

Rachel Wolff, "The Annotated Artwork: 'The Donner Party,'" *New York*, May 28, 2007, pp. 84



(Photo: Courtesy of Magasin-Centre National D'Art Contemporain, Grenoble/P.S. 1)

What do maimed appliances, mutilated Barbies, Mormons, cannibals, feminists, and Mr. Magoo have in common? Jim Shaw's 2003 installation *The Donner Party*, on view at P.S.1 starting May 24, takes its name from the infamous group of flesh-eating pioneers, its form from Judy Chicago's much-analyzed work *The Dinner Party*, and its philosophy from "O-ism"—Shaw's made-up feminist-meets-Mormon religion of which we'd imagine *Big Love*'s Margene (wife No. 3) at the helm. Is this history rewritten? Perverse arts and crafts? Some sort of attack on Chicago? We asked Shaw to explain.

1. **The Concept** "It's not really a satire," says Shaw. "The idea came from switching the *i* in *The Dinner Party* to *o*. O-ism is the feminist version of Mormonism. Its symbolic animals would be orangutans and octopi. I'm pretending that the Donner party would have converted to O-ism and headed west to find the promised land: Omaha. It starts with an *O* and it's halfway west. Besides, Omaha has really good thrift stores," the source of many of the work's materials. "I'm also working on film elements like an O-ist exercise tape."
2. **2. The Wagons** "We designed them without a computer. We ordered a bunch of wheels from an Amish wheelwright over the Internet—of course, they have to have a non-Amish person to do the Internet selling. The circling, which forms the table itself, is something you'd do when you're surrounded by Native Americans. It's meant to be a stereotype of the Old West, but also forms a perfect self-enclosed unit."
3. **3. The Place Settings** To create them, the artist enlisted nineteen students and colleagues. Each chose a name connected to O-ism (Yoko Ono, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Mormonism founder Joseph Smith) and a few of Shaw's thrift-store finds and household appliances. "[The result] was sort of childlike, and not as varied as I had hoped," he says.

“It’s supposed to be about a situation that got out of control, like the Donner party, and that’s an aspect that got out of my control.” As for the collective effort, “*The Dinner Party* was criticized for Chicago’s alleged exploitation of her collaborators. Up until this project, I had a hard time collaborating, so it was in part about that, but also the notion of artistic cannibalism.”

4. **4. The Vacuum Cleaner** At the center of the circle is a vacuum, which Shaw says “sucks into itself. I was thinking about the way in which art inevitably stamps what comes after it. It’s on the ruins of a campfire, surrounded by wrapped pieces of meat representing the different artists who are being cannibalized, like Jackson Pollock and Judy Chicago. [Members of] the Donner party didn’t want to eat their own relatives, so they wrapped the meat up and labeled it.”
5. **5. The Canvas Backdrop** “It’s set against the landscape of the Sierra Nevada. It gives the work a presentation similar to the Mormon visitor center in Salt Lake City. The figures are supposed to be confusing: feminist artist Lynda Benglis; actress Tina Louise as the anti-O, the whore of Babylon; Mr. Magoo as Bacchus; Loki; L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. They were painted by many different people who had many different styles, so there was supposed to be an element of chaos. It wasn’t as chaotic as I wanted it to be.”