Changing the Future: The Women’s Caucus for Art Awards and The Feminist Art Project Day of Panels

THE WOMEN’S CAUCUS FOR ART (WCA) Lifetime Achievement Awards, begun in 1979, and The Feminist Art Project (TFAP), started in 2005, came into existence in their respective eras due to similar interests in dialogue, documentation, and recognition of feminist art practices. Until recently, the WCA Lifetime Achievement Awards have been the only accolade devoted to women in the visual arts. The award is an opportunity to reflect on the accomplishments of a select distinguished group and create a record through the awards events and catalogue. With the award, important contributions receive much-deserved attention. Even with WCA’s existence firmly established, more opportunities for explorations of feminist art were needed. In 2005, TFAP developed out of the desire to capitalise on the unique synchronicity of multiple major museum exhibitions of feminist art. TFAP focuses on expanding the community, increasing opportunities, and broadening the discourse. It now includes a broad range of activities. In this discussion, I’ll focus on TFAP@CAA, which refers to the day of panels and related events scheduled under TFAP’s aegis at the annual conference of the College Art Association (CAA) which is the professional association for visual arts professionals. These activities are my primary area of interest because I

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1 The CAA Committee on Women and the Arts gave recognition awards to women in the visual arts from 1996-2008. At that point in 2009, it became the Distinguished Feminist Award which is an award given at the CAA annual conference alongside other prestigious awards. Thus, though WCAs Lifetime Achievement was the only accolade until then, has a longer history. (Olin 2013.) I served on or chaired the jury of the Distinguished Feminist Award from 2011-2014.
helped start it and coordinated many of its activities from its inception in 2005 until 2014. The separate histories of the WCA awards and TFAP, especially TFAP@CAA, the systems they have created to remember the past and change the future, and the solutions they offer have diversified American feminist art and academia. I want to reflect on what has been accomplished by WCA and TFAP and then consider how they offer directions for the future. I’ll start with the WCA awards, then discuss the origins of TFAP, and consider the two in relationship to one another and what contributions each has made.

Both emerged because there was a need for more attention to feminist art. Analysis of the feminine and feminized body, celebration of womanhood, critiques of gender, the liminal space of transsexuality, potentials/possibilities for feminist utopias and dystopias, and the consequence or lack thereof of feminist interventions were, and still are, all at issue today. The relationships between theory and practice are integral to any history of feminism in contemporary art, since the artist now has available many systems - methods, techniques - to expose the privileging social and critical structures defining woman's relationship to the world. But these same systems have often resulted in many women not having opportunities to participate in exhibitions, not having work collected by private patrons or by museums, and generally, not seeing their work get much attention. As a result, feminism remains much-needed in the international art scene. Feminism focuses on access - that women should have equal opportunity - and on realities - that women have not had equal opportunities. The WCA Awards and TFAP have been attempts to correct these oversights and absences while also recognising the language and reality of women's contributions to the visual arts and their histories.

Studying WCA’s awards history gets you up close to a “Who’s Who” of feminist art in the United States. WCA was born out of a moment, in which there was a strong desire to counter professional discrimination, gain opportunities for women in the visual arts fields, and network. The awards came later. WCA was an organisation which resulted from the need to have a woman-only space within the College Art Association.

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2 I relinquished my role as TFAP@CAA coordinator in 2012, but had already planned the events through 2014.
3 Some of this material here first appeared in a slightly different form in Swartz 2007, pp. 281-88.
4 I have written elsewhere about my perspective, see Swartz 2007, p. 12.
(CAA), the United States-based learned society and professional association for the visual arts, begun in 1911. At the CAA Annual Meeting in San Francisco in 1972, a meeting called by art historian Paula Harper and artist Miriam Schapiro, both faculty of the pioneering Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts (California Institute for Art), attracted a group interested in equality for women in the arts. This assembly quickly formed a splinter organisation which became the Women's Caucus with many women members taking on leadership roles, many for the first time in their careers.  

Simultaneously, under the auspices of CAA, a Committee on the Status of Women, then known as the Committee on Women, later the Committee on Women in the Arts, was formed with feminist art historian Linda Nochlin Pommer as its chair, and worked independently of the Women's Caucus. The CAA committee was intended to survey the status of women in the professions; but they moved slowly, which only spurred the caucus into more activist involvement. Feminist art historian Ann Sutherland Harris emerged as the president of the women's caucus at its first meeting. In 1974, the caucus became a new nonprofit organisation separated from CAA called Women's Caucus for Art (WCA). This division was a somewhat controversial schism - sometimes referred to as “the banishment” 7 as some feminists saw this split as a weakening move, while others viewed it as a way to clarify the group's identity and expand their purview. Alongside the evolving form of the organisation itself, the awards developed. They were first conceptualised in 1972 as an outgrowth of WCA's desire to champion women in the art world. Ann Sutherland Harris would later become the first Honors Awards Chair in 1977. Finally, they were given for the first time in 1979.

Many women were involved in the inception of the awards. From the start, the award celebrated accomplishment and achievement, which translated into nominees and awardees of advanced age. As the Guerilla Girls, a feminist activist performance art group, would mockingly and initially CAA catered to academe and museums, primarily art historians and studio artists who teach in colleges and universities. Slowly it expanded to include more of the visual arts professions. Though CAA has an international membership now, it still is primarily comprised of members from North America and, at that time, the membership was principally drawn from the United States.

Julia A. Sienkewicz recounts the specific agenda of the first gathering, including noting that the first meeting attracted 250 members (a large number for a session at that time). (Sienkewicz 2011, p. iii-12.)

Brodsky 2011, pp. 202-03.
ironically note in 1988 that women artists were not burdened with success early on and that one of the “Advantages of Being a Woman Artist” included: “knowing your career might pick up after you are eighty”. Even now, decades after the award’s inception, there are still many deserving women who do not receive recognition in their lifetimes. And there has been some internal controversy about acknowledging “younger” women with the award, meaning women under age 70. The selection committee fluctuates in its opinion about what age constitutes a level of contribution sufficient to constitute the worthiness of a lifetime achievement award. It was and is an award unlike any other. Continuous annual awards recognising lifetime achievement for women artists did not exist prior to the invention of the WCA Honors Awards.

The awards emerged from several divergent but simultaneous factors. Artist Judith K. Brodsky, third WCA president organised the first WCA conference in Los Angeles in 1977. The previous two presidents had organised a single session within the framework of earlier CAA conferences, but the first full WCA conference was initiated by Brodsky. It was held at the same time and the same locale as the CAA conference that year. Brodsky, enlisted local Los Angeles women to help with its implementation - The Women’s Building leadership consisting of art historians Arlene Raven and Ruth Iskin along with graphic designer, Sheila de Bretteville, as well as artists Ruth Weisberg and June Wayne. Weisberg brought together a group of California women artists to establish the Los Angeles chapter of the WCA to help with the conference.

Additionally, Brodsky organised an exhibition of work by WCA artists which was mounted at the renowned Women’s Building. She invited twenty-four women curators and art critics from different parts of the United States to select artists from their regions. Brodsky also obtained the first National Endowment for the Arts grant ever issued for feminist activity, not enough for a full catalogue but enough for a poster that documented all the artists, designed by de Bretteville. Renowned feminist art critic Lucy Lippard was invited by Raven to be the keynote speaker at the conference convocation which was held at the Women’s Building. The witch Z Budapest talked on one of the panels and wove such a powerful spell that the captivated audience only left the room when

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9 Brodsky 2013.
the executive secretary of the CAA came in to evacuate the room for the next panel. Following the main conference events, a closing celebration was held at June Wayne’s studio in which art historians Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris received the first WCA awards ever for their incredible accomplishment of curating and realizing their massive corrective exhibition “Women Artists: 1550–1950” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The show traveled to the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition catalogue became a standard reference on feminist art.

So in a sense the awards started at the 1977 conference, but they became official under the next president artist Lee Ann Miller with support from artist Charlotte Robinson, who was then serving as the Chair for the 1979 WCA conference. Additionally, artists Marilyn Green with the Workshop For Careers in the Arts and Ellouise Schoettler of the Coalition of Women’s Art Organisations also were instrumental in bringing the awards into existence.

Brodsky had brought Joan Mondale, the wife of the then-vice president to be the keynote speaker at the second WCA annual conference held in New York City in 1978. Thus, this relationship created a connection between the White House and the WCA that resulted in Joan Mondale becoming instrumental in hosting the initial formal awards ceremony at the White House in 1979 when the WCA held its third annual conference in Washington, DC. Through Mondale’s assistance, President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn bestowed the awards at the White House to Louise Nevelson, Alice Neel, Selma Burke, Isabel Bishop, and George O’Keeffe (in absentia) followed by a repeat ceremony for WCA members at the conference which was held elsewhere. Artist Muriel Magenta, one of the later presidents of WCA, noted that the energy of that awards ceremony was extraordinary and motivating.¹¹

WCA has maintained its connection to CAA in that its annual conference and awards ceremony happen in the same locale and usually on the same days or within a day or two of the CAA annual conference. But that was not the case in 1980, when the political agitation of the WCA was in full force and the group dissented to hold its annual conference

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¹⁰ This exhibition was a corrective to an earlier exhibition The Art and Technology Program 1967–1977, which excluded women artists. As a result of feminist artists protesting the exclusion, the museum commissioned Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris to curate the exhibition Women Artists: 1550 to 1950.

¹¹ Magenta 2017.
and awards events in the same place. The reason was that the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had been sent to the states for ratification after the United States Congress passed the Twenty-Seventh Amendment to the Constitution earlier in 1972. Despite vigorous efforts by the national feminist movement, it had not been ratified in certain states, including Louisiana which the CAA board selected in 1977 as the site for the 1980 annual conference. Within WCA, this situation was controversial and a small group decided to attend the scheduled events in New Orleans, Louisiana, while the larger membership had an alternate conference in Washington, DC. Both groups gave awards. The ones in New Orleans went to Anni Albers, Louise Bourgeois, Carolyn Durieux, Ida Kohlmeyer, Lee Krasner. The awards made in the alternate ceremony in Washington DC that year were given to Bella Abzug, Sonia Johnson, Sister Theresa Kane, Grace Paley, Rosa Parks, Gloria Steinem. In 1981 at the conference in San Francisco, the awards went to Ruth Bernhard, Adelyn Breeskin, Elizabeth Catlett, Sari Dienes, Claire Falkenstein, Helen Lundeberg. Over time, the WCA award became known as the Lifetime Achievement Award.

In 1986, art historian Annie Shaver Crandell, president from 1986 to 1988, created a President's Award, which gives the WCA President the opportunity to make a special occasional recognition of a younger woman, typically mid-career, who has not yet reached the level of having her career recognised by the other award. This award became intermittent, bestowed subsequently in 1987, 1997, and 2002. Since 2004, when arts administrator Dena Muller was president, the award has been made annually. In 2011, under the tutelage of artist Janice Nesser-Chu as president, the award changed into the President's Award for Arts & Activism, in acknowledgement of the primacy of political activity in the service of enhancing, furthering, or improving the circumstances for women in the visual arts. One persistent feature of the awards is the reliance on a committee of esteemed visual arts professionals to select the recipients. Another is the ability of the entire membership to propose nominees.

The Feminist Art Project came into existence because of a unique moment in more recent history. In 2005, several large-scale mainstream museum exhibitions of feminist art were held or announced with opening dates in 2007. Several women, including Chicago, Raven, and

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12 Hilary Robinson lists these exhibitions as: (in order of the year they opened; touring venues not
curator Susan Fisher Sterling, as well as Brodsky and art historian Ferris Olin, began focusing on how to capitalise on this unique moment, build momentum, and optimise it. Judy C (as she was called in this situation to differentiate her from Brodsky) and Raven organised some meetings that became “Overcoming Erasure” and later “The Feminist Art Project”. Separately, Brodsky and Olin were crafting ideas for ways to create broad recognition of women in the arts at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, a large, public university in close proximity to New York City where they both held professorships, through exhibitions and other activities, such as lectures, publications, and symposia, to celebrate the “Year of the Woman”, which was also inspired by the upcoming 35th anniversary in 2006 of their celebrated exhibition series known as the Dana Women Artists series.

My involvement began because of a conversation Arlene Raven and I had in the spring of 2005 after visiting several art galleries in New York City. We were discussing the situation for women artists in the art world, a topic we often considered. She said “You should get involved in this idea that Judy [Chicago] and I are developing”. A meeting was held in May 2005 at art historian Gail Levin’s home in New York City where the women in attendance (artists, art historians, and curators) were asked how they would individually capitalise on this upcoming opportunity in 2007.13 Immediately I realised that the College Art Association’s annual

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13 The attendees at that first meeting were: Judy Chicago, Catherine de Zegher, Erin Dougherty, Maren Hassinger, Laura Kruger, Gail Levin, Wendy Oslof, Maura Reilly, Jean Bloch Rosenhaft, Phyllis Rosser, Alexandra Schwartz, Susan Fisher Sterling, Anne Swartz, and Midori Yoshimoto.
conference was scheduled for New York City in February of 2007 and I thought a panel would be worth pursuing since panels focusing on feminist art were still occasional at CAA at that time. I said I would work with Raven to create a CAA panel, who was unable to attend the meeting due to health issues (she died of cancer in 2006). Others in attendance at Levin’s house suggested exhibitions, programming, and publications. More meetings were held that summer and into the fall. Levin and others contacted Brodsky and Olin, and after some discussion with Chicago, Swartz, Raven, and Fisher-Sterling including a visit to Judy C in New Mexico by Brodsky and Olin, they took over the project. They turned it from an amorphous set of activists promoting feminist art at this unique moment into an organisation with an office at Rutgers University, two assistants, a parking space, and a telephone number - all difficult mechanisms to realise at an institution of higher education in the United States where resources are usually excessively managed and scrutinised making them nearly impossible to access.

I mentioned to Raven the idea of a panel at CAA’s annual conference in 2007. Her reply was a classic example of her grand vision. She said, “a panel, how about a whole day?” Luckily, that year at the 2005 annual conference, a group interested in Ecological Art had had several events over the course of a day, giving us some precedence for such a plan. With the support of several key players, including Brodsky and Olin, as well as Emmanuel Lemakis, the then-Vice President for Conferences at CAA, Raven and I set about developing a day of panels, along with two exhibitions, for CAA 2007. Despite her failing health, Raven remained absolutely committed to realising the panels and insisted I bring them into being, even if I had to work alone.

That day in February 2007 was a success! The room was packed all day, making available seats a rare commodity (some people irrationally stayed seated all day to avoid potentially losing their seat), the audience was intergenerational (including men, women, and transsexuals). The enthusiasm was high throughout the day. Alongside the day of panels, an exhibition of feminist art was scheduled to coincide with the conference. Ceres Gallery in Chelsea, a feminist cooperative gallery, offered space,

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14 The two exhibitions were a show of Darja Dorosh’s art at A.I.R. Gallery and a group exhibition curated by Leslie King-Hammond at Ceres Gallery. A third exhibition, a group show of gallery artists, curated by Dena Muller, at A.I.R. Gallery also emerged.
guided by artist Phyllis Rosser. Art Historian Leslie King-Hammond curated and created *Agents of Change: Women, Art, and Intellect*, an incredible exhibition. I did the fundraising. Dena Muller acted as registrar and supported the installation. Celebrated curator Lowery Stokes Sims installed the show. Distinguished art critic Holland Cotter positively reviewed the show in *The New York Times*, calling it “a modest but timely arrival”.

Many people were committed to the project and propelled the day of panels and exhibitions forward into the future. Artist Connie Tell joined TFAP as an administrator and helped expand the activities considerably. For the 2008 CAA conference in Dallas, Muller and Fisher-Sterling chaired the TFAP panel, “The Glass is Half Full: Embedding Feminism and Feminist Art”.

But one panel didn’t prove satisfying so Brodsky and Olin asked me to organise another day of panels for the 2009 CAA conference in Los Angeles. On an extremely short timeline - a few weeks - I organised a full day of panels, including interstitial performances to maximise the available space and time. The first panel was chaired by one of my colleagues, Suzanne Jackson, who approached me at the end of the first day of panels in 2007 because she was disgruntled. She is African-American and told me she was surprised by how few women of colour participated in the day’s events. My panel, the first of the day, was the only one that included anyone non-white. As a corrective, I asked her to serve as a panel chair - the first of the day - for TFAP@CAA 2009, in which she focused on the accomplishments and involvement of African-American artists and art historians. She had been involved in the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles in the 1970s, so her participation helped connect the west and east coasts (at that time, she was a professor of painting, at my college in Savannah, Georgia).

Developing TFAP@CAA into an exciting forum to discuss feminist art became possible because of the increasing interest among artists, art historians, and curators in feminist art and CAA recognised that growth. In order to avoid having the TFAP@CAA days of panel become my property and associated with me and my perspective, I arranged with Brodsky and Olin to become the overall Coordinator and in that role I was able

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16 The panelists were: Ferris Olin and Judith K. Brodsky, Leslie King-Hammond, Mary Garrard, Norma Broude, Andrea Barnwell, Helaine Posner, and Terrie Sultan.
to select different leading edge feminist scholars and artists for each year to be the organisers of the event, through 2014. My focus in determining the Coordinator or Coordinators was to identify feminist artists or art historians who engaged in provocative, exciting, and important work. I worked closely with the TFAP staff to ensure that the coordinators had complete autonomy. That way, in defining the scope of their respective day of panels, she (they were all women during my tenure) would have intellectual freedom to realise events of significance with an important impact or impacts on the on-going discussion about feminism in art.

Art Historian Maria Buszek’s day of panels at the 2010 Chicago CAA annual conference was held in a slightly smaller room, which remained cramped and packed all day. The panels included broad-based discussion of sexuality and popular culture.

Within CAA’s board, though, concern arose that TFAP@CAA was being privileged over the affiliated societies by being given a whole day for its sessions. The issue raised was the fact that TFAP offered free admission and thus people attending the TFAP sessions were getting a free ride from CAA popular culture-a progressive and important series. Brodsky and Olin showed CAA officers photographs of the audience, who were all wearing conference name tags indicating paid CAA registration. But CAA remained distressed and felt it was providing free meeting space and free audio-visual support to non-members. Rather than continuing to try and appease the CAA board and potentially having to change or sacrifice some of the structure they had put into place, Brodsky and Olin decided to move off-site for the 2011 conference. Even though they moved off-site, CAA continued to promote TFAP@CAA in their “Special Events” section and publish panel abstracts. Brodsky and Olin secured the auditorium of the Museum of Arts & Design for the next TFAP day which was at the CAA New York conference in 2011. Art historians Johanna Burton and Julia Bryan-Wilson focused on a more political discussion. The sessions they planned pulled in a full house, necessitating that audience members sit on the stage and in the aisles. Many high profile art historians and artists attended. Despite moving off-site, the day was a major success, as defined by the level of audience members in attendance.

Artists Elana Mann and Audrey Chan organised the 2012 TFAP@CAA. They called their day “Shares and Stakeholders” and focused
attention on the range of what’s happening now in feminist art and what is being planned for the future. Mann and Chan successfully arranged for TFAP@CAA to be held at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and again a full audience remained for the day’s events. Catherine Morris, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, organised the 2013 TFAP@CAA day of panels, held at her Museum, and focused on the intersections between feminism, art, and museums. The day of panels has become an institution and is currently scheduled to run through 2016. Art historian Jennie Klein and artist Myrel Chernick managed the day in Chicago with a focus on art and motherhood from diverse perspectives. In 2012, Brodsky and Olin decided to step down from managing TFAP since at the same time they were stepping down from the directorship of the Institute for Women and Art (IWA). They began implementing their succession plan. Tatiana Flores, art historian at Rutgers University, became the director of both the IWA and TFAP with Connie Tell continuing as executive officer of TFAP and as deputy director of the IWA. Subsequently in 2013, Connie Tell assumed all responsibilities for TFAP and IWA. Then in 2015, Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion (OIDI), the managing entity of the IWA at Rutgers, requested a name change. The IWA became the Women and the Arts Collaborative and then changed again to the current title of the Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities.

The 2015, 2016, and 2017 TFAP@CAA sessions have been sketched out. The 2015 day focused on collaboration and collectives, under the aegis of artists Damali Abrams and Jenn Dierdorf and art historian Kathleen Wentrack in New York City. The 2016 day will be run by artist Zoë Charlton and art historian Margo Hobbs in Washington, DC. 2017 will be held in New York City, focusing on native feminism, and coordinated by art historian Kat Griefen, artist Maria Hupfield, and artist Jaune Quick-To-See Smith. The 2018 events are under development but will be held in Los Angeles.

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17 This status presents exciting collaborative possibilities. Information on all of the participants in past panels and plans for future panels is available at https://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/tfap-at-caa. Because TFAP is more institutionalized and allied with CAA, Suzanne Preston Blier, CAA President and Chair of the Board of Directors, and Judith Rodenbeck, Annual Conference Program Chair, are enthusiastic about the collaborative possibilities. Information on all of the participants in past panels and plans for future panels is available at https://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/tfap-at-caa.
Both WCA and TFAP were born out of the need for better treatment of women in the art world. For WCA, the lack of access in academia and the art world were key issues. Similarly, TFAP emerged from a desire to expand the discussion of feminist art and make it central rather than occasional and peripheral. As a democratic membership organisation, CAA recognised the impact of feminist art on its membership and in the field and has continued to provide a platform even if that platform has taken a different shape over time. Both the WCA and TFAP eventually became embedded in CAA, which bespeaks the organisation's flexibility and member-orientation enough to allow things to unfold in this way.

The missions of both organisations began as a way to provide an open forum for academic discussion about feminist art. Each took its natural form reflective of the values of that moment. The WCA Awards were a way to give awards to women, at a time when women were recognised only occasionally by CAA. It was significant from the start to document the activities and the awards catalogue served that purpose. Documentation and promotion of women's activities had been a main focus of the Women's Movement, countering the erasure of women's involvement in academia and the art world. Thus, the WCA awards would convey the untold story of many women's accomplishments. The catalogue was straightforward in promoting equity.

While the WCA was a membership organisation that sought to counter CAA neglect by Honouring individual women through awards, in contrast, TFAP was a crowdsourced effort, originally with no membership. As such, even now as a CAA-affiliated society, TFAP has retained a kind of freedom to adapt and change. TFAP has a social media format and is responsive to whatever interests and energies develop. It put feminist art scholarship in the forefront of its activities in a serious and impactful way. Its efficiency and professionalism make a huge crowd possible. Now it is a broad-based organisation with the day of panels functioning as only one of many events and activities.

WCA awards and TFAP both offer opportunities to celebrate feminist art. WCA awards have become a significant and high-profile event. TFAP provides sites for discourse about feminist art. WCA continues to be a membership organisation that exists to support the needs of its members, whereas TFAP is whatever it needs to be to serve anyone who wants to participate. Both reflect the zeitgeist of their moment of origin.