

**FEMINIST
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**THE ACCIDENTALITY OF THE VIOLENT
WOMAN? NOTES ON ART, FEMINISM AND
VIOLENCE (*)**



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Along the lines of what Xabier Arakistain and Lourdes Méndez propose in their presentation of *Feminist Perspectives in Artistic Production and Art Theories*, specifically, ‘to contribute to the diffusion of critical knowledge’, based on the conviction or certainty that ‘feminist knowledge, like all critical knowledge makes us UNCOMFORTABLE’, I will begin by affirming that it essentially is uncomfortable. It unsettles us in many senses and diverse ways, some of which I will attempt to describe here by addressing an uncomfortable topic that makes us uneasy: violence. We find it disturbing when violence requires us to engage in critical thinking, and more so in art, which we expect to connect us with imagery in the realm of beauty: with what is beautiful. I will state here that it is not my intent to enter into the debate on Violence and Beauty. My topic is also uncomfortable for feminism and likewise engages it, especially in relation to what these reflections stir up. I am speaking of the violence of women, which I will first attempt to address from a general approach that will lead us to develop some specific notes regarding artistic productions, art and feminism. But before I begin, I would like to make a few introductory clarifications.

As I was contemplating a title for this article, seeking to capture concisely the essence of what I wanted these notes to centre on, the first thing that came to mind was *Thinking violence/s*. That was going to be the object of my reflections, starting with the need to think about violence and different forms of violence or violences in public and private spheres, based on a very basic question along the lines of Hannah Arendt: Do we think what we do? Applied to a work of art—be it a painting, a poem, a symphony, a sculpture, a novel, a performance, dance or a photograph—thinking what we do implicates and complicates the spheres of individual or collective action. If I combine Arendt’s (1973) thinking that violence is distinct from power, strength, force or authority, with my reflections based on our experience with artistic production and practices, what does it mean to think violence or violences? The title seemed adequate, but as I thought about it, a more suggestive one came to mind from a 2007 exhibition curated by Arakistain in the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao, called *Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang. 45 Years of Art and Feminism*. I had contributed to its catalogue with work related specifically to violence against women. Since I wanted to explore the violence of women, which obviously excludes “eternal” love or the trappings of beauty, I thought I could drop the *Kiss Kiss* and keep the second part, resulting in something like *Bang, Bang, thinking violence/s*. This would allow me to place violence within a wider frame. As I reviewed the catalogue for the exhibit, I noticed the text by Linda Nochlin and Maura Kelly titled *No more Kiss Kiss: notes on feminist art in the 21st century*, which ends by stating: ‘Kiss Kiss is history, only bang bang remains. Boys beware, these girls are armed and dangerous!’ (2007: 66). Though I knew it lacked originality, *Bang, Bang, armed and dangerous in feminist art* seemed a much better title for introducing questions related to violence and artists. In other words, how do “armed and dangerous” women engage in artistic practice and production and how can we understand it—with all the questions it raises—from a feminist perspective? What are they armed with? Why are they dangerous? These questions lead us to research and think about the sense or senses in which feminist artists use and represent the body and its fluids as weapons in artistic, politically subversive, transgressive or even aggressive manifestations.

After I had settled the matter in my mind, in a text by Victoria Combalá (2006) I came across the very surprising title of a painting by Remedios Varo: *The accidentality of the violent woman*. This picture, along with two others, had been included in the 1936 Logicophobic Exhibition at the *Galerias Catalonia* in Barcelona. I searched for the painting online, but found nothing more than citations of it. Similarly, there was no reproduction or additional information about the exhibit, only mention of it. I made efforts to discover if it was possible to see the painting and gain some insight into the meaning behind the title. Though unsuccessful in my enquiry, I eventually decided to borrow Remedios Varo’s title, but added a question mark and a subtitle: *The accidentality of the violent woman?* This captures the questions involved fairly well. On the one hand it invites a critical revision regarding the exceptionality, or accidentality of violent women. Indeed, the topic should be approached non-a-critically, questioning whether violence is an exclusively male domain or if women are “naturally” pacifists or more peaceful. On the other hand, it involves exploring whether artists use violence, and how. Are they violent? Do they think what they do as feminist activists/artists?¹ Starting with art as a means of approaching or addressing violence/s and the awareness that human violence is uncomfortable and disturbing, let us address the especially unthinkable topic of the violence of women.

¹ I would like to thank Lourdes Méndez for her research on this painting. After several unsuccessful attempts, her enquiries finally yielded fruit. In a personal communication, María José González Madrid, author of *Surrealismo y saberes mágicos en la obra de Remedios Varo*, a doctoral dissertation presented at Universitat de Barcelona (<http://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/handle/2445/52044>), indicated that the title of this painting, as listed in the exhibition brochure, was *Accidentalitat de la Dona-Violència* and that the picture is currently unlocatable. It was at some point included in the Remedios Varo Wikipedia page but is no longer there. It can be found



I. Uncomfortable, disconcerting

First and very briefly, I must emphasize the difficulty of thinking about and facing violence. Perhaps this explains to a large extent why until recently philosophers and political theorists have reflected little on it, except in the context of war. Second, it is rather unclear what we mean when we talk about violence (Birulés, 2007). Diverse theories exist regarding its nature (natural, social, cultural) and we encounter difficulties in naming, defining, conceptualising or classifying violence. For this and other reasons, it seems more appropriate to speak of violence/s rather than violence. In a certain sense, the same problems arise in attempting to theorize about violence as we do in many other concepts. So how can we grasp that much of the difficulty we encounter in addressing violence derives from the discomfort generated by assuming a position must be adopted that justifies, condemns, absolves or praises it (Mayer, 2014; Cardi and Pruvost, 2012)? If thinking about violence/s is uncomfortable or unsettling, facing the problem of violence directly is ever so much more disconcerting and several positions can be taken.

When disconcerted, some like Žižek (2008) engage in cold, dispassionate analysis. Hannah Arendt —the exception in her ability to reflect on violence in the twentieth century— does not consider it a matter of having blood cold enough to ‘think the unthinkable’: she actually accuses scientific specialists of ‘not thinking’ (1973:114). Judith Shklar holds a different perspective, namely that philosophers have said little on cruelty. Like other *ordinary* vices, it is ‘the type of behaviour we all expect: nothing surprising or out of the ordinary’. This obviates the need to analyse the subject, ‘since anything we can say on it [cruelty] we may assume to be too obvious to require mention’ (1990:11). Shklar considers cruelty disconcerting because it shows us our own irrationality, constituting a serious threat to reason. For Arendt, violence in public affairs is neither bestial nor irrational; it is both rational and instrumental. Both authors hold that violence should not be treated by cold-blooded analysis, but must be addressed through stories, narratives, and imagination. Literary fiction and imagination thus play a crucial role in helping us think about violence in public and private affairs and understanding it in its specific human sense. This leads us to some questions: Is art in general, and feminist art in particular, an adequate and necessary medium? Does female artistic production help us to address the problem and think about violence? Since violence/s are criss-crossed with sex-gender, it becomes necessary to introduce the sexual dimension in reflections on violence/s.

Feminist artists have confronted specific violence against women by denouncing, escaping, subverting, or transgressing the feminine. This has never been an easy task. However, addressing violence perpetrated by women constitutes a delicate, uncomfortable and even more unthinkable question. Confronted with the problem of victims of violence and of women as victims of violence in times of peace as well as in war, the magnitude and continuity of violence *against* women might suggest that addressing the violence *of* women would distract us from a priority focus. Violent women are statistically few or exceptional, even accidental according to our title. However, I would like to emphasize that to a large extent both violences fit the pattern of the dominant sex-gender system in every society and historical period. Therefore, the first task is to determine the content of that exceptionality in relation to symbolisation processes and ongoing, deeply-rooted traditions. Equally important is recognising that women in different places and times, including the present, have participated in and perpetrated political and criminal violence. The often ignored or hidden violence of women must be brought to light, addressed and contemplated (Dauphin and Farge, 1997; Badinter, 2003; Cardi and Pruvost, 2012). Thinking violence means overcoming the taboo that shrouds the violence of women, applying sex-gender lenses and —without essentialism or naturalism— critically assuming responsibility for what is in play, which among other things is the capacity for action and responsibility: freedom. In sum, this requires thinking, historicizing, and symbolically representing violences, departing from the pacifism of women and their traditional dedication to life or

in other online documents, indicating that it belongs to a private collection and is attributed to the author. Maria José González pointed out that the painting was not visible in detail, but one could make out an aggressive masculine figure acting against a female statue with severed limbs. Given this valuable information, for which I am most grateful to Maria José González, the translation of the title is incorrect. It should be *Accidentalities of the Woman-Violence*, which, based on the images of the painting, do not suggest a violent woman; rather a representation of violence as a woman. If this is what the picture represents, it would lead us to examine representations of Violence from the sex-gender system. Though related, it goes beyond the intent of this paper and must wait for another occasion.



their passivity or restraint regarding violence and eliminating any sense of moral superiority that casts women as exclusively victims or entirely innocent.

II. Leaving innocence, recovering the body

Representation of the violence of women is depicted as exceptional and even excessive in myths, imaginaries and historical narratives that seek to reproduce and perpetuate normative femininity and the subordination of women. Nicole Loraux's studies of the Greek world and the depictions of actions by women insightfully reveal how "the natural feminine" becomes excess, portraying female audacity with regard to the polis, politics and war as dangerous and defective. Succinctly, the violence of women occupies the realm of tumult, revolt and exceptionality; it is considered excess, excitability, sentimentality. Violent women become "furies" and "amazons", or exceptional *men-women* in anomalies or transgressions. Women live "under the sign of the uncontrollable", in an imaginary, a scenario devoid of "actions" by women, only "acts" or better still, the "act of women"; the violence of women is neither rational nor deliberate and of course produces nothing. From this perspective, women are much more cruel and violent and only intervene in contexts of tumult, revolt or rebellion, not those of action and revolution (Loraux, 2004; Ruggiero, 2009). We recurrently find that the maternal nature of women is deemed to place them on the side of pacifism, where they may give life but do not take life. However, that very maternalism can lead women to kill: to make them vindictive, more violent and more cruel (Bourke, 2008:313). This confronts us with the uncomfortable unthinkableness that the life-giving sex would ever want to take life, kill, or make blood flow. Medusa and Medea are two well-known and exploited icons in this regard (Agra, 2012). Against the strong, enduring lines of tradition, narrative construction, stereotyping and representation of heroines designed by males (Solana, 2011), the revolt of the feminist artist becomes artistic and political action that invades space, breaks containment and defies 'restraining orders'.²

The violence of women has been recurrently inscribed within specific parameters by assuming that, as Simone de Beauvoir indicated, 'violence is not permitted' for women. Young ladies do not receive a 'true training in violence as boys do and thus are instead impeded from developing aggressiveness, will to power, love of challenge (De Beauvoir, Vol. II, 1998:77-78). From this quarter we hear the challenge of women: 'we're bad, but we can be worse' or 'we're good but we can be bad', and we can understand Amelia Valcárcel's (1980) combative, polemic and provocative vindication of the 'right to evil'. Without going into that particular controversy, I think it pertinent to examine Collin's reflection on the fact that women have named evil. 'They have left innocence because they have named the evil of which they are victims and that they commit, and by naming it have gained a voice' (Collin, 2006:164). This emphasizes the important achievement of the feminist movement in breaking the silence and "naming" violence against women in two key spheres: in the discourse of justice and law, and in works of art. The departure from innocence reflects a new way in which women relate with the world and with the symbolic, one 'in which we can detect the insistent emergence of violence (suffered or exercised)' (Collin, 2006:165). Referring expressly to the world of art, Collin notes the significance of 'the development of the *noir* novel imaginary, detective stories or erotic and pornographic narratives' as 'ingenuous though indispensable forms of response and challenge'. They signal the end of an era 'with powerful horn-blasts and cinema footage'. Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes were cited for their media relevance in literary circles and for basing the challenges of this new relationship of women with the world on the socio-historical 'active access of women to the erotic sphere'.³

² This expression was coined by María Reimóndez in reference to female writers, but can also be applied to artists: '[...] we can identify tacit expulsion mechanisms that I ironically call "restraining orders", or a series of subtle and not so subtle strategies used to give female writers a sense that they have a secondary role and/or that they are not well received in the public sphere or in defining the nation. This exile is necessary for minimizing our potential for breaking the mechanisms of reproduction of meaning' (2010:72).

³ Collin notes a second important socio-historic fact: 'the mutation of parenting and specifically of maternity'. This implies a revolution in how women relate to the world: 'So one fine day they publicly demanded the initiative to end life, after they had transmitted it for centuries. "We've all aborted" not only infringed the positive law of a country but also the timeless, symbolic, sacred law. They invented, not without pain, this unheard of crime that has always been practiced anyway. They irreversibly inscribed the violence of their "inhuman liberty" within the public sphere. With authority they began to make blood flow (2006:166).' See, María Xosé Agra "Violencia/s: hacer correr la sangre" in Elena Losada and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (eds.) (forthcoming).



We return to the idea that naming evil implies leaving innocence behind. Naming evil exposes violence suffered as well as violence exerted. Here the body takes centre stage and, in the words of Collin, it is for the artists to respond and challenge:

Perhaps the observer is surprised to realise that in these last decades what female artists have put and continue to put on stage, in play, is their own body and not that of men, as if they needed to supplement the false representation of their bodies, presenting them as never before: as a sculpted body, injured, but a body-subject or body parody of the object to be seen and had: as the other body. Since 'this is not my body'.

It is as though the first gesture of freedom of female artists were to recover their body from the public landfill, where it has been on display for centuries (since the dawn of time), not to dissimulate or cover it but to display it inside and out, from all angles in its unownable visibility - servitude without a master. These works on the body are undoubtedly in sync with the times, aren't exclusive to women but are demanded with greater insistence (2006:166).

After pointing out the need for specific analyses, Collin cites the works of Gina Pane, Kiki Smith, Ana Mendieta, Orlan and Nil Yalter. According to Linda Nochlin and Maura Kelly, the response and challenge give rise to or constitute a counter-attack and an offensive along fairly convergent lines:

In a certain sense, it is not unreasonable to state that [...], today female artists are counter-attacking, they are on the offensive. They are reversing the dominant male tradition. They will not accept the implications of masculine sexual pleasure and of the aesthetic sampling that are derived both from the abject victim and the classical nude of the past. They are also building new meanings—often transgressive and sometimes aggressive—around a feminist representation of masculine and feminine bodies (2007:66).

Contemporary artists, then, break with established norms or canons of beauty, virtue, and representation of the feminine body by subverting, transgressing, and creating 'alternative counter-histories to the traditional narratives of masculine dominance' (2007:66). So, we depart from innocence, rejecting containment and the role of defenceless victims, challenging, defending ourselves, counter-attacking. It is important to highlight that the body is at the centre; the body is a battlefield, but especially a weapon. When addressing violence, we can see the vital importance of instruments or weapons in the world of art also. Feminist artists use the body as a weapon of subversion, transgression, or rebellion and many of them depict armed women. It is thus coherent to relate artistic productions with other uses of female bodies as weapons. In the realm of political violence, other uses include suicide bombers or female military torturers, whom I will refer to later in reference to Coco Fusco. We must also ask if feminist artists are aggressive: do they ultimately use or make use of violence (and how) to deconstruct by breaking masculine and feminine stereotypes in order to arrive at new representations? Are they exercising violence on their own bodies, being aggressive with spectators or seeking their complicity, or at least facing the complexity of the problem of violence with new artistic modes of expression? So it is according to Rosi Braidotti:

Nowhere is the feminist challenge more evident than in the field of artistic practice. For example, the ironic force, scarcely repressed violence and vitriolic ingenuity of feminist groups such as the Riot Girls and the Guerrilla Girls constitute an important aspect of the contemporary re-localisation of culture and the struggle for representation. I would define this position in terms of the politics of parody. The Riot Girls want to say that the war continues and that women are not pacifists, as we are bad girls, guerrilla girls, we want to engage in active resistance but also have fun and do it our way (2004:113).

Braidotti also notes the growing number of women writing science fiction, cyber punk, film scripts, "fanzines", rap, rock and other similar music. She then states:

There is clearly a touch of violence in the way the Riot Girls and Guerrilla Girls express themselves: a sort of crude frankness that clashes with the syncopated tones of standard art critics. This categorical style is a response to the hostility of the environment and social forces. Moreover, it manifests a deep trust in the collective links that can be established through rituals



and ritualized actions, which, far from dissolving the individual within the group, actually accentuate the individual's impenitent singularity (2004:114).

This is of course a symbolic violence that seeks to provoke. Braidotti emphasizes that the weapon is irony and the practice is parody, which she calls the 'as-if philosophy'. From a feminist perspective it 'is not a form of rejection but rather the affirmation of a non-essentialized subject, not sustained by the idea of human or feminine "nature" yet capable of ethical and moral actions.' (2004:114). This coincides with the thinking of Judith Butler, in which the parody facilitates the development of a 'politically empowering position'. The challenge emphasizes an affirmation that gives rise to a fun, happy, symbolic violence, laughter and irony, as also pointed out by other female artists and authors. These are the weapons they carry and display, in action and in feminist artistic production. The action and production correspond to collective struggles without leaving aside individual singularity. However, violence is always produced so that the 'armed and dangerous' women are happy, fun, and entertain us. Some exercises of violence in artistic practices encounter problems and lead us to acknowledge that we should *think what we do*, or as Lourdes Méndez (2014) reminds us in the words of Virginia Woolf, 'think we must'. Problems arise and we will face ethical and political commitments that lead us to think on limits and responsibilities. A specific example might better help us understand the complexity of the matter.

III. Coco Fusco: Invasions of space, loss of innocence

Collin labels some of the responses and challenges that marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new relationship of women with the world as 'powerful horn blasts'. Indeed, we find a powerful blast of the horn in the words of Nochlin and Kelly:

Of all the possible forms in which artists today challenge traditional narratives of masculine dominance, particularly impacting is the atypical role of *dominatrix* or punisher of submissive victims [...] with a masculine model as a sexual object and assuming for herself the role of dominating subject (2007:66).

Most of us can recall the great media impact and scandal generated in 2004 by the images of female torturers in the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war. Though much has been written on it (Agra, 2014), perhaps it is still surprising or considered inappropriate to connect the theme of torture and the violence of female torturers with art. However, as Mary Louise Pratt observed: 'It's no accident that the word vanguard has a triple existence: in the lexicons of military science, politics and aesthetics. It names a field of risk, experimentation, openness towards new futures' (2009:25). Does this imply that the military and artistic worlds share family traits? Coco Fusco argued that they do indeed, in her fifteen-minute presentation in the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMa). However, this cannot be uncoupled from her concern over the use of sexual aggression as a military interrogation technique. In Abu Ghraib, this was carried out by women seen in the role of punishers of submissive victims. Now the 'powerful horn blast' signals an unsettling, disconcerting and scandalous reality, even in feminist circles.

In January of 2007 the MoMa organised a symposium titled *The Feminist Future*, to which Fusco was invited to speak. She indicated that the event was the first to address and publicly recognise the existence of feminist art and art history. It coincided with two other exhibits: *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MoCA) and *Global Feminisms* in the Brooklyn Museum. Though these events generated much debate in the media and in academia, Fusco was concerned that feminist art was being portrayed as something already normalised. This conflicted with her perception of reality for two reasons: first, the art world was still 'hostile to all practices that politicize aesthetic values and dominant tastes'; and second, that the MoMa and the MoCa had no commitment to acquiring feminist works of art, which in her judgement would have indicated a stronger recognition of the "value" of feminism (2008). In this context, Fusco decided to get up and present herself as 'a visitor from the US Army who had come to congratulate her peers in the art world for their strategic containment of feminism and effective use of women' (2008:93). Using parody and irony, she details the family relations between the military and artistic worlds. Drawing from her military experience, she recommended six measures for finding ways to make it seem that 'the achievements of women are antithetical to feminist politics' (2008: 102-104). Containment referred not only to the 'natural pacifism' of women who produce and reproduce myths, narratives and representations, but also to 'restraining orders':



mechanisms for containing feminist challenges. I encourage careful examination of Fusco's very worthwhile presentation, though I will not go further into it here.

In line with reflections on the violence of women, based on what has been said we must point out that *Our Feminist Future* named the field of risk, experimentation, and openness toward new feminist futures, framed within a broader examination and reflection by the artist on war, torture, and the strategic use of women and the feminine. This was developed in a text written to Virginia Woolf, manifesting the intent to emulate her in creating a character such as Shakespeare's sister. She would be an 'implacable interrogator' and speak on themes and events that had distressed her, without sidestepping or fear of publicly addressing (as many feminist 'sisters in the struggle' are) questions such as those that arise from sexual aggression or feminine sexual exhibitionism as a weapon or military interrogation technique in places such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. This reflects the content of 'Invasion of Space by a Female' (2008:41), based on a standardised expression and authorised tactic in prisoner interrogation manuals and practices. Fusco did not really create a fictional person; she engaged in direct research by following interrogation training courses. She sought to understand how one becomes this kind of interrogator and what exactly they do. Fusco spoke directly with interrogators and their trainers to acquire a sense of who they were as people and what their profession expected of them (2008:64). In *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, she describes her experience and includes an illustrated manual of the sexual tactics used by female interrogators, based on the testimonies of detainees and witnesses. It makes us think, it fits our topic perfectly, and it leads us to form ideas and a conclusion.

Fusco not only exposes the taboos, escapism or fears of many feminists in facing or thinking about the violence of women, but also starts with the idea that our culture lacks a political vocabulary for adequately understanding women as conscious perpetrators of sexual violence, and violence in general, I would say. This deficit runs parallel to trust in a moralist language on virtue, privacy and emotional vulnerability that defines or limits the perceived scope of feminine sexuality, which has articulated the historical condition of women as victims. Fusco indicates that since the 1970s, feminists have tried to depart from that repressive, moralistic language by defending feminine sexual assertiveness as a form of freedom of expression. She bases her argument on the problems, dilemmas and limitations that arose when researching female torturers (2008:49-50). Fusco supports Angela Davis' idea that if gender is a social construction, then women can easily participate with men in the established circuits of violence (2008: 60). She reveals the difficulty and discomfort created by imagining women as voluntary perpetrators of wilful violence, while denouncing feminist blindness to the violence of women. Likewise, she attacks visions that appeal to female nature or the experience of female victims of oppression, that present women as possessing higher ethical standards for the use of violence.

Leaving innocence behind is ultimately a challenge to invade spaces. In spite of ongoing difficulties in making it visible, feminist art has surely contributed significantly to exposing violence against women with its own forms of expression and representation. In this sense, it is to a large extent subversive, transgressive, taboo-breaking, even violent or shocking. Leaving innocence means losing our innocence and facing the violence of women, neither as "accidentality" nor by simply celebrating transgression and aestheticizing the problem. Rather, we must 'think what we do'. Let us not forget that violence can produce fascination or create indifference through saturation or excess exposure. Losing our innocence and assuming the problem of violence/s is and will always be difficult and complex; we cannot step around that. From this perspective, fiction, literary imagination and feminist artistic productions can serve as good weapons for managing the uncomfortable or disconcerting.



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