

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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In this text, rather than focusing on theoretical questions, I have decided to give attention to some fairly recent experiences in academic institutions and museums. They stem from the need to draw attention to institutional issues from the perspective of feminist reflections and practices.

In September 2012 and October 2013, I had the privilege of organising and directing two versions of the *Seminario Historia del arte y feminismo* [Seminar on Art History and Feminism]¹, as part of my work as a curator at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (MNBA) [National Museum of Fine Arts] from 2010 to 2013.

The Seminar came about through the institutional need to respond to the Management Improvement Programme for Gender Equality, known as Gender PMG, which was launched by the first government of President Michelle Bachelet for national public institutions.

The Gender PMG at the MNBA proposed a series of long-range actions and activities that would encourage reflection and diffusion on issues relating to general questions such as equality, esteem, and respect for diversity, thereby fostering cultural change through this institution. Emphasis was placed on working through the museum collections and programmed temporary exhibitions.

From the Curator's Office, we worked locally and throughout Latin America, generating interactions, discussions, conferences, texts, assessment of the Museum's permanent exhibitions, and exchanges with other academic institutions and museums. In the near future, we hope to organise an international exhibition with the participation of several Ibero-American curators and artists.

Though the Gender PMG programme used (and uses) the term "gender", we decided to give the Seminars a clear, political, and unmistakable focus by adopting feminism as the theoretical and discursive institutional framework at the museum.

The objectives that motivated the Seminars included spreading information, generating discussion and producing knowledge on feminism and historiographic writing on art in Chile and Latin America; making visible the contribution of female artists and intellectuals to the development of Chilean and Latin American visual arts; reflection on practices that have perpetuated traditions and social inequalities affecting women and female artists; discussion on the role of academic institutions and museums in establishing historical narratives and becoming vehicles for critical discourse through their activities; and opening new channels for discussion on cultural practices and art history from a feminist perspective.

The first Seminar on Art History and Feminism consolidated a reflection already present in our institution and established the bases for discussion under the title *Narratives, Readings, Writings, Omissions*. A group of leading female academics, artists, researchers and art historians were invited to address the deficits, achievements and difficulties for feminist theories in institutional and non-institutional contexts. We also analysed the work and production conditions of female artists in Chile and Latin America, strategies of contemporary feminisms and how they relate to other theoretical currents, and how the image of women is constructed in Art History (portrait, nude, social roles), among other themes.

We started from the heritage of important transformations in Art History, which developed during the second half of the twentieth century thanks to the systematic work of female art historians. They began to influence the academic sphere using epistemological, political, and discourse analyses based on diverse currents of feminist thought. This was then projected into the Chilean context, where such issues had scarcely been contemplated, let alone studied.

Female authors such as Linda Nochlin, Carol Duncan, Griselda Pollock, Lucy Lippard, Laura Mulvey, Joan Scott, and of course Poullaine de la Barre, María Zambrano, Amelia Valcárcel, Elena Caffarena or Julieta Kirkwood, seldom appear in academic bibliography, footnotes, textual quotes or analytical articles in the field of art history. However, they opened theoretical horizons that in the last forty years have

¹ The first seminar was called *Narratives, Readings, Writings, Omissions*; the second, titled *From Discourse to Exhibition* (2013) was international. Audiovisual records of both seminars can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCcdtLc0Tc> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK2raV4rKBM>



yielded results on an international scale: interaction, debate, reflections based on multi-cultural or post-colonial theories, queer analysis, new sexual identity constructions, etc.

A brief exploration of art history in Chile—in itself problematic due to weak development in print—inevitably leads to a few texts that have become canonical or foundational. Chief among them is the *History of Chilean Painting* by the Chilean-based Spaniard Antonio Romera, which was published in 1951 and re-edited twice. This and similar works provide a chronological listing of artists, grouped generationally around master-disciple relationships.

Romera's work is built around what he establishes as *the four great masters*: Pedro Lira, Alfredo Valenzuela Puelma, Alberto Valenzuela Llanos and Juan Francisco Gonzalez. These artists worked during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Female artists scarcely appear in Romera's work; and when they do, it is strictly as disciples of the 'masters'.

What Romera assigned value to has informed MNBA exhibition guidelines for a long time. Other cultural institutions have expressed their commitment to this *founding text* even more explicitly by giving their exhibitions titles based on Romera's concepts or chronological periods.

Following this historical-ideological articulation, for several years one of the main halls dedicated to Chilean painting at the MNBA has displayed large-format works on opposite walls: landscapes on one side and 'nudes' on the other. Also on display for the public was the institutional assimilation of the artist's possession of the painted objects: nature and the female body. This approach has been effectively implanted in school visual art programmes. Even today, primary school children are exposed to these precepts, which must be "presented" by the museum's educational staff who accompany school visits.

A first gesture by the MNBA—which can only be considered a gesture and should acquire substance with time—was to place in the halls of the *great masters* a few works from the collection of the **female masters**, who were active in the second half of the nineteenth century in Chile: Luisa Lastarria, Aurora Mira, Celia Castro and Magdalena Mira. In 2011 we opened a new exhibition of the collection, titled *Diecinueveinte. La construcción del imaginario pictórico en Chile*.

Apart from that gesture, and prior to my three years as curator at the MNBA, it is important to emphasize the solid, well-documented and ground-breaking work of the Chilean artist Voluspa Jarpa (born in 1971). Within the framework of the "Collection exercises", in 2009 she carried out exhaustive research that deciphered part of the myth surrounding *La perla del mercader* [*The Merchant's Pearl*], a painting by Alfredo Valenzuela Puelma, one of the *four masters*. Originally titled, *Marchand d'esclaves* (Paris 1884), this work has become iconic of the MNBA collection and is recognised as the crowning representation of how Valenzuela Puelma and his generation regarded *women*.

During the nineteenth century, many female artists actively participated in *salons* and other great exhibitions. Many received important awards, distinctions and public recognition. This included art critiques in the press, mainly through *El Taller Ilustrado*, an art newspaper edited by Jose Miguel Blanco, sculptor and founding member of the MNBA.

Blanco, along with Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna and other authors of that time, gave special attention to the number of female artists creating and exhibiting their art. This was sometimes cast in their texts as a symptom of *modernity*. They wrote extensive critical analyses of the works exhibited, praising the quality and mastery of execution.

In his article *El arte nacional i su estadística ante la esposicion de 1884*, [National art and art statistics for the 1884 exhibition] Vicuña Mackenna emphasizes how:

[...] in this way Mr. Pedro Lira and Mr. Ramón Subercaseaux Vicuña prodigiously brought together in only a few days at least 250 pictures, of which, **in demonstration of an even greater miracle, 95 had been done by women**, while the rest were the work of a man's brush. [...] yet in the total number and as I tallied it, the women triumphed completely because of the 41 artists who entered the 1883 exhibition, 23 were women and only 18 were men. What a success, what a revolution in art, in ideas, in the home, in education, in everything!



However, in the paragraph following Vicuña Mackenna's exultant, promising words, alongside praise and enumeration of works by women in the exhibition, he describes the artists' physical characteristics as justification for their talent and recognition: 'The nucleus of that female phalanx, which for our country was truly glorious but would have been absolutely scandalous and unheard of a few years ago, were a group of **beautiful young women, who for this reason alone deserve perennial praise from the sponsors.**'

Vicuña Mackenna highlighted that for 1884, 'in a country where scarcely half a century ago women were intentionally taught *not to write*, this was a notable achievement.' Listing the female entrants, he closed the paragraph by saying that 'of these various works produced exclusively by female artists among us, 71 were canvas and 33 were drawings, some of the latter as notable as the former'².

Some of the information from the nineteenth century has been collected in another text that I find exemplary due to its dramatic departure from the Romera canon, both methodologically and in the structure of its historical narrative. *Estudios sobre la Historia del Arte en Chile Republicano* [Studies of Art History in Republican Chile] was written by Eugenio Pereira Salas in the 1970s and published in 1990 by the Universidad de Chile.

This work is considered unfinished, as the author had not fully developed his research and book-writing programme at the time of his death in 1979. Nonetheless, Pereira Salas did dedicate a chapter to what he calls 'the development of female painting', in which he documents important works of that period. It serves as an indication of the value he assigned to the contribution of these artists.

Eugenio Pereira Salas also lists a set of more or less renowned female artists who dedicated themselves to painting and intellectual and cultural activities before the founding of the Academy (1849). He identified Agustina Gutiérrez (1851–1886) as the first female student of the Academy of Fine Arts, whose dedication took her painting from pastime to profession. Gutiérrez worked in Valparaíso, painting mainly portraits; her significant public acclaim was reflected in the press of her time.

Pereira Salas associated a second high point in nineteenth-century painting with the figure of Clarisa Donoso, whose social and economic origins were radically different from those of Gutiérrez. She moved in artistic circles that included Francisco Javier Mandiola, Antonio Smith and Cosme San Martín: recognized painters in Chilean Art History prior to the founding of the Academy. The MNBA collection has no works by either of these female painters.

Pereira Salas noted the high level of participation by female painters in the 1884 *Exposición* (considered a key year for female artists). Organised by aristocratic painters Pedro Lira and Ramón Subercaseaux, this was the instance that Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna celebrated for its gender proportionality (23 women and only 18 men exhibited). Pereira Salas considered this exhibition as 'the definitive triumph of women in art.'

However, a hiatus seems to have occurred at the turn of the century and the work of those female artists slid into obscurity. Female presence declined in the official art structures that developed after 1910, when the Museum of Fine Arts moved into its current building and its collection was consolidated through the centenary celebrations and the great international exhibition.

By that time, we find that the long list of female artists who were later named by Pereira Salas had all but vanished from official sources. The few works by female artists that were acquired for the Museum collection were presented with their distinctions and awards from the Salon and other great exhibitions; however, their works were paradoxically described as 'amateur'. We find an example in an entry from the 1922 General Catalogue of paintings, sculpture and other works, which was compiled by Luis Cousiño Talavera, a member of the Fine Arts Council that institutional managed the Museum:

Magdalena Mira de Cousiño. Portrait and landscape painter born in Santiago on 30 May, 1859. From an early age she studied drawing under Blandeau, training later under Juan Francisco González, who influenced her significantly, and then Mochi. In

² Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, 'El arte nacional i su estadística ante la esposicion de 1884', in *Revista de Artes y Letras*, year I no. 9, Santiago, 15 November 1884 (pp. 438 – 441); emphasis mine.



1905 she moved to Europe and after touring the main capital cities and museums on the Continent, she settled in Rome, where she lived for three years. She returned to Europe twice prior to her definitive return in 1914. In the International Exhibition of 1884, she was awarded First Prize and in 1891 received Honourable Mention at the *Salon*. She is a gifted amateur who continues to pursue art passionately.³

Pereira Salas points out that the social climate of that time restricted the Mira sisters from full dedication to this profession. Accordingly, 'Magdalena was in the very correct definition of Luis Cousiño Talavera "a gifted amateur who continues to pursue art passionately"⁴. From this statement we might infer that the social climate was different for male artists, at least until the turn of the century. Many of them enjoyed a social and economic status that allowed them to pursue art full time without the pressure of *earning a living* from it. Pedro Lira was probably the most paradigmatic example.

The 'social climate' Pereira Salas refers to obviously implies the restriction of women to the domestic sphere and the role of wives and mothers, who dedicate themselves to artistic work in their *free time* between other activities. Most gave up artistic production when they married and had children. The Mira sisters are a case in point, particularly Magdalena. She had achieved critically acclaimed pictorial maturity before the age of forty, then began to withdraw from the world of exhibitions and salons.

The professional/amateur artist dichotomy clearly affected how female painters were evaluated, their subsequent recognition through the incorporation of their works into museum collections, and inclusion in historiography on national artistic production. The resulting social demarcation of the contours of the field of art, along with the definition of a painter, an artist and the *artistic heritage of the nation* has endured to the present day.

Returning to the nineteenth century, no more than five female painters from the extensive list compiled by Pereira Salas have works in the MNBA collection. This raises obvious questions if we understand the Museum as a space for presenting a historiography. Exclusion from its collections signifies exclusion from historical narratives on artistic production in Chile.

Such narratives must be sustained by research that informs regarding works that might prove interesting for acquisition (most of which symptomatically belong to private collections of family inheritances). Diligent research is also urgently needed on works in the MNBA collection that are not attributed to any painter. This recalls the historical slogan of feminists in the 1970s: 'anonymous' was a woman.

Obviously the purpose is to list or identify names and raise questions regarding their work and the production conditions under which they developed. As Nochlin suggested, we must situate them in a written historiographic context and —according to the type of work or historical moment— re-analyse and/or revitalise certain practices or issues raised by their works: how they were and are exhibited, incorporated, marginalised, and received by the artistic system, critics, or the public.

The nineteenth century was especially productive; we find long lists naming artists who received significant recognition in their day, but whose works and lives are unfamiliar to us now. They remain unrecognised in research and historical production, and appeared as 'amateurs' in the MNBA catalogues and other official publications. Art critic Adriana Valdés commented on this in a conversation with anthropologist Sonia Montecino in 2006: 'In the struggle for recognition in various cultural fields such as literature or the visual arts, women generally appear side-lined as a sort of supplement or note in the margin'⁵.

Through the Seminars we sought to launch a discussion on these topics while also addressing the internal need for reflection, which we converted into a social experience in order to gain a sense of direction regarding how and what to research, how and what to exhibit.

3 Luis Cousiño Talavera. *Museo de Bellas Artes. Catálogo general de las obras de Pintura, Escultura, Etc.*, Santiago Imprenta y Litografía Universo, 1922 (p. 90).

4 Eugenio Pereira Salas, *Estudios sobre la historia del arte en Chile republicano*, Santiago, Ediciones de la Universidad de Chile, s/d (p. 201).

5 *Muestras de género*, conversation between Adriana Valdés and Sonia Montecino about the *Del otro lado exhibition*, CCPLM, Santiago, September 2006, in visualartchile.cl/espanol/invitados/teoricos_invitados.htm



Reflection at this level was not possible in solitude; it required input from an artistic, academic, activist community that could provide key insights regarding what to discuss and implement in the institutional context.

The 2013 Seminar, *Del discurso a la exhibición [From Discourse to Exhibition]*, focused on exhibitions in order to analyse the messages that public institutions transmit to visitors. We approached exhibitions as a potentially privileged place from which to define the discursive analysis of historical constructions and narratives. They transcend the specific field of artistic production to involve social dynamics and transmission of knowledge.

As organisers of the Seminar, we noted a strong, growing interest in addressing and discussing these themes and exchanging ideas in several areas of research and artistic production. We identified the need to raise public awareness by providing information. This occurred in spite of scant public awareness regarding feminist struggles and needs in the visual arts and the discredit associated with feminism and its implications, mainly due to ignorance and an ideological construction against it.

The first *Seminar on Art History and Feminism*, titled *Narratives, Writings, Readings, Omissions*, sought to raise awareness concerning how Art History has assessed the work of female artists and provide answers to our questions as MNBA researchers. The second Seminar focused on creating discussion regarding how to make feminism—as theory and praxis—visible through an exhibition. What would be the characteristics, needs, and specific work required, particularly for a public institution such as the MNBA. This motivated the call for participation around the theme *From Discourse to Exhibition* as a way of analysing the forms this institution had adopted. It was also a sort of call to go beyond theorising and materialise the work, creating greater social involvement with these questions.

We considered relevant antecedents, especially those that had sparked crises regarding the usual ways of exhibiting art throughout the twentieth century: from Dadaist soirees to land art, happenings, performances, interventions in public spaces and productions such as those of Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, or the action of collectives such as *Tucumán Arde* (Argentina), *No Grupo* (México), *Polvo de Gallina Negra* (México), *Chaclacayo* (Perú), or *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* (Chile).

The forms of exhibition used in these practices reflect the ideas that inspired them: use of the body as a medium, rejection of the museum and gallery system, or placing the artistic system in crisis. In our opinion these intersect with feminism. We also felt it was not possible to evaluate feminist artistic praxis or feminist practices linked to art as if they were another departure from the artistic production of the second half of the twentieth century. They signalled the undermining of a sphere greater than that of mere art and an appeal to a more radical transformation of society from its foundations.

From this point of crisis derived from the very nature of these works, especially from the second half of the twentieth century, exhibitions can no longer be considered as a space for exhibiting *works* only; they should also provide a space for the discussion and display of *ideas*. This is reinforced through the consolidation of the figure of the curator, who acts as a vehicle for discourse through exhibition proposals based on research and ideological positioning in art and art history.

Within the framework of feminism and later *gender studies*, a series of key exhibitions has opened the door for re-reading, re-evaluating and identifying problems in the field of visual arts. The overlap of art history and feminist discourse issues has re-organised the exhibition panorama both for museums and great international events.

Against this backdrop, it is important to highlight how the projects of female artists were often marginalised from traditional spaces, discourses and systems of circulation. In order to make their work visible, they have had to generate their own exhibition opportunities through networks, use of non-canonical spaces, self-reflection and critical writing.

The 'historic path' opened by *Womanhouse* (organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in 1972) and *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (curated by Linda Nochlin and Anne Sutherland Harris in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976) marked a turning point for the *new and revised history of art*. They verified the existence of great female artists through the centuries whose work had not been recognised by canonical history. We may also mention *Making their mark. Women artists move into the mainstream 1970-1985* (Cincinnati Art



Museum, Ohio, 1993). More recent examples include *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabriele Mark, MOCA, Los Angeles 2007); *Global Feminisms. New Directions in Contemporary Art* (curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, 2007); *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. 45 years of art and feminism* (curated by Xabier Arakistain in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2007); *In Wonderland. Mujeres surrealistas en México y los Estados Unidos* (Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico 2013); or *Genealogías feministas en el arte español* (MUSAC 2013). These are but a few powerful and pertinent examples that underscore the need to revise and renew the significance of the corpus of feminist works that appeared in the fervour of the 1960s and 1970s. Alongside this is the task of making visible the recent production of artists and curators worldwide whose work is marked by feminist theories.

The necessary epistemological deconstruction launched by art historians such as Griselda Pollock expands the scope of the exercise from making female artists erased from art history inescapably visible to embarking upon fresh analyses and readings that draw from the intellectual and interpretative depth offered by feminism. Such activities are concerned with how *history* is constructed, works by female artists, and works that construct the female gender sign in different cultural moments.

In my opinion, exhibition plays a central role in this endeavour: both as a vehicle for new discourse, analyses and readings, and as a privileged place from which to influence society and instigate broader transformations outside academic spheres.

For these reasons, the Seminars on Art History and Feminism have attempted to foster national and international debate, reflection and discovery of experiences around these issues in the institutional sphere. As the legitimising sphere for the builders and administrators of *knowing*, it also becomes the place where uncomfortable interventions and alterations are required.

After focusing specifically on historiographic discussion, for the second Seminar we moved towards theoretical debate by proposing some possibilities for discussion around the theme of “*exhibitions, theory and praxis*”, based on the notion that feminist practice informs not only theoretical reflection but also exhibition form and content.

We pondered how to do “feminist exhibitions” today. From *Women Artists 1550–1950* to contemporary exhibitions such as *Global Feminism*, we realised that questions are “installed” and issues regarding feminism today are “displayed” in the specific design of exhibits. This opens the discussion to involve not only exhibitions with specific themes or artists recognised as feminists, but also work with museum collections, as we saw with the MNBA.

Our reflections on the relations between history, feminism and academia lead us to ask if a new theory does in fact generate new methodology. What aspects of academic production and training has feminism introduced or modified in art history? How has feminism affected the development of historiographic research? How is this reflected in developing the work of a curator? Finally, and equally significant, we sought to open paths and spheres for diffusion of research that could raise awareness regarding the work of female and feminist artists from a historical perspective, within the context of institutional appraisal and exhibition of their work.

As a team working within the most important public museum of the country, we were convinced of the need for a new approach to Chilean art history, one that exhibits the participation of women in the spheres of work, politics, collective action, artistic creation, feminism and literature. Clearly, challenging the stages or relevant facts of our social, cultural and political history is central to this endeavour.

