The Project of Hope: Middle Eastern Feminism in Controversy

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This book explores what art and artists can do to create democratic space, form, and language in a world devastated by multiple crises. Artists, activists, art historians, and art curators conduct timely and critical analyses across political divides, informing the public search for an agency, dialogues and self-representation. They analyze how artists transform these social relations through aesthetic means with a shared commitment to bridging political divides and conflicts. The book uses case studies from Australia, India, Mexico, USA, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, the Balkans, Russia, Italy, Ukraine to discuss the possibility or impossibility of building avenues for participation, equitable interaction, self-organisation, as well as the common creation of the imaginary and a culture of dialogues. The book pushes for a broader and more conflict-oriented understanding of art and politics.

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Every year I teach at least one course on gender and art where I cover feminist art of the 1970s. Most of my upper-level undergraduates come to class with only cursory knowledge of feminist art gained from survey courses. My lectures usually start with art and craft produced in the nineteenth century as we inch towards what I consider the high point of the course, namely the lecture on Womenhouse and Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party. As I talk about this innovative art, I see my student's faces; first, a bit shocked by the menstrual room and, at the same, overtaken by the beautiful imagery on the plates of The Dinner Party. We reach a watershed in the history of feminist art and navigate the before and after of The Dinner Party and the feminist art of the 1970s. Whatever we talk about after that lecture, my students always come back to The Dinner Party as a milestone for comparison and contrast. The work is indeed remarkable in its long-lasting effect. Fifty years after its conception, it does not stop being a topic of heated debates about its usefulness and destructive power of stereotyping.

The idea of the dinner party as quasi-spiritual and loosely connected to the Last Supper motif in the arts still inspires artists. It is enough to remember Renee Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper (1996), in which the Christ is a nude black woman surrounded by African American prophets, and Mary Beth Edelson’s Some Living American Women Artists (1972). Chicago’s work manages to rid the idea of taking a meal together of its Roman Catholic association and make it open for interpretation, which is one of the work’s strengths. Most of the commentators who discuss The Dinner Party note the
two most essential parts of the work: the use of handicrafts and relatability. Arguably, the two are interconnected: after all, embroidery and ceramic make the work of art more accessible. This chapter will discuss a work of art that builds upon Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. The interdisciplinary installation *Dinner with Friends* was created in 2016 and continues to be developed and updated. The work attempts to create a conversation between Jews and Muslims in the middle east. This chapter examines how strategies such as using relatable, easy-to-understand, and experience subject matter help create conversations. I argue that the strategy that made Chicago’s early work so controversial remains vital in the regions and contexts where feminist art does not have as deep roots and culture as it does in North America.

Given the contested nature of the *Dinner with Friends* project – which asked artists from opposing political sides, Israeli and Iranian, to participate – the history of its development became one of the most critical aspects of the work. This chapter argues that the events that have unfolded since the start of the project are as important as the actual project itself. In a way, *Dinner with Friends* became a process-oriented installation (see Fig. 3.1). What follows is an attempt to understand how to appreciate the significance of an activist art project that crosses disciplinary and temporal boundaries. Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* is a combination of art, popular culture, sexuality, and popular feminism – an ideal mix for creating a memorable artwork. Shirley Siegal and her collaborators have adopted the same approach. The simplicity of the idea appeals to many and avoids the perceived or actual elitisms of contemporary conceptual art. This approach is the main subject of the investigation of this article.
History of the Project

Israeli artist Shirley Siegal’s Dinner with Friends started when she became a finalist in a juried exhibition in Gallery MC, New York. When she arrived at the opening ceremony, she realized that her work was being shown next to work by Iranian artist Hadieh Afshani. The two decided to collaborate on a project to demonstrate that cooperation is possible between Israeli and Iranian artists, even though their respective countries do not have diplomatic relationships. Natalie Burlutskaya, the curator of the exhibition where the two artists met, suggested that they return in a year to unveil the result of their teamwork. The two artists decided to concentrate on the ideas that would be important and relevant to both nations, especially women, as both considered themselves feminist artists. Thinking and reading about feminist art, both found the idea of Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party inspirational. At the same time, both felt that they did not want to include the element of
sexuality as explicitly as Chicago did. The result of a yearly exploration, *The First Supper* was presented in 2016 in New York and consisted of a table set where the tablecloth was produced jointly by Siegal and Afshani, a half each, sewn together during the installation. The plates painted by Siegal featured women who played essential roles in either Iranian or Israeli culture or society, e.g. the first woman pilot in Israel or a meaningful feminist from Iran living abroad. Afshani bought wooden mugs, utensils, cups, and cutlery and decorated them with images of Iranian women. Later, Azadeh Pirazimian added Farsi words.

The result was a work of art that tried to bring the two cultures together symbolically and literally. This first iteration of the work posed several important questions. While it was relatable and received well by the audiences, it also presented a challenge of connecting culture and tradition in art and avoiding stereotyping. The simplicity of the idea of a connection between two Mediterranean cultures that have been at odds for so long makes the work hopeful and idealistic. That idealism was welcomed by the audiences in New York and Toronto. As discussed below, this idealism was severely criticized when the work was shown in Amsterdam.

Siegal and Afshani brought the project to the Toronto Feminist Art Conference the following year. It had changed very little since the exhibition in New York and was received well, and the artist’s talk on one of the panels brought up several interesting issues, including collaboration across political divides. Siegal recounts that during the presentation there were several students of Iranian descent in the audience. They seemed to both artists somewhat taken aback by the project, and remained very quiet while others contributed to the discussion. The exhibition and conference in Toronto coincided with President Trump’s first travel ban, issued in 2017. The executive order, colloquially called the travel ban, effectively prevented most immigrants or people holding visas from several Muslim countries, including Iran, from travelling to the US. 

for three years, she was detained. Her phone was taken away and requests to call her fiancée or lawyer were denied, and she was interrogated for several hours by the border officials. The latter repeatedly inquired about the reasons for her trip and why she was returning to the United States instead of going to Iran. This experience showed Afshani that her life in the US may become impossible and unsafe, and she started considering returning to Iran. In these circumstances, collaborating with an Israeli artist became potentially dangerous since the Iranian government prosecutes its citizens if they create collaborations with Israelis.

Afshani’s departure was a significant setback for the project in the foundation stage. Siegal was forced to look for another artist. Through messages on social media, she met the Iranian artist Azadeh Pirazimian, with whom she came to exhibit in the Netherlands as part of the Art and Activism: Resilience Technique in the Time of Crisis conference. The exhibition was housed in the small conference room in the National Museum for Ethnology in Leiden (see Fig. 3.2). That installation, Dinner with Friends, became probably the least well-received iteration, and garnered some criticism from both the organizers and members of Boycott Divestment Sanction (BDS). This movement, which aims to stop international support for Israel’s oppression of Palestine and Palestinians, expressed dissatisfaction with the participation of Israeli artists and scholars in the conference. The conference organizers, who invited Siegal and Pirazimian to participate, urged them to withdraw two days before the start of the conference and the exhibit. This was especially surprising in light of the goals of the art project, which attempted to establish dialogue and understanding between the two cultures. Those who saw the exhibition were interested in discussing the connections between cultures, but the call for boycotting the project reinforced the need for projects like that to create communication between people whose nations disagree.
This incident and lack of public funding caused Pirazimian to leave the project. Siegal continued, this time with the Indian activist artist Madan Lal. They called their project *The Plate and the Palette*, which went to India, where it was exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts, Punjab University, Chandigarh, and the National Academy, New Delhi. Besides this, Siegal lectured on the project at several universities. Lal added a tablecloth painted with Indian folk motifs and several sculptures made of grains, seeds, and wheat. The latter connected the ideas of womanhood, motherhood and mother earth. Most discussions revolved around women’s lives in India and women’s rights. The exhibition was unusual since it was visited by thousands of students, artists, professors, and local politicians. Although,
from the Western feminist point of view, Lal’s association between womanhood and the earth may seem essentialist, it is important to understand that while it is a drawback of that particular stage of the project, it still allowed for meaningful conversation and discussion to happen in India (see Fig. 3.3).


That was Siegal’s last collaboration with another artist. She is currently continuing the project alone to continue the idea of creating a dialogue between the nations by sitting together for a meal. The last show where Siegal presented the project, at least the part she made, became part of the exhibition on feminist art in Haifa Museum of Art, titled Feminism in the Age of Transnationalism. The exhibition, which took over the entire

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museum space (Haifa Museum of Art does not have a permanent collection on display), presented a representative sample of recent feminist works of international artists. Siegal’s work was this time installed on the wall vertically yet still reminded the viewer of the arrangement of the dinner around the table (see Fig. 3.4). While Siegal is currently working alone, she is searching for collaborators. Her collaborators must come from cultures that are politically opposed to Israel; thus, she has approached a Palestinian woman artist and a Bedouin woman artist. In both cases, the prospective collaborators have turned to their community and support group to help decide on whether to get involved with the project.

Fig. 3.4. Shirley Siegal, Dinner with Friends. Photo by Shirley Siegal. Image courtesy of the artist.

In both cases, the communities threatened to exclude them if they collaborated with an Israeli artist. Therefore, for the time being, Siegal is still working
alone. To substitute for the lack of collaborators, she created utensils with Farsi Calligraphy\(^3\) and painted several plates with portraits of women from Arab cultures. One of the portraits is of Mariam Fagih Imani, an important Iranian feminist living in Oslo (see Fig. 3.5). Mariam, who has significant

Fig. 3.5. Plate dedicated to Mariam Fagih Imani, along with utensils and a cap in preparation for the installation in Haifa. Photo by Shirley Siegal. Images courtesy of the artists. \textit{See centrefold for this image in colour.}

\(^3\) The translation from Farsi reads:
   We will smile
   We will cry
   We will rejoice
   We will find comfort
   We will talk
   We will befriend
   We will share
   We will be tearful
   We will solve
   We will unite
   We will love
political connections in Iran, helped to facilitate one of the most significant achievements of the project. When it was exhibited in Haifa, Mariam organized for an Iranian journalist to come and talk about Siegal’s project and film a segment translated on London-based Iranian International TV and broadcast to Iranian communities outside of Iran and in Iran. This is one of the extremely rare times when Iran talked about Israeli art or culture. Like The Dinner Party, Siegal’s multifaceted project is more than the sum of its parts. The history of its making and exhibiting becomes part of the project itself. Although it is impossible to explain all the complex histories of the project when exhibiting it, it is important to understand that the plates and the objects are physical embodiments of the idea that, despite its aspiration for hope and peaceful coexistence, it sparked many controversies and heated debates.

**Feminist Art Generations**

The installation of the project revolves around the plates that Siegal, a realist artist, created. Like Chicago’s project, this one uses the ceramic-making medium, traditionally considered as feminine, to combine imagery and craft. However, unlike Chicago’s rendition of personalities as sexual organs, Siegal is cognizant of the connection between fine art and craft. Her use of naturalistic portraits creates a connection between fine art, craft, and activism.⁴

This objectification of the faces and women in general and emphasis on femininity is an essentialist idea that shows an evident influence of cultural feminism.⁵ According to feminist historians Rupp and Taylor, cultural feminism has concentrated since the 1970s on three main issues: essentialism, separatism from men, and emphasis on exclusive female (sis-gendered)-only culture. Cultural feminism, as the title suggests, defines women-only (lesbian and heterosexual) cultural production aside from

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political struggles. Gerhard argues that, “As a term, its meaning rested on its opposition to politics: for activists, the distinction worked off the assumption that politics targeted social change, whereas culture engaged individuals and thus represented a feel-good form of collective self-help.”

Because of that dichotomy between activism and culture, Judy Chicago never identified with cultural feminism.

*Dinner with Friends* uses some of the characteristics of cultural feminism, such as an emphasis on women to the exclusion of men, but at the same time it is an activist work that attempts to appeal to unity and peace. Thus this project denies the stringent classification of cultural feminism. A more suitable characteristic for the project would be a term introduced by Amelia Jones to contemplate feminist art of the last fifteen years. Jones aims to find an appropriate way of discussing the new wave of feminist art that is indebted to early feminist works of the 1970s. She argues that feminist art has returned to its original preoccupation with the representation of the body, both masculine and feminine; however, contemporary feminist art is a lot more intersectional. For example, *Dinner with Friends* demonstrates a negotiation between different cultures and represents various racial differences. Jones uses the term Parafeminism to explain the resurgence of feminist contemporary art, which to my mind is suitable for discussion of Siegal’s project as well. The prefix “para” is used to emphasize the parallel practice of contemporary feminist art, which Jones considers more suitable than the “post” since it allows for both adaptations of the variety of practices and incorporation of the traditional feminist art of the 1970s.

Laura Costagnini further notes that “it characterises an intersectional form of feminist art practice that refutes coalitional identity politics and adopts a ‘rethinking’ and expansion of second-wave feminist methodologies.” Parafeminism, according to Jones, “understands ‘gender’ as a question rather than an answer – and a question that percolates through other

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subjective and social identifications – sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on which can never be fixed but always make meaning concerning each other.”

Feminist art is a process that contributes to feminism as a social and cultural movement, and therefore the prefix “post-” represents that feminism is something that has already happened. Most post-art movements, such as postimpressionism, followed the actual movement that had already finished. Parafeminism signifies the continuation and expansion of feminist strategies.

Thus, this approach celebrates the ability to interpret and augment one’s position and question one’s outlook vis-à-vis feminism. Still focused on the body or, in the case of Siegal’s project on the face, this approach rejects essentialism and celebrates relativity and change. Siegal’s project changed based on the venue and context. Exhibiting the project in different countries and places, and working with different artists, Dinner with Friends is in a constant process of mutation and change. The project has changed since it was exhibited for the first time in 2016, having evolved and grown in size, but it has not changed its aspiration. It remains an attempt at artistic collaboration, continuously frustrated because of the political circumstances surrounding it. In a way, the project becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. While it offers an ideal of peace and collaboration between countries, in every iteration, it demonstrates how far the Middle Eastern nations remain from even accepting friendships between artists. The history of frustrated collaborations emphasizes the artist’s position as a peacemaker. The use of imagery and objects that are stereotypically and traditionally feminine asks the viewer to consider not only politics but also the position of women in the Middle Eastern politics. Parafeminism shares the prefix “para” with the word parody. Therefore Jones and feminist writers that use the term often associate parody or humour with recent parafeminist art. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that “para” has two meanings: one is “counter” or “against,” and the other is “beside.”

Thus, parafeminism could be seen as both art opposing art that underscores the body, and also art that stands beside or

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incorporates the ideas of the body as articulated in the 1970s. Furthermore, Hutcheon defines parody as:

Repetition with a difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony. However, this irony can be playful instead of belittling: it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” (to use E. M. Forster’s famous term) between complicity and distance.\textsuperscript{11}

Parody in parafeminism could be understood as a critical distance between the feminist tradition and its return in the second decades of the twenty-first century. Siegal’s project does not have irony or parody, or humour. It approaches its subject, women, and the creation of dialogue entirely seriously: empathetic to women and their different lives and plights, it refuses to be sarcastic or humorous. The project suggests that while hope is essential, the time to be sarcastic has not yet come. Given these nations’ constant conflict, there is no possibility of sarcasm when negotiating peace or coexistence. Neither is it possible to gain critical distance when thinking of the situation of feminism as a social and political struggle in Israel or Iran.\textsuperscript{12} Arguably, the contemporary feminist art that uses humour in the West can afford to do so precisely because the feminists of the 1970s and 1980s and prior generations were completely serious. Their fight allowed us to fight with a smile, reflect on and parody the past and present. Dinner with Friends does not have such a critical distance yet. At the same time, it re-evaluates and rethinks Judy Chicago’s piece and other works that could fall under the definition of cultural feminism. Siegal rejects the idea of sexuality and leaves to one side the idea of corporeality, of the presence of the human body. She wants us to see the faces and wonder about the lives

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 32.
and personalities of those depicted. No wonder whenever someone notes that the work is similar to *The Dinner Party*, Siegal answers, “yes, but I decided to depict faces because one cannot talk or dine with vaginas. I tried talking to them, but they did not answer me.”

**Portraits and Faces**

The project features plates with the faces of eighteen different women, an important number in the Hebrew numeric system where it is signified by a letter כ, which is also the letter for the Hebrew word “life” (haim). The letter is also the first letter in the name Eve (Havah) in Hebrew. Siegal notes that Eve is considered “the mother of all the people in Hebrew tradition.”¹³ She started with seven plates, and now she is up to eighteen. Each time the project is exhibited in a different venue, she adds a plate portraying a woman. In essence, these are traditional portraits that include the face and shoulders, a tradition present in Western culture, from Renaissance portraiture to mugshots. These portraits are painted on the medium-sized, unglazed dinner plates that Siegal purchases from an Israeli ceramicist. Since the plates are never glazed (they are covered in gesso, on which Siegal uses oil paints), they remain non-functional. The portraits include women of different races and from many walks of life, such as an Ethiopian woman whom Siegal met in Jerusalem, a Filipino nanny who works for an Israeli family, and an Israeli Arab young woman. Different in age, race, and social background, these women are all portrayed with photographic precision.

Portraiture originated in Ancient Rome and historically projected the ideas of commemoration, memorialization, and often political messages. From its early examples, painted and photographic portraiture has emphasized the tension between realistic representation (truth) and social construction of meaning (manipulation). Thus the identity of the sitter is located in the space that these two opposing aspects create. As Marcia Pointon argues, “The idea that a portrait stands as a material correlative to a particular human subject is a conceit.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Pointon suggests that “portraiture is an

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¹³ Personal Conversation with Shirley Siegal on April 5, 2020.
instrumental art form, a kind of agency; this does not mean that it lacks aesthetic value. Alternatively, that it is not connotative (suggesting thematic connections) as well as denotative (offering information).” Pointon sees a portrait as not only an expression or interpretation of a sitter’s personality rendered by an artist, but also an entity that, once created, has agency in a social context. This is crucial for those images that depict what Pointon calls a “subaltern subject.” Such a subject’s representations become especially important and sensitive where the artist has a social and economic advantage. In the case of Siegal, a white Israeli woman, she possesses more power than some of her subjects. When portraing people of colour and racial differences, it is essential to remember the heritage of physiognomic science, a tradition linked to the antiquity of finding a correlation between facial features and individuals’ emotional and moral characteristics. This belief in a connection between the two was especially prevalent after the Enlightenment and was developed by Johann Kaspar Lavater. A social practice as well as an art form, portraiture brings together patrons, artists, and viewers in ways that complicate subject–object relations. The genre of portrait painting conveys authenticity and yet, at the same time, challenges viewers’ belief that it does so. It makes us question the subject–object relationship, which is especially important when gender and race are represented.

*Dinner with Friends* draws on the aspect of relatability to attract audiences and disseminate the message of a peaceful conversation. The naturalistic portraits that constitute the exhibition’s core create the audience’s main draw. The faces of women on the plates are varied, but the style of representation showing some smiling, seeming shy, looking directly at the viewer, anchor the exhibition and establish the point of entry. These images are both permanent because they draw on the long-lasting tradition of the portrait and at the same time vulnerable because they are painted on ceramic plates. When the plates are exhibited, Siegal and other artists allow people to come close to the installation, but touching is not allowed. The proximity

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15 Ibid., p. 21.
and temporary convey the real and perceived fragility of the objects. The temporality of the exhibition and the objects themselves parallel the ever-changing nature of the relationship between Israel and Iran or other Arab cultures. The relationships between Siegal and the artists involved in the project are as fragile as the objects and the installation. This is not because the artists do not strive for more permanence. The vulnerability of the portraits on plates exemplifies the uncertainty of political events and the precariousness of the artists’ practice.

Unlike Chicago’s work, *Dinner with Friends* is about women’s facial features and expressions; it is a meditation on femininity as a subject and object of the gaze. Siegal opens the field of the traditional male gaze to invite herself as a portrait artist of rare skill to portray faces. Concentrating on the faces ensures that our attention does not drift to clothing or other details; the face on the plate completely subsumes the viewer. While Siegal brings objectification to a minimum, she does not take it away, asking us to experience the aesthetic pleasure of the portraiture. Such representation of women begs a discussion of the gaze and to what extent *Dinner with Friends* makes itself vulnerable to the accusations of catering to the male gaze. Siegal recalls that, in some contexts, she had been asked: “Which of the women you have painted is the most beautiful in your opinion?” Such questions allow the opening conversation about the male gaze that is so entrenched in the viewer.

As Claire Raymond reminds us, it is essential to understand that the notion of the gaze is rooted in Western psychology and philosophy of the mid to late twentieth century. Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is based on popular Hollywood films from the middle of the century or earlier. To develop this theory, Mulvey had to investigate French philosophers such as

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Sartre,20 Lacan,21 and Metz.22 The issue of the male gaze had been further developed, and questions were asked about how to decolonize the male gaze and render it irrelevant, and finally how to equalize it.23 John Berger24 and his theoretical followers think about gaze as a field rather than an individual power exchange.25 Dinner with Friends offers an opportunity for gazing, but I think it opens the idea of the gaze as a field of complex power relationships between genders, races, and ethnicities. Siegal opens the conversation about depicting women. When the project is installed, the audience often does not know who the women are.

The viewer cannot recognize whether the images are of an Israeli or Iranian since many people have facial features that could be identified as both. Claire Raymond also reminds us that the gaze is a very Western construct, and that one has to be very careful in applying it to culture-specific concepts.26 Thus the idea of the gaze in Dinner with Friends is complicated by several issues. The issue of looking at or staring at in Middle Eastern cultures does not have the same set of associations as it does in Western culture. A specific set of questions has to be asked when portraying the likeness of a Middle Eastern person, such as her religion, interest, and openness to public exhibitions. While some of the subjects were approached and asked all these questions, others were not made aware to what extent their likeness would be widely exhibited. The work generally empowers women by representing Middle Eastern women as capable of conducting a peaceful conversation when men fail. Siegal’s and her collaborator’s work

26 Raymond, 16 Ways of Looking at a Photograph.
failed to give agency to the people she imagined. This issue underlines a perpetual discussion of artist agency and people’s privacy. In this, the work’s overall message of optimism and collaboration is challenged by the omission of the private. This lack of the names of some of these women and also lack of awareness of the project’s evolving history are lamentable in the cases where women of different races are represented. The faces that look from these plates suggest that these women, depending on the context, can be imagined as either guests at this table or subjects of commemoration, as a traditional association of a portrait on a plate is often one of commemoration. Whether we know the name or not, the works commemorate the presence and existence of these women. The nature of portraiture is such that once the subject has been portrayed, the portrait becomes the subject itself and acquires its own life and destiny. The women that are represented become, in the words of American artist Amy Sherald, “archetypes.”27 No longer are these women individuals. They transgress who or what they are and become co-opted and subsumed into the political process of art creation.

Conclusion

*Dinner with Friends* is a project conceived as a partnership and has become a series of complicated collaborations across physical and cultural borders. With rare clarity, it shows the potential of artistic collaboration to create conversations. At the same time, it demonstrates that almost unsurmountable difficulties are still present on both sides of the political divide. Art often tends to simulate politics when it comes to political conflicts. For instance, many artistic projects and publications about the Middle East do not include Israel and vice versa. Only a tiny handful of artistic projects feature the opposing side’s viewpoint. *Dinner with Friends*, as an attempt at collaboration between the two women artists, represents a unique case study.

This paper argued that while *Dinner with Friends* fits with Jones’ notion of parafeminism, it does not include the aspect of parody or humour that many contemporary feminist artworks do. The idea of hope at the project’s centre is a rare contribution to multinational collaborations. In the introduction, I

discussed the idea of critical hope as one of the main ingredients of contemporary art in the twenty-first century. *Dinner with Friends* demonstrates that optimism and perseverance are essential aspects of artistic production. As the narrative of the project demonstrates, while *Dinner with Friends* was conceived as optimistic, it did not consider the need for political struggle and engagements. The political changes, such as Trump’s travel ban and BDS’s involvement in the project, forced the artists and the work to acquire a more critical and engaging voice. Two issues could be learned from this project. One is that it is impossible to remain politically neutral or uncritical when creating activist art. The second is that in such critically engaged works, the use of parody or any type of humour may not be possible. *Dinner with Friends* augments or limits the relevance of parafeminism to contemporary feminist art produced outside of Western discourses of feminism.

**References**


