like quilting, as "a chain of stories" that "form the patterns of entire lives" (1982, 128). Almost twenty years later, in his discussion of Walker's "Everyday Use," Sam Whitsitt argues that "The quilt 'represents' herstory, history, and tradition, binding women, and men, to the past and the past to the present" (Whitsitt 2000, 445). A guest speaker at Brenda's conference, meanwhile, interprets the revival of quiltmaking as historically significant, and as both anti-feminist and feminist: a "retreat from responsibility" and "a continuum of what it has always been, a means of exercising control over a disorganized and hostile universe" (Shields 1982, 139).

These gendered positives and negatives of quilting reflect the way in which Chicago revelled in "the splendor of needlework" at the same time as she used "specific needlework techniques as metaphors for women's oppression" (Kubitza 1996a, 159). Rozsika Parker argues in *The Subversive Stitch*, published two years after Shields's book and five years after Chicago's installation, that "The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal...But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them" (Parker 1984, 5). Similarly, Amelia Jones describes *The Dinner Party* as having the goal of confronting "the public domain of high art (the province of men...) with the private realm of domesticity (conventionally assigned to women)" (Jones 1996b, 29).

Despite the way in which Shields's fourth published book makes some of the same arguments and exhibits some of the same goals, it has been dismissed as trivial, overshadowed by her other books, and further obscured by a decision to retitle it. The original publication title was dropped when the book was republished in Great Britain in 1991 in one volume with its companion novel, *Happenstance*, and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* became *Happenstance: The Wife's Story*. Shields has said that she disliked the punning title *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (interview with de Roo, Shields 1988, 45), which was suggested by her publisher. As Shields's manuscripts in the Library and Archives of Canada show, her working title for the book had been *Broad Daylight*, a tongue-in-cheek subversion of a derogatory term for women. However, renaming the book *Happenstance: The Wife's Story* is not an improvement. Instead, its subordination of the female protagonist to her husband is a patriarchal subversion of the often witty revisioning of women's artistry evident in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*. The first published title of the book refers to a woman whose meeting with other women helps her to become more political, and thus evokes the transformation in critical approaches to women's art and women's lives of the late 1970s and early 1980s evident in both Chicago's exhibit and Shields's book.

Shields told Eleanor Wachtel in 1989 (after the publication of *Swann* but before *The Stone Diaries*) that she believed *A Fairly Conventional Woman* to be her "best book" but that "hardly anyone agrees" (interview 1989, 35). Like *The Dinner Party*, *A Fairly Conventional Woman* fits within liberal feminist parameters, and certainly Shields's feminism as evident in that book is open to the kinds of criticisms that have been leveled at liberal feminism of the early 1980s: that it is too little concerned with issues of class and race; that it celebrates rather than criticizes cozy domesticity; that it is not radical enough; that it is essentialist in its approach. But the dismissal of *A Fairly Conventional Woman* as not feminist or not feminist enough ignores the historical realities of women's lives and feminist practice at the time the book was produced. Like Chicago's installation three years earlier, Shields's book broke ground in the early 1980s by exploring gendered aspects of the arts-crafts divide. And like *The Dinner*

Party, *A Fairly Conventional Woman* both posits and questions the role of women's sexuality and domestic activities such as quilting and food preparation as impetuses for social change. Shields's fourth published novel thus stands as a strong statement of the power of fiction to explore the relationships among gender, art, domestic labour, and sexuality.

Endnotes

1. The popular response to *The Dinner Party* can be compared to contemporary responses to productions of Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* or, in Canada, exhibits of Esther Bryan's *Quilt of Belonging*. The international dinner party held during the opening of Chicago's exhibit was emulated in worldwide dinner parties to celebrate Margaret Atwood's birthday beginning in 2005 (Glover and Hengen 2005).
2. See essays by Gamble (2003), Groening (1991), Hall (1997), Levy (2007), Williamson (2003). White's book, meanwhile, discusses both *A Fairly Conventional Woman* and *Happenstance* in conjunction with a number of novels by other writers (2005).
3. I quote from Shields's letter to Howard, housed in the University of British Columbia Archives, with permission from the Carol Shields Literary Trust.
4. Citations are from the 1994 Canadian edition in which *A Fairly Conventional Woman* was republished in one volume with *Happenstance* (with the two books subtitled *Happenstance: The Wife's Story* and *Happenstance: The Husband's Story*). However, I retain the books' original titles in my discussion, both to avoid confusion and because I intend to criticize the retitling.
5. See my essay "Autobiography as Critical Practice" (2003) for a more detailed discussion of Friedan's theories as evident in *The Stone Diaries*.

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