

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS AND THEORIES OF ART

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**A POSSIBLE TRIANGLE OF RELATIONAL
NETWORKS IN ARGENTINIAN, BRAZILIAN
AND MEXICAN FEMINIST ART DURING THE
1970s AND 1980s (*)**



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To speak of feminisms in Latin America is a complex matter. Historical, social and ethnic diversity and geographical particularities have caused feminisms to develop their own particular nuances and has made them hard to categorize narrowly¹. After a brief general introduction to some regional singularities, this article will seek to point out how feminist art in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico raises certain questions based on the concept of situated knowledge. This critical epistemological approach was developed by Donna Haraway in her 1991 book, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*². The idea of constituting knowledge from a policy of displacing hegemonic understandings will be central to this article.

This theoretical application is not entirely unfamiliar to Latin America. In accord with Argentine feminist philosopher María Luisa Femenías, it is important to note that: “In Spanish, to ‘translate’ is to ‘transfer’ and ‘convert’. This transfer is not reduced to a mere linguistic event. It interprets, enriches and polishes. In sum, it generates a policy of appropriation as an unavoidable mechanism of thinking”³. For this reason, I invite reflections from and on other analyses of feminist art in these Latin American countries through encounters and exchanges that may be of interest.

A context of diversity

The current state of poverty and marginalization among indigenous and Afro-Latin peoples in Latin America stems from historical sociocultural and economic factors. Ethnic-racial discrimination plays a central role as a source of exclusion, poverty and marginalization in these populations, and gender cuts across these issues transversally. Illiteracy affects many indigenous and Afro-Latin women, and though Latin American women gained the right to vote during the first half of the twentieth century, only those who could read were able to exercise this right. According to the *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* [Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean] (CEPAL), indigenous people accounted for over half the population during the first half of the twentieth century in countries such as Bolivia, Perú, and Guatemala⁴. Therefore, ethnic and class status governed the inclusion of women in the public sphere, since it was mostly white bourgeois women who launched the struggle for citizenship rights in the early twentieth century and continued demanding rights over their bodies from the 1970s on. These are not minor issues when seeking to understand feminist art on this continent.

As we shall see, a large portion of the artists who approached or joined feminist movements in the 1970s were white women, or occasionally mixed-ethnicity *mestizo* women belonging to the middle and/or the elite classes, in some countries such as Argentina. This allowed them to establish contact with feminist art centers (mainly in the US, France, and Italy), read bibliographies in other languages, and transfer understanding to their own contexts, where they developed perspectives around local issues. During the 1980s, contextual dynamics in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina gradually led to greater diversity and ethnic and class pluralism among women’s movements.

From the perspective of political-artistic or artistic-political praxis, we recall Mexican creator Mónica Mayer’s comment in reference to her student phase at the Feminist Studio Workshop in the Woman’s Building of Los Angeles, in 1978: “If there is one thing I concluded at that time, it is that, if one hopes to do revolutionary art in political terms, it must first be so in artistic terms”⁵. In this spirit, feminist artists at that time established experimental languages, often by placing their bodies in the center of the stage.

Though Argentina and Mexico can boast artists who emerged from these women’s movements, they did not appear as clearly in Brazil. This underscores the importance of referring to artistic works that expressed a critical position regarding the diverse situations that women were experiencing at that time, even though the artistic creators did not necessarily participate in women’s movements or define themselves

¹ Maxime Molyneux: *Movimientos de mujeres en América Latina. Estudio teórico comparado*, Valencia, Cátedra, 2003 and Maxime Molyneux: “Género y ciudadanía en América Latina: cuestiones históricas y contemporáneas”, *Debate feminista*, year 12, vol. 23, April 2001, p.18

² Donna Haraway: *Ciencia, cyborgs y mujeres. La reinención de la naturaleza*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1995.

³ María Luisa Femenías; Paula Soza Rossi (ed.): *Saberes situados/Teorías transhumantes*, La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2011, p. 17

⁴ See: Álvaro Bello, Marta Rangel, *Etnicidad, “raza” y equidad en América Latina y el Caribe*, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL, 2000

⁵ Karen Cordero Reiman; Inés Sáenz (ed.): *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, Universidad Iberoamericana, México D.F., 2007, p. 404.



as feminists. Beyond the self-categorization of the artists, their works offered a critique of domesticity and the oppression imposed by the ideal of female beauty that defined a labelling system for what being a woman was and was not. All this clearly resonated with Brazilian feminist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Thus, we see the need to understand these artistic works by inscribing them within their places of origin. Hybrid theoretical frameworks and new questions are essential for illuminating the grey areas that still envelop the feminist artists of this continent.

Argentina

In 1969, in the Café Tortoni, the *Unión Feminista Argentina* [Argentine Feminist Union] (UFA) was organized with the collaboration of filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg, photographer Alicia D'Amico, writer Leonor Calvera, theatre producer Marta Miguelez, poet and writer Hilda Rais, and others. In 1971, the *Movimiento de Liberación Femenina* [Female Liberation Movement] (MLF) was launched to empower the debate on abortion.

Feminists critically addressed the housewife model by highlighting the exhausting, unremunerated, and undervalued nature of domestic work. A 1970 UFA flier⁶ for Mother's Day⁷ depicted a woman cooking frenetically while answering the phone with her foot and attending three children who were breaking things in front of the freshly washed clothes she had just hung up. On a table next to her, the TV admonished her to show herself as beautiful by using "Sexy" brand lotion. Below the drawing was the caption: "Mother: slave or queen, but never a person"⁸.

María Luisa Bemberg became an extremely prominent figure in this sphere. UFA members had asked her to use her camera to denounce sexist events, and she was one of the first creators to connect feminist demands with filmmaking. From 1972 to 1978, Bemberg designed and produced *El mundo de la mujer* [*The World of Women*] and *Juguetes* [*Toys*], two short films⁹ based on UFA demands for "[...] theoretical clarification of how the apparatus for the oppression of women perpetuates itself and how ideas, sentiments, or behaviors reinforce this oppression [...]", and the "[...] rewriting of textbooks and the entire educational system to eliminate discrimination that imposes sexist roles from kindergarten [...]"¹⁰.

In 1972, María Luisa Bemberg produced her first cinematographic document, *El mundo de la mujer*¹¹ [*The World of Women*] as a result of the *Femimundo '72 Exposición Internacional de la mujer y su mundo*, which took place at the La Rural exhibition site in Buenos Aires. It was intended as a testimony of UFA activism and a tool to raise awareness about the group. Influenced by Kate Millet's book *Sexual Politics* (1970)¹², which argued that economic dominion over women was one of the most effective patriarchal instruments, Bemberg's camera focused on consumption as the trap that kept females perpetually dependent on males. The director fixed her lens on wallets, paying and paying, and on the cooptive power of publicity and its images. Bemberg then developed a 'counter-discourse' using the same tools: words

⁶ This flier was paid for by María Luisa Bemberg. She had asked an advertising agent to design it, and the brochure was part of the UFA campaign to denounce the exploitation of women. See Alejandra Vassallo: "Las mujeres dicen basta": movilización, política y orígenes del feminismo argentino en los '70" in A. Andújar, D. D'Antonio, K. Gramático, F. Gil Lozano, Ma. L. Rosa: *Historia, género y política en los '70*, Buenos Aires, Luxemburg, 2009, p. 69.

⁷ In Argentina, Mother's Day has been celebrated since the early twentieth century. This celebration has experienced much diversity due to growing immigration, but towards the 1940s the Church linked the figure of the mother with that of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the first Mother's Day was linked to a religious view and only in the late twentieth century did 11 October, "Day of the Catholic mother", begin to shed its differences with respect to other Mother's Days. With the commercialization of this day and popular rejection of the idea of separating Catholic mothers from all the others, the third Sunday in October was eventually established as Universal Mother's Day.

⁸ Brochure of the *Unión Feminista Argentina*, 1970.

⁹ For an exhaustive examination of the short films of María Luisa Bemberg, see: María Laura Rosa: *Legados de libertad. El arte feminista en la efervescencia democrática*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, pp. 21-45.

¹⁰ "Inquietud de entidades locales por la urgente emancipación femenina" in *La Opinión*, Sunday 26 August 1973, p.6

¹¹ *El mundo de la Mujer*. Directed by María Luisa Bemberg. Head of Production: María Rosa Sichel. Sound: Nerio Barberis. Camera: Osvaldo Fiorino. Editor: Miguel Pérez. Year: 1972. Length: 15'45". It can be found at: <http://www.marialuisabemberg.com>

¹² Kate Millet, *Política sexual*, México, Aguilar, 1975



and images. An accusatory discourse was designed by combining images with words: sentence fragments read by voices in off or words from selected songs.

The theoretical work of European feminist Carla Lonzi impacted the UFA. In *Let's Spit on Hegel*, she expressed: "The Hegelian relationship between slave owner and slave is internal to the masculine world and to what dialectics refers to in terms deduced exactly from the premises of taking over all power. But the female-male discord is not a dilemma: no solution is foreseen since patriarchal culture has not considered it a human problem but rather a natural datum"¹³. Bemberg subverted the dialectic, revealing a background relationship of slavery with the market economy as the accomplice. Her camera focused on fashion-makers and models on the catwalk to denounce the slave-owner dichotomy pointed out by Lonzi: women had to mold themselves to patriarchal beauty requirements that were ultimately defined by capitalism. Physical demands combined with psychological ones to include the cult to the good wife and mother, which perpetuated a form of slavery lived out as something natural rather than barbaric¹⁴.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Argentina experienced a renewal and expansion of mass media. More than mere channels for communication and the transmission of information, it encouraged a consumption that objectified female bodies, as women became targets for TV advertising and other new publications. In this complex consumer framework, new female voices appeared that rejected market objectification and the sexist model. Catalina Trebisacce, in her research on second-wave feminism in Buenos Aires, pointed out that "local feminists in the first half of the 1970s dissociated from passive stereotypes of women, homemakers, and the 'cute little thing' ideal. Finally, they also moved away from the imperative of maternity as foundational to the identity of every woman"¹⁵. In a very significant way, the expansion of mass media and consumption also provoked a contemporary feminist reaction in Brazil, as we shall see.

It is commonly assumed, even today, that in Argentina feminists did not feel integrated into left-wing groups, and that this distance led them to form their own associations — an interpretation that has come under greater scrutiny in recent years¹⁶. Though relations were ambiguous, left-wing movements established some links with feminists, who were addressing issues linked to the system of inequality that arose from gender.

This was the case with the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores [Revolutionary Worker's Party] (PRT), the Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores [Socialist Worker's Party] (PST) and the Frente de Izquierda Popular [Popular Left Front] (FIP). The PRT women established the group *Muchacha* and published regularly under that name. The PST created the *Comisión de Lucha de la Mujer* [Women's Fight Commission]. Several members frequently participated in UFA and MLF meetings, and UFA feminists shared their meeting spaces with *Muchacha* members. This reflects more regular exchanges and solidarity between feminists and women in left-wing parties than has previously been recognized. The latter considered the feminist analysis of female oppression to be a specific struggle that need not necessarily coincide with other struggles. This led to a dual membership for some women, while others prioritized membership in left-wing parties and perceived feminists as more bourgeois due to their single focus¹⁷.

However, all the feminist momentum that was gained in first half of the 1970s was cut short by the military coup of 24 March 1976. When democracy was restored in 1983, the underground work of the late 1970s emerged powerfully. Demands gained new impetus with the

¹³ Carla Lonzi. *Escupamos sobre Hegel y otros escritos sobre liberación femenina*, Buenos Aires, La Pléyade, 1978, p. 26.

¹⁴ María Laura Rosa: "El despertar de la conciencia. Impacto de las teorías feministas sobre las artistas de Buenos Aires durante las décadas del '70 y '80" in *Artelogie. Recherches sur les arts, le patrimoine et la littérature de l'Amérique Latine*.; Art et genre: femmes créatrices en Amérique Latine, num. V, 2013.

¹⁵ Catalina Trebisacce: *Memorias del feminismo de la ciudad de Buenos Aires en la primera mitad de la década del setenta*, Doctoral Dissertation for the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, p. 253. [Unpublished]

¹⁶ Catalina Trebisacce: "Encuentros y desencuentros entre la militancia de izquierda y el feminismo en la Argentina" in *Revista Estudios Feministas*, vol. 21, num. 2, May-August, 2013, pp. 439-462

¹⁷ The same situation arose in Brazil, as indicated by historian Joana María Pedro, to whom I will refer later on. For Argentina, see: Catalina Trebisacce: *Memorias del feminismo de la ciudad de Buenos Aires en la primera mitad de la década del setenta*, op. cit., p. 346.



return of exiled women, among other factors. Artists regained their active role in the media and the artistic elements of society began to participate in raising awareness of gender problems.

In 1983 — some months prior to the restoration of democracy with president Raul Alfonsín — a plural space was created for anyone interested in the advancement of women, even if not of feminist leaning: *Lugar de Mujer*, [The Woman's Place]. It hosted activities, workshops, artistic exhibits, film viewings, and debates that impacted artistic creation. The founders included prominent feminists such as Marta Miguelez, Hilda Rais, María Luisa Lerer, María Luisa Bemberg, Sara Torres, Graciela Sikos, Lidia Marticorena, Ana Amado, Alicia D'Amico, and others. This context facilitated an interactive dynamic between the local artistic sphere and feminist activism. Feminist artists such as Teresa Volco, Ilse Fusková, and Josefina Quesada raised issues and created debates that opened up a golden age for Argentine feminist art¹⁸.

In November 1983, feminist artist and activist Ilse Fusková presented the photograph exhibition entitled *El Zapallo* [The Pumpkin], which she had presented one year earlier at Talleres Brígida Rubio. It consisted of ten photographs that referred directly to female physical and mental fertility. The invitation to the exhibition included a short poem by Fusková¹⁹. This series reflected on the corporal dimension of the female experience by focusing poetically on two nudes: a pumpkin, with its internal flesh exposed, and a female model. The bodies of the vegetable and of the woman were intertwined in exuberant concavity and roundness. The photographer noted that the model transmitted a strong personality, “[...] she would move instinctively and I would take pictures”²⁰. The interest in creating an iconography that reflected women looking at their own physical nudity, conforming a poetic *other* of the female body, led Fusková to create further works in which nature and female anatomy complemented each other. Through recourse to light, the pumpkin became part of the woman's body: one more roundness, one more organ, as skin itself.

At *Lugar de Mujer*, feminist photographer and activist Alicia D'Amico (Buenos Aires, 1933-2001) engaged in a lengthy study using photographic portraits, in order to disarticulate the visual framework that defined women within social, domestic and beauty mandates, among others. By presenting women with their own images, she sought to question heterodesignation, understood as the defining of an identity imposed upon the subject from the outside. She pushed against limits and explored other methodologies to go deeper in this genre, using it as a feminist tool for women to reflect on their identity.

Two psychologists, Graciela Sikos and Liliana Mizrahi, contributed to D'Amico's approach by helping to develop reflexive and creative games that de-stabilized gender mandates. One of the main objectives was for women to construct their own image and verbalize what they felt upon looking at themselves. In the workshops, female authority was created and sentiments, desires, and reactions were given legitimacy. The work directly involved subjectivity in order to achieve what D'Amico called a *true woman*: a woman whose image reflected her desires, personal choices, and who she felt she was.

Since the 1970s, feminist artists have linked their creations to the most experimental languages in contemporary art, while remaining constant in their feminist positions. They questioned the steadfast and fixed nature of identity and established that what is personal is also political, making the body the center of the scene and the locus from which to create. Thus, performance occupied a privileged place and developed powerfully in Argentina in the 1980s. Building on the work at *Lugar de Mujer*, the Alicia D'Amico-Liliana Mizrahi work group offered a series of photo performances in which they investigated identities, masks, and questions of violence. Through an experimental language, bodies and especially faces became malleable.

From 1986 to 1988, Ilse Fusková, along with Josefina Quesada and Adriana Carrasco, were members of the *Grupo Feminista de Denuncia* [Feminist Protest Group]. On Saturday evenings, they would go down to 800 Lavalle Street, to the pedestrian crossing for the central movie

¹⁸ For an outline of that period, see: María Laura Rosa: *Legados de libertad. El arte feminista en la efervescencia democrática*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2014.

¹⁹ Some of the photographs of the *El zapallo* series can be seen at: “Repensando identidades e imágenes corporales. La fotografía de Ilse Fusková tras el retorno de la democracia en Argentina” in *Re-d. Arte, cultura visual y género*, Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Autónoma de México, Num. 2, 2012. <http://www.pueg.unam.mx/revista2/?p=1290> [last accessed on January 2016]

²⁰ An interview with Ilse Fusková, Buenos Aires, 7 August 2008.



theatres in Buenos Aires. Fuscová recalled: “We would stand with our hands held high, making the feminist sign and holding signs that said things like ‘Rape is torture’, ‘Women are the only owners of their own fertility’ [...] These and other irritating slogans surprised the people around us and led them to discuss these matters. Each Saturday evening about a thousand people would see us. It involved minimal cost and raised interesting questions, which was our objective”²¹.

In 1988, this same group began to publish *Cuadernos de Existencia Lesbiana* [*Notebooks on Lesbian Existence*]. For eight years, until 1996, this publication attended the need to make that collective visible and discuss their problems. Argentinian lesbians began to write their own history, though many of them continued to participate in feminist struggles and did not demand a separate focus. In redefining what had been seen, and how it had been seen, in the search to examine the lesbian body and explore lesbian desire, along the frontier between what is artistically allowed and rejected, one encounters Ilse Fusková’s photographic series *S/T* (1988). It was created for showing in the late 1988 exhibition *Mitominas II. Los mitos de la sangre* [*Mythmines II. The Myths of Blood*], in the *Centro Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, which is now the *Centro Cultural Recoleta*. This work consisted of five photographs showing a pair of women painting their bodies with menstrual blood. The models posed in scenes that were somewhere between ritual and festive, seeking to break with images built for and from male desire regarding the sexual practices of lesbians. Fusková sought to show menstrual blood as an energetic fluid, full of life, and in that sense opposed historic perceptions of it as unclean and something that should be hidden. The photos also highlighted the ritual sense of female menstruation. This work was catalyzed by debate and discussion around the book *Sinceridad sexual. Así nació el informe Hite*, by the US sociologist and sexologist Shere Hite. The *Hite Report* had been read and discussed by Fusková and others involved in *Cuadernos de Existencia Lesbiana* and contributed to their reflections on constructing sexuality.

Although there were more Argentine feminist artists than are mentioned here, these examples cover themes that offer the possibility of dialogue with Brazilian and Mexican artists. Beyond historical differences that determined the particular direction of feminist development in each of these countries, we can also highlight notable coincidences and common problems.

Brazil

The second moment of feminism in Brazil displays traits particular to having developed in the midst of a long military dictatorship (1964-84), which restructured the nation’s political and economic relations for twenty years. The regime imposed greater restrictions from 1968 on as citizens were stripped of their civil and political rights by Institutional Act No. 5, which legitimized censorship along with severe “national security” measures²². In this context, feminist groups — which had been developing since the second half of the 1960s, though until recently International Women’s Year (1975) had been considered the foundational date — aligned themselves with left-wing groups in the fight against authoritarianism.

Connections existed among feminists, left-wing groups, and progressive elements in the Church, particularly those involving liberation theology, which was one of the most radical forces opposing the military regime. The struggle for freedom of expression was linked to demands for the rights of women and impacted the art of Wanda Pimentel, Anna Bella Geiger, Anna Maria Maiolino, Regina Vater, and others who presented women’s demands in their work without actually joining feminist groups.

There are several hypotheses regarding the singularities of the relationship between art and feminism in Brazil, as research so far has not found artists directly emerging from or linked to the feminist groups. Since the search for militant feminist artists, or artists within women’s movements in Brazil has yielded little fruit — though this by no means implies their absence — other alternatives must be considered. One alternative hypothesis suggests that Brazil’s political circumstances caused feminist groups to be eclipsed by left-wing militancy, in which many feminists participated. Moreover, around 1979 the feminist groups diversified with the return of women who

²¹ Interview with Ilse Fuscová, Buenos Aires, 17 November 2004.

²² Along with AI-5 (13 December 1968) was a new Constitution (1967), a new Law on the Press (Num. 5.250 of 9 February 1967) and the National Security Law (Num. 898 of 29 September 1969)



had been exiled. According to historian Joana María Pedro: “Fighting for the ‘liberation of women’ within the left-wing during a full military dictatorship in Brazil did not allow feminists to develop a project similar to that of Europe or the US, which provided the texts, ideas and proposals”²³.

Another hypothesis relates to the impact and reception of foreign feminist texts on Brazilian feminists. In Argentina, an early translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex*²⁴ gave new momentum to feminism in the 1960s, and the UFA feminists translated several texts by Kate Millet, Carla Lonzi and Shulamith Firestone, which turned out to be decisive for raising awareness among Argentinian groups. This does not appear to have been the case in Brazil, at least in the main urban centers of that time — São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte — as Portuguese translations of feminist texts came later. *The Second Sex* was translated a decade after its initial publication, as was *The Mystique of Femininity* by Betty Friedan, which was translated around 1971. Brazilian feminists were not especially attracted to Beauvoir, though she was more fully recognized when she visited Brazil in the 1960s at the time of the publication of her novel *The Mandarins*. Since *The Second Sex* was being read later there than in other places, some Brazilian critiques addressed temporal and existential differences. Joana Vieira Borges pointed out that this work seemed overly psychoanalytical for Brazilian feminists and offered few benefits from the outset. A re-reading of this text in the 1980s provided a more positive interpretation. Vieira Borges indicated that “the repercussions of *The Second Sex* in Brazil were more along the lines of the Argentine response than the French one; the impact gradually intensified over time in tandem with the intellectual and political maturity of the readers in relation to feminist movements”²⁵. The works of Friedan were read by Heloneida Studart and Rose Marie Muraro, whom I will discuss, and received somewhat more amicably.

The hypothesis of the spread of feminism through popular mass publications can be most easily linked to the artistic field. The strength of feminist demands arose from the participation of women in left-wing groups, while the modernization and development of mass media in the 1960s in Brazil and Argentina fostered a publishing market that generated recognition of writers and journalists offering various ways of re-appropriating feminism. Several publications reflected links between Marxism and feminism, mainly through the journalist Heloneida Studart and the chief editor and director of *Editorial Vozes*, Rose Marie Muraro. Journalist Carmen da Silva explored the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism in her column “A arte de ser mulher” [“The Art of Being a Woman”], which she wrote for twenty-two consecutive years in the popular magazine *Claudia* (1963-1985)²⁶. Researcher Rita Fonteles Duarte pointed out that: “In the 1960s, Brazil experienced a transformation in publications directed at middle-class women. No magazine incorporated that spirit as well as *Claudia* of the Abril group, with more dynamic and colorful graphic layout, along with modern content.”²⁷

These three women were key in raising popular awareness of feminist struggles such as maternity, divorce, and domesticity. The enormous popularity of Carmen da Silva has led some Brazilian researchers to refer to her possible influence on contemporary artists, as several sympathized with the left but were not directly involved in party politics and even less so in any form of armed struggle. Also, as Talita Trizoli has said: “The fluid, colloquial, and intimate language of Carmen created a sense of identification and sympathy towards her arguments and themes among middle and upper-class readers. Though it did not change the daily life of these women, at least her column raised concerns that led to reflection on social imperatives and conditions of existence, which extended also to artistic themes of that period”²⁸.

²³ Joana Maria Pedro, “Narrativas fundadoras do feminismo: poderes e conflitos (1970-1978)” in *Revista Brasileira de História*, São Paulo, vol. 26., num. 52, p. 269

²⁴ Simone de Beauvoir’s text arrived in Argentina in 1954, was translated by Pablo Palant and published by the editorial group *Psique*. See: Marcela Nari, “No se hace feminista, se llega a serlo. Lecturas y recuerdos de Simone de Beauvoir en la Argentina, 1950 y 1990” in Paula Halperin, and Omar Acha: *Cuerpos, género e identidades. Estudios de historias de género en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones del siglo, 2013.

²⁵ Joana Vieira Borges: “Leituras feministas no Brasil e na Argentina: circulações e apropriações” in: *Fazendo Gênero 8. Corpo, Violência e Poder*, Florianópolis, 2008, p. 6.

²⁶ For an exhaustive study of the topic, see: Ana Rita Fonteles Duarte: *Carmen da Silva: O feminismo na imprensa brasileira*, Fortaleza, Expressão Gráfica e Editora, 2005

²⁷ Ana Rita Fonteles Duarte: “A escrita feminista de Carmen da Silva” in *Caderno Espaço Feminino*, v. 17, num. 1, January/July 2007, p. 197.

²⁸ Talita Trizoli: “Crítica de arte e feminismo no Brasil dos anos 60 e 70” in Monteiro, R. H. and Rocha, C. (eds.). *Anais do V Seminário Nacional de Pesquisa em Arte e Cultura Visual Goiânia-GO*, UFG, Faculdade de Artes Visuais, 2012, p. 416.



Thus, several artists in Brazil raised critical issues of domesticity and stereotypes related to female beauty without joining feminist groups²⁹. Among them, I only have space here to discuss some works of Wanda Pimentel and Regina Vater. We shall also examine three works of the video artists Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia Pontes, who were in New York during the 1970s and became directly involved with the Women's Liberation Movement. Both women produced pieces that reflected their commitment to US feminist causes. Mexican artist Mónica Mayer also had direct contact with feminist art and environments in the United States. This proved significant to the development of feminist art in both South American countries, since these artists would eventually return home and carry out artistic-feminist activities there.

The extensive series *Envolvimento* [Enclosure] that Wanda Pimentel (Rio de Janeiro, 1943) developed between 1968 and 1980 was generally interpreted by Brazilian critics as a protest about human objectification due to the impact of industrial objects on daily life. A careful look at the feminist context already described makes it possible to see how several pieces were linked to questioning domesticity, which feminists were already doing. Daniela Labra has indicated that: "Wanda Pimentel criticized the mechanized, impersonal world at a time in which mass media and spectacular aesthetics, embodied in the TV, were considered to have defeated the silence of intimacy. Moreover, the works in this series offered an explicit reflection on the place of emancipated women in a consumer society that would eventually become post-modern. The title was also a commentary on the experience of human beings in the world and their relationship to things that enclosed them [*envolvem*], things manufactured to facilitate our existence."³⁰ Pimentel represented oppressive spaces linked to enclosure within the immanent world that the artist and many emancipated women experienced. From her column in *Claudia*, Carmen da Silva denounced the fact that Brazilian women could not have any future project beyond family and homemaking. In this sense, the artist presented fragments of female bodies swallowed up by the house and objects surrounding them; without subjectivity or desire, an invisible, lost, inexistent I.

In 1972, through the video *Sin título* [Untitled], Pimentel examined the theme that she had been addressing through painting³¹. This new media reflected the research and experimentation of several Brazilian artists of that time, including Sônia Andrade, Anna Bella Geiger, Anna Maria Maiolino, Regina Vater, Regina Silveira, Carmela Gross, and others. Pimentel incorporated sound as another element of female alienation within the household. Sounds given off by home appliances and objects imposed daily for female beauty — hair dryers, epilators, mixers, irons, etc. — invade private space, decreasing opportunities for conversation and hearing, accentuating the solitude of women in their enclosure. Once more, the protagonist appears fragmented, her body parts functioning mechanically as if she were an automaton. The woman goes from the epilator to the shower, from the dishes to the blender. This video dialogues with critiques of kitchen appliances, domesticity and the beauty stereotypes identified in María Luisa Bemberg's short film *El mundo de la mujer*, which was produced that same year in Argentina.

At that time, artist Regina Vater (Rio de Janeiro, 1943) also challenged the ideal of feminine beauty and domesticity mandates that weighed upon women. As Talita Trizoli suggests: "Carmen da Silva strongly influenced her peers and the artist Vater through their sporadic contact in the Ipanema neighborhood. With her, this artist realized the potential that lay in her experience and in her female subjectivity"³². In the 1960s, Vater developed a collection entitled *serie Tropicalia*, in which she used a pop aesthetic — as did Wanda Pimentel — to represent women as objectified, headless, without subjectivity and often subjected to violence, which often occurred in that country and in their own private lives. In *Útero-TV* [Uterus-TV], the artist depicted a female body gestating the object of consumption that targeted gender at that time: the television. With great irony, she reflected manipulations of identity in contemporary economic and marketing discourse. This work of art was created for the occasion of her participation in the 1967 Youth Biennale of Paris. During those years, this artist criticized the construction and exploitation of the Brazilian feminine ideal: the famous *Garota de Ipanema* [Ipanema Girl], which was so

²⁹ An exhibit intended to reflect on this particularity of Brazilian artists was *Manobras Radicais*, curated by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda and Paulo Herkenhoff. See: *Manobras Radicais: Artistas Brasileiras (1886-2005)* [exh. cat.], São Paulo, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2006.

³⁰ Daniela Labra: *Wanda Pimentel*, Niteroi, Museum of Contemporary Art [Museo de Arte Contemporâneo], 2010, p. 2

³¹ In relation to the origins of video in Brazil, Mello points out: "Video as an artistic practice in Brazil has its origins in 1956 with the media interventions and performances of Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973) on Brazilian television". Christine Mello: *Extremidades do vídeo*, São Paulo, SENAC, 2008, p. 77.

³² Talita Trizoli: "Arte y feminismo en la dictadura militar de Brasil" in *II Seminario internacional. Historia del Arte y feminismo*, Santiago de Chile, DIBAM, 2014, p.166.



fashionable at that time. She, along with the *mulatto girl*³³ were used to place Brazil on the map of attractive tourism destinations. State violence and the rise of mass media, which defined what women should consume, also became part of Vater's thematic repertoire.

Both Pimentel and Vater were influenced by fashion magazines and tourist postcards that used and abused women's bodies. *Tina América* (1975) is a book of photographs by Regina Vater and her friend and colleague, the photographer Maria da Graça Rodrigues Lopes. It contains a series of performances in which Vater parodied various female models popular in the Brazilian scene and media at that time. The photo performances illustrate the diversity of female types and how impossible it was to have a single, fixed, stable, female identity. She also addressed tensions experienced by women fighting for their emancipation in a society that wanted them to be wives and mothers. Vater created a female gender catalogue: the defiant one, the prude one, the sensual one, the hippie, etc. With this she destabilized the traditional female duality that categorized women as either chaste or uninhibited. She placed the photographs randomly in a wedding album, one in the center of each page, so that each time the spectator turned a page, a different parody appeared. In an interview with Brazilian researcher Talita Trizoli in 2009, Vater pointed out that "logically, my work had everything to do with feminism and Maria da Graça was equally engaged with these ideas. However, I was a soft feminist, extremely timid, insisting on believing in a romantic relationship between men and women, and a happy ending. Under my timidity was hidden an Amazon"³⁴.

Finally, scriptwriter/filmmakers Rita Moreira (São Paulo, 1943) and Norma Bahía Pontes (c.1942-?) pioneered independent films in Brazil³⁵. Moreira trained in documentary production at the New School for Social Research (New York) in the early 1970s, while also working as a correspondent for the weekly *Opinião* [Opinion]. In New York, both women joined the Women's Liberation Movement, which influenced their production of a series of pieces reflecting their feminist activism. The first was the 1972 work *Lesbian Mothers*, which represented the New School in the First Tokyo Video Festival. It dealt with the question of maternity in a lesbian feminist couple who had left their husbands in order to live together, which led to a legal dispute over the custody of the children. The video began by interviewing passers-by on a New York street regarding their opinion of maternity among lesbians. In the central portion it incorporated images of women intertwining their bodies and kissing each other to music featuring Nina Simone³⁶. These very sensual images were interrupted by lesbian voices declaring their fear of persecution and the pathologizing of homosexuality. The video interwove bodies with discourses, exhibiting absurd homophobic attitudes between scenes of fear and loving. It revealed what Adrienne Rich would refer to years later as compulsive heterosexuality.

In 1975, the two women produced the documentary "She Has a Beard", as part of the series *Living in New York*, which was organized by the independent distribution company that these two women had formed: Amazon Media Project. This documentary was shown in universities, museums, cultural centers and feminist spaces, with a clear activist goal of raising awareness, as Argentinian artist María Luisa Bemberg was doing at that time with her short films. "She Has a Beard" presented the story of Forest Hope, a young feminist ballerina who decided to stop removing her facial hair, which resulted in the growth of a beard. Forest asked women of various ages and social classes — passers-by in Manhattan — what they thought of the issue of facial hair on women, given her own case. According to Moreira, this dealt with the politics of appearances: a theme that was center stage at the time and was also being addressed by artists in Brazil, as we have seen.

Another film in this series was "The Apartment" (1975-76). It depicted the life of Carol, a feminist playwright who made ends meet by working as a taxi driver. Carol describes her life in the taxi, and the daily scenes and activities that reveal sexist attitudes in US society.

³³ For more in-depth information, see: Verónica Giordano: "Brasil, una nación erotizada. Las representaciones de la mujer mulata en *A revista do Homem* (1975-1978)" in *Crítica cultural*, num. 2, July/December 2014.

³⁴ Talita Trizoli: "Tina América- O feminismo na produção conceitual de Regina Vater in *Fazendo Gênero 9. Diásporas, diversidades, deslocamentos*, Santa Catarina, USC, 2010, p. 5.

³⁵ Moreira and Bahía Pontes were pioneers in Brazil in the use of the portable camera, a Sony Portapack (3400 with 1/2 inch open reel film). For more information, see: Arlindo Machado (ed.): *Made in Brasil: três décadas do vídeo brasileiro*, São Paulo, Iluminuras, 2007.

³⁶ According to Karla Bessa: "The presence of Nina Simone in the soundtrack, singing to Bob Dylan's "Just like a woman" (LP *Here comes the sun*, RCA, 1971) — and his known support of the fight for black civil rights in the United States reinforces the tone of irreverence and radical adhesion of the documentary." See: Karla Bessa: "Un teto por si mesma. Multidimensões da imagem-som sob uma perspectiva feminista-queer" in *ArtCultura*, Uberlândia, num. 30, 2015, p. 81.



The filmmakers focused on Carol's lesbianism and the dominant lesbophobia of that time. Through Carol, they reflected on hetero-designation and compulsive heterosexuality as oppressive means of conditioning women's lives. The powerfully masculine female subject narrated her life as she did jobs clearly considered masculine at that time, such as construction work in her new apartment and driving a taxi. She destabilized gender roles and questioned the supposedly 'natural' types.

In the 1980s, Rita Moreira and Norma Bahía Pontes returned to Brazil and continued producing documentaries that denounced the political and social situation of their country. Several of her subsequent works reflect how Moreira continued to position herself as a feminist, which is still the case today.

In my opinion, Brazil presents several points in common with Argentine and Mexican feminist art, regardless of whether Brazilian artists defined themselves as feminists or made feminism a constant theme in their production. Let us now turn to the role of feminist art in Mexico.

Mexico

Interest in establishing an art that challenged canonical discourse began in 1977, when several artists' voices were heard in Mexican feminist groups: Rosalba Huerta, Lucy Santiago, Mónica Mayer, Maris Bustamante, poet and writer Alaíde Foppa, and others. The newly-established *Coalición de Mujeres Feministas* [Coalition of Feminist Women] provided the context for this interest, with its demands regarding voluntary maternity, an end to sexual violence³⁷ and the right to sexual freedom. Also at that time, the UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico] created the first Chair for Studies on the Condition of Women, and the journal *Fem* began publication (until 2005).

Ana Victoria Jiménez³⁸ points out that in Mexico, feminist art in the 1970s established diverse links with left-wing political groups, since some members of these groups and parties had joined the feminist movement. The women's movement also had solid institutions such as the *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas* [National Union of Mexican Women] (1964), with members from various social strata³⁹. The 1970s brought a true renaissance of feminism⁴⁰, mostly among urban, middle-class, university-educated women in Mexico City. The first feminist organization of this second wave was the *Movimiento en Acción Solidaria* [Solidarity in Action Movement], (MAS, 1971) in which the photographer Ana Victoria Jiménez participated. Later, the *Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres* [National Movement of Women] (MNM, 1973) emerged, followed by the *Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer* [Women's Liberation Movement] (1974), the *Movimiento Feminista Mexicano* [Mexican Feminist Movement] (MFM) and the *Coalición de Mujeres Feministas* [Coalition of Feminist Women], which in 1976 coordinated the activities of the MNM, MFM, *La Revuelta* [The Uprising] and the *Colectivo de Mujeres* [Women's Collective]. Within these organizations, artists contributed their creativity to the signs used in protests and other actions. Among them, Mónica Mayer participated in the Women's Liberation Movement, and Leonora Carrington produced one of the first protest posters of Mexican feminism for an early march in 1972⁴¹.

Mónica Mayer (Mexico City, 1954), one of the strongest Mexican feminist voices in art, highlighted the lack of visibility of Mexican women in politics and art: "[...] when the San Carlos [*Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas*] closed due to an important student movement that required an entire change of curriculum — in the 1970s the generation of *los Grupos* was being born and 1968 was still fresh even though there was no Internet or AIDS — I came across a sign in the women's lavatory that said 'Girls, support our boys in their fight by making

³⁷ Regarding violence and rape in Mexico during this period, see: *Fem*, vol. I, num. 4, July-September 1977.

³⁸ An interview with Ana Victoria Jiménez, Mexico City, 27 April 2016.

³⁹ Regarding this and other institutions of the Mexican Women's Movement, see: Ana Victoria Jiménez and Francisca Reyes: *Sembradoras de futuros. Memoria de la Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas*, Mexico, *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas*, 2000.

⁴⁰ On the development of Mexican feminist groups in the 1970s, see: "Grupos feministas en México", *Fem*, Mexico, October-December 1977, vol. II, num. 5, pp. 27-30.

⁴¹ For a more detailed study of Latin American art activism, see: Julia Antivilo Peña: *Entre lo sagrado y lo profano se tejen rebeldías. Arte feminista latinoamericano*, Bogotá, Ediciones desde Abajo, 2015.



love to them'. With a single phrase, they had erased our entire participation in the movement along with the struggles of young women at that time to appropriate our own sexuality and they sought to reduce our lives to keeping male students' beds warm and their brushes clean"⁴².

The need arose to form groups and seek collectives of artists who could produce feminist art. This task required great effort since, as Maris Bustamante indicated, female artists were fearful: "[...] at that time, all art galleries and museums were run by men, and female artists expressed fear⁴³ that they might experience reprisals that would limit their possibilities of exhibiting their work"⁴⁴. However, proximity to the USA allowed Mexican female artists to quickly become informed of artistic proposals within US feminist movements and even educational projects involving feminist art.

Mexican artistic groups that included women such as Maris Bustamante and the *No Grupo* provided stimulus for the idea of establishing feminist art groups. This coincided with the festivities of the 1975 International Year of Women, with Mexico City hosting the World Conference on Women. Heloneida Studart participated in the Mexican activities and publicized the materials and innovations from Mexico upon returning to Brazil. Consequently, this date was considered foundational in the second wave of the Brazilian women's movement.

At the epicenter of the International Women's Year, the *Museo de Arte Moderno* [Modern Art Museum] put on an exhibition entitled *La mujer como creadora y tema del arte* [Women as Creators and Themes in Art]⁴⁵. This event exposed artists to the situation of the female gender in this field, since most of the participants were males. Mónica Mayer stated that: "A bit over a quarter of a century later, it seems incredible to me that at that time they had not even thought of organizing an exhibition of female artists, nor had they realized that it was incongruent to propose an exhibition in which women were still mainly seen as muses or even objects"⁴⁶.

The expansion of feminist groups generated several fora for debating issues relating to women. In 1977, the Carrillo Gil Museum organized an exhibition entitled *Pintoras/escultoras/grabadoras/fotógrafas/tejedoras/ceramistas* [(Female) painters/sculptors/engravers/photographers/sowers/ceramists]⁴⁷, curated by Alaïde Foppa, Sylvia Pandolfi, and Raquel Tibol. In the catalogue introduction, Foppa indicated that: "Perhaps in a few decades no one will even think of organizing an exhibition of female artists because it will be obvious that there are equal numbers of artists of both genders. Until recently, an exhibition of this type seemed to be interpreted more or less from the view, 'not bad for a woman' [...]. Today, an exhibition of such broad scope seeks to share the richness, quality, rigor, and variety of works produced by female artists in Mexico: some people will still be surprised by this fact"⁴⁸. The event coincided with the *Primer Simposio Mexicano Centroamericano de Investigación de la Mujer* [First Mexican Central-American Research Symposium on Women]⁴⁹.

In 1978, Mónica Mayer joined the Feminist Studio Workshop in the Woman's Building of Los Angeles and became familiar with the feminist educational methodology of small awareness-raising groups⁵⁰. After returning home, she taught a ground-breaking feminist art workshop from 1982 to 1984 at the *Academia de San Carlos*. Araceli Barbosa explained that: "In Mexico, the rise of the feminist art group phenomenon derives from the critical cultural process pioneered by the Women's Liberation Movement and its influence on certain artists; and from the

⁴² Mónica Mayer: "De la vida y el arte como feminista" in *N.Paradoxa*, November 1998. Num. 8, n/p.

⁴³ It would not be surprising if Argentinian and Brazilian artists also shared these fears, given the sexism that dominated the art scene in both countries.

⁴⁴ Carlos Arias, Maris Bustamante, Mónica Castillo, Lourdes Grobet, Magali Lara, Mónica Mayer, Lorena Wolffer: "¿Arte feminista?" in *Debate feminista*, Mexico, April 2001, vol. 23, year 12, p. 278.

⁴⁵ An exhaustive analysis of this exhibition can be found in Chapter III of the unpublished thesis of Anvy Guzmán: *Entre amor y color. Mujeres en la plástica Mexicana*. Masters of Women's Studies Thesis at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Xochimilco Unit, Mexico, copy, 2005, p. 65-85.

⁴⁶ Mónica Mayer: *Rosa chillante. Mujeres y performance en México*, México, CONACULTA/FONCA/PINTO MI RAYA, 2005, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Alaïde Foppa: "Pintoras/escultoras/grabadoras/fotógrafas/tejedoras/ceramistas", (exh. cat.) México, Museo Carrillo Gil, 1977.

⁴⁸ Cited in Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México. Una perspectiva de género*, Morelos, Autonomous University, 2008, p. 46.

⁴⁹ That same year, Mónica Mayer, Rosalba Huerta, and Lucila Santiago participated in the production of *Collage Íntimo* at the *Casa del Lago*, México D.F. The following year, the *Muestra Colectiva Feminista* [Collective Feminist Production] was presented at the *Galería Contraste* in D.F. along with the exhibition *Lo Normal* [What is Normal] at the *Casa de la Juventud de la Colonia Guadalupe Tepeyac*. This exhibition contained strongly feminist works related to the social roles of women.

⁵⁰ Regarding Mónica Mayer's career, see: Lorena Zamora Betancourt: *El imaginario femenino en el arte: Mónica Mayer, Rowena Morales y Carla Rippey*, México, INBA/Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2007.



feminist art course (1982-84) taught by Mónica Mayer at the *Academia de San Carlos* (ENAP-UNAM)⁵¹. Three important Mexican feminist art groups emerged from these artistic encounters. The first, *Tlacuilas y Retrateras* [Women Scribes and Portrait Artists] (active in 1983-84)⁵², was composed of artists and photographers including art historian Karen Cordero, whose main visual project was “*La Fiesta de Quince Años* [The Fifteenth Birthday Party] (1984). The second group, *Bio-Arte* (active in 1983-84), was formed by Nunik Sauret, Guadalupe García, Laïta, Roselle Faure, and Rose Van Lengen; their production ranged from painting to fashion design, engraving, and performance. The third group, *Polvo de Gallina Negra* [Black Hen Powder]⁵³ (*PGN*, active from 1983 to 1993) was initially composed of Mónica Mayer, Maris Bustamante, and Herminia Dosal, who later left the group⁵⁴.

La Fiesta de Quince Años was first produced on 20 August 1984 at the *Academia de San Carlos* in Mexico City. The participants included neighbors, artists, feminists, critics and the media. This work involved a series of performances that simulated a fifteenth birthday celebration, in order to critically address the theme of the initiation of women as good wives and mothers. The artists incorporated a large dose of humor and irony in order to stimulate laughter and laugh at themselves while replicating daily behavior. The critics were unable to capture this artistic expression and published short press reviews demonstrating that they had not understood what was being presented. The level of confusion was such that the critics thought they were observing a series of theatre presentations by very poor actresses⁵⁵.

PGN performed for more than a decade, constantly questioning the role of women in Mexico and the construction of the female image in the media, while denouncing violence and machoism. They complemented many of their artistic performances with talks at various educational institutions. The trajectory of this group was supported by the individual production of both artists.

The visual project *¡Madres!* [Mothers!]⁵⁶ reflected the disruptive and experimental nature of Mexican feminist art. Developed in 1983-84, the main theme was maternity, a situation which both Bustamante and Mayer were experiencing at that time through their pregnancies. This work was composed of letter art that was sent to the artistic community and press and signed with “*Égalité, liberté, maternité: Polvo de Gallina Negra ataca de nuevo* [Equality, liberty, maternity: Black Hen Powder attacks again]. Other acts involved poetry readings and performances⁵⁷ at the Carrillo Gil Museum and other cultural spaces. The *Carta a mi madre* [Letter to my Mother] contest invited the public to send letters expressing the things they would have wanted to say to their mothers. On the day the winner was announced, the event ended with the Mónica Mayer exhibition *Novela rosa o me agarró el arquetipo* [A romance or I was grabbed by the archetype], which we will discuss further on.

⁵¹ Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México*, op. cit., p. 100.

⁵² “They adopted the role of the *tlacuilos*, who had made the pictograms in the pre-Hispanic codices, as well as of portrait artists, understood as those who captured customs, people, or objects, by drawing, painting or photography.” Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México*, op. cit., p. 101.

⁵³ “The irony contained in the name originated from the idea of conjuring up, by means of a ‘magic recipe’, the negative effects resulting from their daring to refute and defy patriarchal values through their art. [...] It is a popular belief in Mexico that an illness of ‘magical origins’, called the ‘evil eye’, can be cured with a recipe calling for powder from a black hen [...] ‘Because being born a woman is in itself difficult in any culture, and in this one even more so, and on top of that wanting to be an artist, well! Even for a man it is difficult to be an artist, no! Now imagine being a woman, and if we add to that cocktail the act of being a feminist, then you are beyond salvation.’” Conversation between Maris Bustamante and Araceli Barbosa, in Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México*, op. cit., p. 113.

⁵⁴ On this topic, Mónica Mayer commented: “Herminia abandoned us not long after because she didn’t share our artistic views.” Mónica Mayer: *Rosa chillante. Mujeres y performance en México*, op. cit., p. 38.

⁵⁵ Regarding *La fiesta de quince*, Araceli Barbosa points out how: “[...] due to the intrinsic characteristics of this piece, the critics would have needed to be more adapted to unconventional performances [...] [they thought] that they were at a theatre representation, and for that reason classified the artists as ‘poor actresses’”. Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México. Una perspectiva de género*, op. cit., p.107.

⁵⁶ The artists called it a visual project because of its defining features: “its integration into a political proposal, its stubborn conviction that the limits between what is and isn’t art must be erased, and finally the fact that it took place over a period of several months”. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁷ These performances were organized in four stages: *Madres I* was held at the *Escuela Nacional de Pintura y Escultura La Esmeralda* (INBA-SEP); *Madres II* was entitled *Madres por un día* [Mothers for a Day] and presented on Guillermo Ochoa’s TV program *Nuestro Mundo*, on Televisa Channel 2; *Madres III* was a conference-event at the Carrillo Gil Museum; and finally, *Madres IV: Me fui a parir, gracias*, was held at the *Universidad Autónoma de México*.



¡Madres! involved at least two significant aspects. First, it was a process work of art that extended over time and involved several stages; second, mass media was used to support the performances. Specifically, the performance *Madre por un día* [Mother for a Day] was featured on *Nuestro Mundo* [Our World] with Guillermo Ochoa on Televisa Channel 2: one of the highest-rated programs on Mexican TV.

Being a work of art that was a process linked *¡Madres!* to conceptual art. Conceptualism was manifested in its political goal. In seeking to reach the largest possible number of spectators, the artists made use of a Mexican television program. This involved both publicizing the day and time of their actions and inviting the public to an exhibition that used a television program as the medium for their performance, while employing humor to draw in the program host himself, who was cross-dressed as a pregnant homemaker, and crowned as queen of the house because “the mother is queen of the home”⁵⁸. Mónica Mayer took her doll Catalina Creel — named after the evil mother in the television series *Cuna de lobos* [Cradle of Wolves] — as a stereotype and symbol of the evil mother and witch constructed by patriarchy. The use of actions and objects in a space that may be virtual — as with TV — or real — as with installations — combined to include the spectator as another participant in the work. Queen, mother, and servant were brought together in an image that showed female stereotypes through three symbols: a crown, a pregnant belly, and a cooking apron.

The program host participated enthusiastically, and public response was divided: men were offended and women were fascinated. Mayer stated: “We knew the performance had been successful when, nine months later, someone from the public called Ochoa to ask if he had given birth to a boy or a girl”⁵⁹. In Maris Bustamante’s words: “I consider our mass media actions a real accomplishment since it is the only possibility of breaking through the barrier of intellectually exquisite limitations in order to broaden the perceptual horizon of the public”⁶⁰.

The biological and cultural functions of maternity were addressed by *PGN* artists, who implicated spectators in active roles within their performances. In attempting to subvert the system, they laid bare its canons. *¡Madres!* concluded at the Carrillo Gil Museum by awarding a prize to the best letter written to a mother. The winner, artist Nahum Zenil, received a Mayer drawing, and another participant won one of her drawings in a raffle. Three female poets, Carmen Boullosa, Enriqueta Ochoa, and Perla Schwartz read their poems on maternity in the closing ceremony.

Mónica Mayer closed the series of events planned for *¡Madre!* with the individual exhibition of *Novela rosa o me agarró el arquetipo* in the Carrillo Gil Museum. It involved fourteen series of drawings constituting a total of 62 works that experimented with diverse techniques. Through introspective discourse, the artist expressed insightful critiques of stereotypes linked to maternity and introduced this problematic theme into an intolerant society that violently imposes roles on women that alienate them from their human condition. Female historian Raquel Tibol pointed out at the time that: “In these drawings, one finds winding paths, transformed at times into specific roads from the home to the mountain, to the sea, to a forest, to a city, to an orchard or garden, to a frying pan, to an iron; but they are also predictable roads that fit the oppressive archetype”⁶¹.

Mónica Mayer’s drawings critically addressed the ambiguous sentiments that accompany maternity while reflecting on the often-asphyxiating routines of domestic chores. They dialogue directly with what was expressed by Simone de Beauvoir, who compared domestic chores with the martyrdom of Sisyphus: “There are few tasks more related to the sufferings of Sisyphus than those of the homemaker; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture and mend clothes that tomorrow will again be dirty, dusty and ripped; the homemaker is always in the same place; only the present is perpetual, as she has no sense of achieving a positive good but instead of fighting indefinitely against something bad, and that struggle is renewed every day.”⁶² The mending work and repetitive use of sewing thread in several pieces

⁵⁸ This comment was made by Maris Bustamante in *Madres por un día*. See the acting of the *Polvo de Gallina Negra* group: ‘Madre por un día’, on *Nuestro Mundo* with Guillermo Ochoa, Televisa Channel 2, 28 August 1987.

⁵⁹ Mónica Mayer: *Rosa chillante. Mujeres y performance en México*, op. cit., p. 41.

⁶⁰ Maris Bustamante: “Feminismos: Sí...artistas feministas”, text presented in a Round Table at the National Centre for the Arts [Centro Nacional de las Artes], 12 October 2005, copy, n/p.

⁶¹ Araceli Barbosa: *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México. Una perspectiva de género*, op. cit., p. 121.

⁶² Simone de Beauvoir: *El segundo sexo*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1987, p. 62



portrays this constant and perpetual state. Mayer played with the serpent which always bites its tail, an Ouroboros alluding to the circularity of time that encloses itself. In the words of Karen Cordero: “The written word — using cursive letters that are both controlled and free — also obsessively invades the space of these drawings, acquiring an enigmatic poetic force through their separation from a descriptive function. It links the works of art, functioning sometimes as a strange mantra that seems to repeat itself unendingly, alluding sometimes to activities that escape the control of the calendar and sometimes to memories”⁶³.

The homemaker, mother, wife has desires and plans outside the home that elude her. Projecting oneself outside, in Beauvoir’s words, is not allowed in this alterity that is always condemned to be the other without any possible fluctuation.

Conclusions

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist art gradually developed strategies to critique the sexism that dominated society in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. It employed a very frank language, a common visual language created by raising awareness, through the labor of the various feminisms on behalf of the women of that time. As we saw, this new way of interpreting women’s realities brought in readings from foreign authors, who were reinterpreted, transferred, and adapted to local situations. In several ways, Latin American women absorbed feminist bibliography and nurtured their own critical capacity.

In this article, we have established links between Argentinian, Brazilian, and Mexican feminist artists, reaching beyond aspects that have complicated the integration of Brazilian feminists into the art narrative of this continent. In my opinion, the problem arising from a lack of Brazilian artists from feminist movements and the fact that the artists who were most committed to feminist questions were not systematic throughout their entire careers distracts the observer from recognizing a country rich in female creators and contemporary artists. Expanding and softening the evaluation of feminist artistic practices will create room for proposals that may be closer to the fringes of what has tended to be considered ‘feminist art’, if this category is still valid.

The triangulation proposed here for a more holistic and situational analysis of Latin American feminist art presents several common aspects, but they are not the only ones. On one side of the triangle, Argentinian, Brazilian, and Mexican artists address the treatment of domesticity and its implications. Another side provides a critique of the ideal of female beauty in mass media and the vulgar use of women’s bodies that was reflected in publicity at that time, which impacted the themes these artists addressed. Finally, the third side introduced a relevant critique of compulsive heterosexuality, which led to experimentation with street and video activism, among other languages used at that time.

However, other common maneuvers also existed. In the words of Julia Antivilo Peña: “Some of the tactics and strategies of Latin American feminist visual artists have included the use of critical tools such as irony, sarcasm, and parody”.⁶⁴ Humor was a frequent element in protest.

To conclude, I have sought to raise more questions for reflection than offer precise answers regarding how to recognize and interpret feminist art and artists. The objective of feminist art has been to transform the lives of women — and other genders nowadays — and expand what is understood by humanity — a concept that feminisms have shown to be excessively restricted — in order to make the world much more livable.

This triangle of challenges remains today.

⁶³ Karen Cordero: *Rayando: Dibujos de Mónica Mayer. Un ensayo a tres voces*, México, Museum of Women [Museo de las Mujeres] (MUMA), 2015, see: <http://www.museodemujeres.com/es/exposiciones/258-rayando-dibujos-de-monica-mayer> [last accessed on: 10/9/2016]

⁶⁴ Julia Antivilo Peña: *Entre lo sagrado y lo profano se tejen rebeldías. Arte feminista latinoamericano*, op.cit., p. 167.



^(*) Several of the questions developed in this article arose from rich discussions with Mónica Mayer and Julia Antivilo Peña in an effort to write a joint article for the catalogue of the exhibit *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, curated by Andrea Giunta and Cecilia Fajardo Hill. This exhibit will be at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, from September of 2017. See: Mónica Mayer; Julia Antivilo Peña; María Laura Rosa: "Feminist Art and Artivism in Latin America: A Dialogue in Three Voices" in *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* (ex. cat.), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles [forthcoming].

