

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

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**FEMINIST ART IN MEXICO. A PERSONAL
ACCOUNT**



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I studied Visual Arts at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas [National School for Arts] in Mexico City. In the central courtyard of the majestic colonial building that housed this institution stands a replica of the Victory of Samothrace. I couldn't quite place it at the time, but I must have suspected that something was wrong if I was being welcomed into the highest institution for visual arts by the sculpture of a scantily clad, headless, armless woman with a fantastic body and two gigantic wings attesting to her purity: the female ideal in a patriarchal society.

Those were fun and interesting times. We were young, and in spite of Mexico's repressive climate we felt we could change the world. Like good 1970s kids, we believed in Utopia. That was where I met Victor Lerma, my companion in life and art. That was where I began to identify myself as a feminist artist: the day a student presented a conference on women artists and most of my progressive, revolutionary classmates affirmed that women could not be good artists because motherhood detracted from our creativity. I realised that not even my classmates saw us as equal to men, let alone the rest of society. If I wanted to be an artist, I would first have to change reality.

Back then, female artists were virtually invisible in Art History, despite the long list of illustrious twentieth-century female artists such as María Izquierdo, Isabel Villaseñor, Lola Cueto and Frida Kahlo. Though a cult favourite, Kahlo was nowhere near the superstar she is today. To this national list we can add several more who arrived in migratory waves: Remedios Varo, Olga Costa, Kati Horna, Tina Modotti and Leonora Carrington. It is hard to understand how an Art History class can be taught without mentioning these women.

Unfortunately, these artists remain invisible, as do subsequent generations of female artists, despite the fact that the number of women who graduate from our country's art schools meets or exceeds the number of men since the 1970s. We can't even be considered a minority, as our predecessors were.

The absence of female artists is coupled with a representation of women in art that continues to reinforce female stereotypes. With a mere glance we can identify the role of suffering and submission assigned to women in the works of great Mexican painters such as José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera.

Those were also difficult times. The 1968 student movement was brutally repressed by the government shortly before the Olympics. The tumultuous decade that followed was marked by the "dirty war" on one hand and criticism and creativity on the other. We questioned everything, even our own definitions of art and politics. Out of this, the generation known today as Los Grupos emerged: including Proceso Pentágono, El No-Grupo, Mira, Germinal and Suma. Artists in these groups took to the streets; they changed artistic form and content, opposing individual creation and making a place for non-objectivism in Mexico. However, not even the left-wing politics of the time contemplated voicing demands based on gender or sexual preference. As a consequence, we began to redefine politics through art springing from the feminist and gay movements.

In 1975, the first International Women's Year Conference took place in Mexico City, and the Museo de Arte Moderna (MAM) [Museum of Modern Art] organised a display of *La mujer como creadora y tema del arte* [Women as Creators and Themes in Art]. Most of the participants were male, and the female artists who did participate exhibited fewer works. Hard to believe, but true. As part of the show, the MAM dedicated an issue of their *Artes Visuales* magazine to the topic of female artists. They published an interview with Judy Chicago, a pioneer of feminist art in the USA, through which I learned of the Woman's Building (WB), the feminist art school in Los Angeles. I decided to enrol, and for two years Victor and I worked hard to save up enough money for me to go study there. During that time, I became a militant feminist in fledgling groups and participated in both the Women's Cinema Collective and the Mexican Feminist Movement, which published a small newspaper called *Gihuat: voz de la Coalición de Mujeres* [Gihuat: Voice of the Women's Coalition]. The fight to decriminalise abortion was beginning, and when I mentioned at home that I was going to a rally, my mum decided to come with me because she thought it might be dangerous. A group of about twenty feminists gathered in front of the Senate, and my mum was so inspired that she joined another group as well. My dad, who was worried about both of us, would watch from a nearby sidewalk, where Victor took pictures. Feminism became a family activity.

During the 1970s, a group of feminists and artists began reflecting on women and art. Very significant for me was my experience as an assistant in an exhibition held in tandem with the *Primer Simposio Mexicano Centroamericano de Investigaciones para la Mujer* [First



Mexican/Central-American Symposium for Women's Studies], curated by Alaíde Foppa, Sylvia Pandolfi and Raquel Tibol. For the first time, I saw how many different artists there were from diverse generations. In another exhibition, the *Muestra colectiva feminista* [Feminist Collective Exhibition], we invited all the feminists we knew to participate. Artistically, the result was naturally a disaster: being a good feminist does not automatically make you a good artist. There were also themed exhibitions on topics such as abortion or normality. We had a wide open field to experiment in and very few answers, but we were convinced that sexism should also be combated with images.

The first exhibition that could properly be considered feminist art was curated by Lucila Santiago, Rosalba Huerta and I in 1977. It was called *Collage íntimo* [Intimate Collage] and took place at the Casa del Lago. One of my works was at the entrance, a photograph of a phallus and a vagina atop the head of a young woman with a bridal veil, surprised at her own fantasies. The picture had a curtain to cover it. My parents, though fairly open-minded, panicked over this piece. They called me the day before the opening to convince me not to show it because 'my brother might lose his job over it'. The piece was quite well received by crowds and critics.

Around this time I also began to contemplate more conceptual and militant works of art. One result was my installation, *El Tendedero* [The Clothes Line], which I presented in the *Salón 77-78 Nuevas Tendencias* at the MAM. It consisted of 800 pink papers on which women of different ages, social status and professions had completed the sentence 'Como mujer, lo que más detesto de la ciudad es...' ['As a woman, what I hate most about the city is...']. Their most common complaint was street harassment, which in Mexico unfortunately hasn't changed much since then. This type of violence has even been naturalised; now there are metro cars exclusively for women.

During that exhibition I met Pola Weiss, a video art pioneer in Mexico who was presenting her video *Mujer-ciudad-mujer* [Woman-City-Woman], a work that broke with several stereotypes. I remember my surprise at observing how woman was not nature but city in her video, and how the plump, cellulite-endowed protagonist broke with established beauty canons. At that time, another taboo topic was breached in Magali Lara's series *Ventanas* [Windows], which portrayed the female sexual experience through drawings. I had known her since art school, when she presented a very strong and clearly feminist drawing exhibit entitled *Tijeras* [Scissors].

Around this time I also met Maris Bustamante, who captivated me with her acuity in treating topics such as the difference between eroticism and pornography: the subject of her *Montaje de Momentos Plásticos* [Montage of Plastic Moments] in 1979. To address Freud's ideas on penis envy, she presented a scandalous work at the MAM in 1982, putting on a mask of her face with a penis nose as a 'work tool' in her performance *Caliente, caliente* [Hot, hot]. Maris's long-time mask maker only acceded to mould the mask on the condition that there would be no paper trail implicating him as the author.

In 1978 I arrived at the Woman's Building (WB), which had been founded by Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven and Sheila De Brettville. It was wonderful. Artists worked alongside historians, activists, and a diverse public that was interested in feminism. Our work was radical, springing from a deep need to speak about our experiences from our bodies. Chicago was a central figure, because of her works, her texts and her significant pedagogical labour.

At that time in the Woman's Building we were discussing interesting and curious ideas, such as whether the composition of a piece revealed the gender of its creator. We positively devoured books such as *From the Center* by Lucy Lippard or *Women artists 1550-1959* by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin; they gave us a proper genealogy. The history of female artists was beginning to be recovered and feminist art theories were emerging: they permeate the main theoretic debates of contemporary artistic production today, even if they are not always recognised.

Miriam Shapiro pioneered alongside Chicago in this field. Several years before founding the WB, they taught a class on feminist art at the Cal Arts Institute, which emphasized research on women's art history. They wanted to give students a set of models to follow and to work from their experience as women, which was quite radical for the time. An example of this was the *Woman House* project (1972), which used an empty house for installations and performances such as *Waiting*, Faith Wilding's monologue about the time women spend "on hold".



One notion that captivated me from the very beginning in Los Angeles was the idea of feminist art education. We needed to develop pedagogic ideas that strengthened the knowledge and skill of female artists —like any mason’s apprentice— and an educational system reflecting the political convictions that women deserved to be listened to and that knowledge was more than information. For the first time in my life I found myself in an environment that valued what I felt as much as what I thought, and where we could uncover different aspects of our identity. Over the years, I have heard countless times how feminism in the 1970s was white and bourgeois. This is repeated as an absolute truth that divides and demonises a group of valiant women doing what they could to change their own reality. I remember a community engaged in workshops and small groups that debated about race, class, disabilities and other issues. I remember seeing how becoming aware of our gender oppression opened our eyes to other sources of inequality. We all tried, with varying degrees of success, to understand the complexity of our identities, recognising and working to change our roles as oppressed or oppressors in diverse circumstances.

The goal then was to reconstruct ourselves as women and rid ourselves of our inner patriarchy. Chicago’s famous installation, *The Dinner Party*, reflected this with 39 seats at a table dedicated to women who had been foundational to Western culture, with the names of 999 other women on the floor. Porcelain plates on embroidered placemats served to recover the arts traditionally reserved for women. We needed to change the present, but also our imposed view of the past. Guided by Chicago, over a hundred people worked on the research and creation of this piece. *The Dinner Party* endured frequent censure and remained homeless for decades, because it was considered “pornographic”. It finally became a permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2007.

With the inauguration of *The Dinner Party* in 1978, Suzanne Lacy culminated her creation *The International Dinner Party*, in which dinner parties were celebrated around the world to honour women in many communities. In Mexico, the *Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres* [National Women’s Movement], to which both my mum and my friend and accomplice Ana Victoria Jiménez belonged, organized a gathering where they warmly honoured Adelina Zendejas, Concha Michel, Marta Trueba and Amalia Castillo Ledón: all extraordinary fighters in journalism and politics, though from different standpoints. Thanks to this project and Lacy’s other projects, it became customary for me to use intimate reunions as an artistic backdrop.

While in Los Angeles I had the privilege of working with Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowits on their collective work *Ariadne: A Social Art Network*, dedicated to feminist public art. Lacy was the director of my Master’s thesis, with the big 1970s title *Feminist Art*. An effective political tool. The first work I participated in was the famous 1978 ‘Take Back the Night’ protest in San Francisco. We paraded out with an allegoric cart carrying a *Virgin of Sorrows* on one side and on the other a skinned lamb dressed as a chorister with pornography spilling out of its stomach. Three thousand chanting and ululating women were supposed to accompany it. Robin Morgan’s phrase ‘pornography is the theory and rape the practice’ was quite famous at the time. Now, this phrase seems rather simplistic and Manichean in light of post-pornography arguments and how the right wing appropriated the line to strengthen censorship.

Two fundamental aspects of the work of these splendid artists interested me. First, they made their art their militancy, which allowed them to break with the status quo of what was considered art; and second, they developed specific approaches to handling images in mass media. Among the issues they addressed were rape and the murder of women. Their 1977 performance piece, *In Mourning and in Rage*, inspired by the serial killings of women by the *Hillside Strangler*, was envisioned for television. It criticised the violence and sensationalism of mass media, which focused coverage on spreading terror and creating a spectacle of the tragedies of the victims.

Other groups were working along similar lines: *Mother Art* (1976) performed at a laundromat on the theme of motherhood, while *The Waitresses* (1978-1985) —who were all artists as well as servers— performed their controversial pieces in restaurants on topics such as how women must always smile even though they receive less in tips than men.

The exhibits presented at the *Woman’s Building* addressed a range of themes, from some that were difficult and barely discussed, such as incest, in ‘*Bedtime Stories*’, to others celebrating love and pleasure, including *The Great American Lesbian Art Show* (GALAS). With the former, I was impressed that information about legal, psychological and medical organisations dedicated to that cause was easily available



to the audience in the exhibition room, and a professional was on hand to provide support to any visitors for whom the exhibit triggered personal memories. As artists, we were also responsible for our audience.

One aspect that impacted me from the start was the value these brave women placed on history and archiving. Projects such as GALAS involved both organizing an exhibit of lesbian art and creating an archive to make available to various institutions. I remember the WB slides archive as a sanctuary: these women fully grasped the importance of preserving the history of women artists, and the need to create their own history. They knew that militancy must also be applied to the archives.

Feminist public artwork also took place in Mexico in the 1970s. One example was the action/rally of feminist and artistic groups on 10 May 1979: Mother's Day. A contingent of women dressed in black placed a funerary wreath on the Monument to Mothers; instead of flowers, it was made up of instruments, pills and herbs used for clandestine abortions. In Mexico City, termination of pregnancy was legalised five years ago. The right-wing retaliated quickly, and today it is still penalized in almost half the states, even in the cases of rape or danger to the mother's life. Women have even been jailed for miscarriages.

In 1980 I worked on the project Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas [Translations: An International Dialogue of Women Artists], a performance aiming to serve as a bridge between feminist artists in Mexico and in the United States. I invited Jo Goodwin, Denise Yarfitz and Florence Rosen, three artists from my generation in the WB, to travel to the Mexican capital and Oaxaca to give lectures and workshops on feminist art while we simultaneously collected information on Mexican artists to share in the USA. The project brought together quite a number of women and the sessions were quite intense; for starters, Mexican feminism was left-wing and very critical of US imperialism. I believe it was also because we used methods that forced the participants to confront both ideas and emotions, which always generates tension.

Today, when I see pictures of the event, what I see are women creating an intense social and cultural revolution with smiles on their faces. We had a lot of fun. Many of them continued to fight with images, such as photographer Yolanda Andrade. Others, like Yan Castro, have soldiered on undaunted; while still others, such as Patria Jiménez, have ventured into institutional politics. Now, a little over three decades later, it is time to re-visit the archives and thoroughly re-evaluate such projects. They have been all but forgotten; at the time they did not fit into what we understood as art or politics.

Something that surprised me at the WB was that professors and classmates, feminists alike, often had altars to "the Goddess" in their homes, through which they sought to recover the power of femininity. Often, it was an image of our Lady of Guadalupe. For me, coming from Mexico, this was the most blatant symbol of female oppression imaginable: it confined women to the role of selfless mothers. So I created a somewhat dramatic series of drawings on the subject, in which a woman trapped in heavy, religious garments was trying to escape from a phallus.

I also did a photocopy series concerning how the imposition of a virginal role of goodness, purity and chastity was another form of rape. When I returned to Mexico, I exhibited both these series, and had them censored. I was surprised; it had not been my intention to offend anyone, only to talk about ideas. Though I am an atheist, I have both Catholic and Jewish relatives and I try to be respectful. When I spoke with those who were displeased with my work, they told me that although they agreed with my ideas, I had used THE image. At that moment I realised that artists play with symbols as easily as doctors deal with entrails, but symbols are truly sacred for some in the same way that others faint at the sight of blood. From then on I started using my own image with a veil, clearly referring to the Virgin but without being the Virgin, and I had no more censorship issues. In that search to work with symbols without causing a violent reaction, I also created a series in which I broke the Guadalupe image, but always left another one behind it. I suppose that is how archetypes work: no matter how hard we try to destroy them, a new version will always appear.

Victor and I returned to Mexico in 1981, and that same year our son Adán was born. Then in 1983, Maris Bustamante and I formed Polvo de Gallina Negra, the first feminist artist group in the country. Our first act was to participate in a rally to protest violence against women, for which we created a potion to hex rapists. The recipe, with ingredients such as 'two dozen eyes and hearts of women who accept themselves as such' and 'seven drops of men who support the fight against rape' was published in the feminist magazine FEM and in an



agenda. Incidentally, *polvo de gallina negra* [powder from a black hen] is a cure for the evil eye. We took that name because we knew that it was hard being a woman, and doubly hard being a woman artist. The challenges we faced as feminist artists were so complex that we wanted the very name of the group to serve as protection.

The group lasted for ten years. One of our biggest pieces was called ¡MÁDRES! [MOTHERS!], for which Maris and I became pregnant, with the help of our respective husbands. As artists, they understood our objective perfectly and were happy to collaborate. The first results of our project were our daughters Yruen and Andrea. Naturally, as feminists we had daughters, who were born only three months apart. Maris later repeated and Neus was born. From that moment, we decreed that only people we had given birth to were eligible for membership in our group.

¡MÁDRES! was a complex project spanning such diverse actions as sending mail art, organizing the contest *Todo lo que siempre quise decirle a mi madre, pero no me atreví* [Everything I ever wanted to tell my mother, but didn't dare to], and working in museums, in the street and in mass media. We baptised these long, difficult-to-define endeavours as “visual projects”.

Possibly our group's most well-known performance was the 1987 piece *Madre por un Día* [Mother for a Day] for Guillermo Ochoa's television program *Nuestro Mundo* [Our World], which reached millions of homes. Generous as always, we decided to share this name with several cherished male community members, including Ochoa; we believed it was unfair for the privilege of pregnancy to belong exclusively to women. The piece caused quite a commotion, and we immediately began to receive calls from offended men and vindicated women. Nine months later, a viewer asked the director if he had given birth to a girl or a boy. To this day, I still find people who remember the programme. I find this almost unbelievable and it speaks of the programme's impact. In another television performance by the group, *Contra el arquetipo de la madre* [Against the Mother Archetype], Maris stuck a stomach on her head, affirming that maternity was for her what art was for Da Vinci: ‘a matter of the mind’.

Over the years, the theme of maternity in my drawings, where I construct my personal experience, has been as essential to me as actual motherhood. It is undoubtedly the most complex, fun, interesting and satisfactory experience of my life. Two of my individual exhibitions addressed the topic: *Novela Rosa o me Agarró el Arquetipo* [Novelette, or The Archetype Took Hold of Me] in the Carrillo Gil Museum in 1987 and *De niñas y pesadillas* [Of girls and nightmares] in the Lourdes Chumacero gallery in 1990.

In the 1980s there was a “boom” and two more feminist art groups appeared. *Tlacuilas* and *Retrateras* both grew out of a workshop on feminist art I taught at the National School of Visual Arts. It concluded in 1984 with the grand visual project *La Fiesta de Quince Años* [The Fifteen-Year-Old Coming Out Party], which involved several performances, including a quinceañera dance, exhibitions and other activities. *Bioarte* was another group that reflected on women's biological processes. In *La Fiesta de Quince Años* they designed some splendid quinceañera formal dresses made out of the plastic tablecloths typically used at inns and taverns. In the process they started a nationwide artistic design trend. The exhibiting artists at the event addressed the quinceañera from different perspectives, such as sexuality, religion and social class. Much like the party, the exhibition had a marvellously kitschy atmosphere that was unusual for the time.

Because the body and identity have long been a topic of reflection in art, many artists such as Edith Medina and Daniela Edburg have tackled topics of gender over the years, whether they consider themselves feminists or not. Others did so from a more clearly feminist stance, such as Andrea Ferreyra with her boxing prize-fighter character *Doña Chuchita* (1999-2000). María Escurra used clothing to visualize the oppression of women in *Guardarropa del ama de casa* [The Housewife's Wardrobe] (2004-2008). Year after year, Elizabeth Romero celebrates the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe—considered by millions as the mother of all Mexicans—with a reflective action involving her own body. Her 2007 *Altar a la Guadalupe* [Altar to the Lady of Guadalupe] serves as an example of this.

Not surprisingly, gender violence is one of the issues most frequently tackled by Mexican feminist artists. Lorena Orozco, for example, has treated the subject of the terror inspired among the female population by the female deaths in Ciudad Juárez in her work *Las vivas de Juárez* [The Living of Juárez] (2004). Orozco interviewed several residents of Ciudad Juárez and shared their stories.



Lorena Wolffier also tackled the subject in her performance *Mientras Dormíamos* [While We Were Sleeping] (2002-2005), in which she marked the injuries of murdered women on her body while a recording of each case was played. As a good 1970s feminist, I have always questioned the need to do violence to one's own body, so I was quite relieved when she talked to me about her piece *Mapa de Recuperación* [Map of Recovery] (2008), which she performed in China. In it she asks a medicine woman to cure on her body the wounds these women had received, while their stories are played in the background. Since 2011 Wolffier has been presenting *Evidencias* [Evidence], a project in which she invites women to share their stories of domestic violence with an object that represents it. Some of the stories are truly blood-chilling. One woman presented a lighter: her partner had doused her in gasoline and lit her on fire.

Another artist, Lorena Méndez, intrigues me because her feminist strategy involves working with the aggressors. She created the group *La Lleca*, which addresses gender topics in performances by inmates. For example, she did a workshop pondering the physical characteristics of men and women, from which came the idea to organize *Concurso* in 2007: a contest to determine whether the inmates or the artist had hairier armpits. She won. In *La Novia* [The Bride] (2009), a piece I find unsettling and don't quite comprehend, Lorena arrived at the prison dressed in white, conversed with the prisoners about personal stories and issues of gender, class, race and discrimination, put cream on different parts of their body and invited them to design a 'wedding photo' with herself and each of them.

Nowadays there are several feminist art groups such as *Las Sucias* [Dirty Girls] and *Madre Araña* [Mother Spider]. The first group has re-appropriated the image of the Virgin and launched a blog and campaign to compile witness stories of apparitions of *la Virgen de las Panochas* [the Virgin of the Pussies]. *Madre Araña* has carried out performances in public spaces that question the beauty standards imposed by globalisation.

A group I find particularly interesting is *Rotmi Enciso and Ina Riaskov's Producciones y Milagros, Agrupación Feminista* [Productions and Miracles, Feminist Collective]. They have been participating in and documenting Mexican feminist and lesbian activism for years and have compiled an extremely relevant archive that can be accessed online. Oddly enough, until we started working with the archive of Ana Victoria Jiménez and reconsidering her work as a documentary photographer, I had not fully comprehended the importance of considering all of our work within the frame of contemporary art. Her valuable photographs have created an interdisciplinary bridge between performance and political action.

Throughout my many years as a feminist, the struggle to uproot the patriarchy within me has been the most difficult of all. It manifests itself in so many ways: from feeling responsible for the well-being of others to difficulty promoting myself as an artist. At this moment, perhaps because I'm working a lot with archives, my biggest issue is to avoid invisibility traps, which I stumble into all by myself. For example, I only recently noticed that, though feminist content clearly permeates all my work, when speaking of feminist art I tended to leave out a lot of my own work that didn't directly involve women. To me, feminism is the fight for women's rights and the questioning of gender stereotypes, but it is also a way of thinking. Feminism is for me the mother of all struggles for democracy and justice, because the "other" is neither stranger nor some dismissible foreigner; it is our father, our son, our partner or our friend, which forces us to negotiate. Feminism means understanding my own oppression and from there empathising with the oppression of others, while also learning to not become an oppressor myself in a reality that systematically assigns us one role or the other.

Since 1998 I have been involved in the project *Pinto mi Raya* [I Draw my Line] with Victor Lerma. It started as an author gallery and soon became a long-term applied conceptual art project that seeks to "lubricate" the art system within our own community. We began organizing exhibits that questioned power relationships within artistic media, such as *Neo-cursi: artistas que realmente saben amar* [Neo-cutesy: artists who really know how to love], which questioned the growing power of curators. We invited several independent art spaces in the area to participate, and on February 14th we invited artist couples to exhibit. Several people were happy to "pair up" in order to participate.

Archiving is the cornerstone of *Pinto mi Raya*. Curiously, in 1991 at least half of the 36 daily newspapers in the capital featured art critiques, but publications on contemporary art in Mexico remained scarce. So we set about compiling all this scattered information. To date, the archive contains approximately 35,000 opinion essays and 200,000 news articles. Several libraries subscribe to this archive and receive information biweekly, as a specialised press service.



In 2011, we celebrated 20 years of work with Archivo Activo [The Active Archive]. For this project we updated and digitalised the compendiums we had been elaborating for some time on different topics such as performances, public art and alternative spaces. Women artists were among the first subjects we catalogued, with some 1,803 texts. Though an impressive number, as a percentage it reflects that even today much less is written about female artists than about their male counterparts. On another note, while updating this compendium I also realised that the term “women artists” worked well for me a few years ago but feels a little constricting today. It still poses gender as a binary and excludes artists of other genders who are also pondering these issues.

In 1995 we began to ask how the protagonists of our archives interacted with each other. The relationship between artists and art critics seemed rife with prejudice and disagreement: something similar to what happens between men and women. In *De crítico, artista y loco...* [On the Critic, the Artist and the Lunatic] we turned the tables, inviting critics to create works of art and artists to publish their opinions in the newspaper columns of the first group. We had quite a range of participants: critics who had never wanted to become artists, those who had tried and failed, critics who took art classes in order to understand techniques, and artists who were also writers. As a result of this interesting exercise, the critics confessed that creating an installation was much more complicated than they had expected, or that they hadn't known how expensive it was to frame a drawing. As for the artists, except for a few brave souls, most were terrified of publicly critiquing the critics. This piece was quite the box office hit; morbidity always sells well. For me, it brought out an interesting parallel: in the art world we have learned to classify ourselves as either artists or critics—with the imbalance this implies—much in the same way we have been taught to accept the binary male/female gender categories that promote power imbalance.

In 1995, we made a piece in response to the two words we were seeing most in the newspapers and least in reality: *Justicia y Democracia* [Justice and Democracy]. We put up a seventeen square metre sign on a screen in the Museum of Modern Art, with a small banner along the bottom reading *Hoy, en este México resquebrajado por la crisis y el escepticismo ¿Qué acción concreta tomarías para llegar a esta utopía?* [Today, in this Mexico torn apart by recession and scepticism, what specific action would you take to reach this utopia?] On a small golden dais in the middle of the space we placed two small chairs and a table covered with several folders: one for the audience to hand in their answers, another with altered texts by Elias Canetti, a third with a personal diary begun the moment we were invited to exhibit, and a fourth containing the project archive of *The Undersigned*, a group that Victor and I belonged to. *The Undersigned* had carried out several negotiations and protests concerning the new National Culture and Arts Fund. From its inception, it had presented some major irregularities, such as the members of the jury awarding scholarships to themselves. We had included our personal experiences and our struggle within the artistic community, but wanted to hear the voice of the public. However, we ended up letting reality take hold of this piece. On opening night, another exhibition of photos by Oliviero Toscani, the photographer for Benetton, also opened. An image of two men hugging each other presided over the show. Outside, a gay couple kissed publicly, and were escorted off the premises. They sent a letter to the press questioning how the museum could open their exhibit with such an image but censure them. We answered them by saying that art and life were certainly two different things, but they could come and kiss on our golden dais because there it would be “art” and they would be untouchable. This also coincided with a gay pride parade, and before it began a contingent entered the museum chanting: ‘Teresa del Conde (the director at the time), el amor no se esconde!’ [‘Teresa del Conde, you don't hide love!'] and came to our exhibit for a “kiss in”.

Feminism says that the personal is political, and I say that the personal is also artistic. Victor Lerma and I married in 1980. Though not a legal requirement, it is customary for women to take the last name of their husbands when they marry. This felt ridiculous to me, like I was becoming my mother-in-law. During the party, my husband and I ran off for a moment with our closest friends to do a performance where we created Mrs. Lerma. Everyone contributed traits and qualities to the character. Mrs. Lerma shows up sometimes in my day-to-day life in circumstances where I am forced to adopt a female role—like when visiting the mechanic or the gynaecologist—and she plays with female stereotypes. One of the most glorious moments of Mrs. Lerma's life was when an encyclopaedia peddler came to the door and, faced with his insistence, she timidly replied that she would have to ask her husband. The indignant seller, bless his soul, asked her if she had ever heard of feminism!!!



On our wedding day, only one friend took pictures, and then he trashed the roll. In 1990, we did an event where even our children participated, called Foto falsa a 10 años de la boda [False photo 10 years after the wedding]. We performed a mock wedding with the help of family, friends and colleagues. We have plenty of pictures of this event; colour, black and white, slides, even video.

Our wedding series continued throughout the decades. In 2002, we celebrated 30 years since we had met with Dualidad Virtual [Virtual Duality], a project where we claimed that we knew each other so well we could create each other's works. We made a series of digital images as if they were each other's. We printed on acetate, so that the environment would be a part of the piece. We also did a performance, playing the story of our relationship while we exchanged clothing through a piece of yarn tied to our ring fingers, which made the clothing reach the other side inside out. For us, it was not transvestism, it was intra-vestism.

In 2005, I wanted a divorce: not because I wanted to leave Victor, but because we had married due to family pressure. When we returned to Mexico after having lived together in the USA, half of my family wouldn't even talk to Victor because we were not married. I had never been happy about having yielded to their pressure. In the end, we did not divorce because the legal process was rather obnoxious and expensive, and the idea seemed to distress our children; so, we resorted to a performance. During a performance soiree in Casa de la Niña, Victor and I arrived each on our own time, wearing each other's clothes inside out. We hung around with everyone for a while, then suddenly there was a heavy knock on the door and Fallaste Corazón by Cuco Sánchez started to play. Our children and some of their friends came in, dressed elegantly as if for a wedding procession, handing out notifications of our divorce. Victor and I exchanged clothing, returning to our own, and threw a bouquet of flowers on the ground. Everyone started begging me to forgive Victor, as if the "breakup" had automatically been the man's fault.

A few days ago, when going through some archive boxes recovered from a wine cellar, I found three pictures of our wedding that one of my brothers had taken.

Feminism has traversed all of our work. Two years ago marked the bicentennial anniversary of Mexican independence and the centennial of the Mexican revolution. We launched the phrase YO NO CELEBRRO NI CONMEMORO GUERRAS [I neither celebrate nor commemorate wars], declaring that war is always a failure of humanity. Whatever the definition of family may be, you would never celebrate one brother hurting another, even if in self-defence, or a wife murdering the husband who had beat her for 30 years. Sometimes violence is unavoidable, even necessary, but it is never a cause for celebration. National holidays should commemorate moments when conflicts were resolved peacefully through dialogue. What is political should be personal.

The piece took on a life of its own. It was presented in an art fair; it appeared in the press and was debated in classrooms. Public demand grew and our friend Rosa Borrás told us she wanted to make pins with the phrase, so we both made them. We also made mugs, hats and T-shirts, so the phrase could permeate daily life. A 1 m x 0.70 m silk-screen print of the motto was included in the Estampas de Independencia y Revolución [Prints of Revolution and Independence] graphics archive of the National Print Museum. Mexico has since gifted the archive to many countries.

In the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo [Collegiate Museum of Contemporary Art] we carried out a performance in which we handed out these pins to the audience, and in exchange they wrote on a blank pin what they celebrated. During the performance we shouted these phrases as if they were political slogans: 'I celebrate the spiral'; 'I celebrate being in harmony with my family'; 'I celebrate a good weekend'.

A feminist's work is never done. First you have to realise your own oppression and make the personal decision to change. Then you must start fighting for the liberation of women, either in theory or in practice. At the same time, you have to archive persistently, almost obsessively. Finally, your archive should acquire a life of its own that encourages and strengthens the achievements of others. Several years ago, Ana Victoria Jiménez —my friend and accomplice in feminism and art since the 1970s— expressed her anxiety to me that, because her only son had passed away and she herself was aging, her archive might be lost after she died. In 2009, Paz Sastré, Karen Cordero, Ana Victoria, Débora Dorotinsky and I formed the group Memora to find a headquarters for the archive. It ended up at a private school, the Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA), because of budget and space issues at the two main public universities that offered gender

studies. We made an exhibit that brought the archive to life, among Karen Cordero's Art History graduate students at the UIA, and the participants of my Art and Gender Workshop (TAG).

Ana Victoria had learned photography so that she could document the feminist movement in which she participated, and she had saved flyers, posters and printed materials. One of my favourite posters is from the first meeting of the most recent feminist wave, against the mother myth. When I first saw it from a distance, I understood that the fundamental symbolic and cultural aspects of the feminist movement in the 1970s have not been sufficiently analysed. They were quite radical in their context, at a time when "politics" was ideologically linked to class struggle and economics.

In re-analysing this archive, which is also my personal history, I noticed that activism and performance —words which we didn't even use back then— were heavily present in most of the demonstrations. I also realised that, unlike the work of the *Generación de los Grupos* [Groups Generation], for example, this movement does not appear in Mexican Art History, even though it constitutes a current facet of Mexican contemporary art. Now if I, who have spent my life studying feminist art, had not noticed this oversight, how could I expect it to be detected by historians less sensitive to the issue? Once again, we have allowed ourselves to fall into the invisibility trap. For now, I hope that making this archive available to researchers will allow them to re-engage with the topic.

My favourite part of this project was working with young female artists on the revival of the archive. Although they consider themselves feminists, most were unaware of the recent history of the movement. Since the archive is quite vast, we decided to concentrate on the poster and sign collection. The group *Las Disidentes* [The Dissidents], formed by Adriana Calatayud, Adriana Raggi and Bruno Bresani, worked off of a poster by Ana Barreto urging women to report rape. The mouths that appeared on the original poster became the theme for inviting students to think about current violence. They could add felt mouths to a tapestry that continued to grow throughout the exhibition.

The group *Las Sucias* [Dirty Girls] was formed by Liliana Chávez, Gina Santos and Sherel Hernández. They focused on a curious little flyer by the *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas* [National Union of Mexican Women], an important left-wing female organisation prior to the feminist movement. The first time we analysed it in TAG, their demands made us laugh: world peace and friendship, equal rights, happiness for our children and democracy. It seemed overly simplistic and reinforcing of the traditional female role. Once we dug a little deeper, however, we found that the topic of childhood was included because these women were fighting to get children's rights approved. Likewise, 'worldwide peace and friendship', which sounded like a slogan for Miss Universe, acquired depth against the backdrop of the Cold War. *Las Sucias* wanted to figure out what women would demand today; they formed specific groups involving their mothers, or their daughters. As one might imagine, whether due to their professional choices or sexual preferences, many of these artists were constantly at odds with their families and conversing with their mothers was a challenge. So they organised a meal and created dynamics. One of the demands they agreed on was the need for happiness and pleasure. This piece also made use of references to *The Dinner Party* that were available in the archive.

At that moment, I didn't have the time to make a personal piece to celebrate the revitalisation of Ana Victoria's archive, because I was working on a similar project for the archive of art critic Olivier Debrouse; but I started it later in 2012. I went through the archive, and for my piece called *Visita al archivo AVJ* [Visiting the AVJ Archive] I wanted to revisit the topic of voluntary motherhood because the first feminist rally I ever took part in was about abortion, as I have already mentioned. I was also motivated by the circumstances in my country, which were discussed earlier. I began by forming the *Taller de activismo y arte feminista* [Activism and Feminist Art Workshop], where we investigated and pondered the issue, generating a complex discussion on the subject of maternity.

After several small group meetings, each of us determined individually which aspect of motherhood we were most interested in and called a dinner party to talk about it with other women in similar circumstances. Some met and talked with young women who were considering whether or not to have children and why: economic reasons, work, societal and family pressure. Others identified with what is known as "the debris of motherhood", which involves women who have decided not to have children but are still responsible for the care of elderly family members, brothers, nephews, etc. Sadly, another topic that requires reflection in today's Mexico concerns more than 90,000 mothers



whose children disappeared or were murdered during the six-year term of Felipe Calderón. After pondering how to encompass such a range of issues, we decided on the concept of “kidnapped motherhoods”, to describe all those that are not voluntary and joyful.

On comprehending the complexity of issues surrounding motherhood, we deduced that there must be facets we hadn’t even thought of yet. We made a Facebook page and created a Twitter hashtag so that other women and men could expand our definition. We received more than 700 answers on a multitude of relevant aspects.

With all this excellent source material we organised a demonstration/performance called La protesta del día después [The Morning After Protest] for May 11th: the day after our traditional, sentimental, extremely commercial, and inescapable Mother’s Day here in Mexico. We decided to leave that particular day alone, using instead the following 364 days to further study the topic. To come up with different slogans, we devised a “jargon walk”, like a runway walk but for jargon. Alongside its meaning as specific or particular use of language, in Mexico the word jerga [jargon] also refers to a cloth used for cleaning floors. Each participant marched past with the slogans they defended, while the cheerers described the issues displayed more thoroughly. We all wore aprons with the motto SAY NO TO KIDNAPPED MOTHERHOOD, designed so that we could take the different slogans on and off with clothes pins. In the “jargon walk” space anyone who wanted to could add their own performance to our demonstration. We ended by raising our jargon/cloth and shouting our motto vehemently while we threw off our aprons.

Today, I am convinced that the day when all motherhoods are voluntary and joyful will be the day when we have changed the world.

