

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

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Author

AMELIA VALCÁRCEL

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**BETWEEN THE LITTLE DEER AND THE
MEDUSA**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

Back when we had to learn basic Latin, we would translate phrases like this one, which I remember from the beginning of the textbook: *Vinum et mulieres laetificant cor* [Wine and women gladden the heart]. It always seemed to me that something was missing, the dative *hominis* [of men] for example. Though it may seem ungracious of me to say as much, I personally did not see how women could gladden my heart; I knew a lot of women and they were not particularly inclined to do so. Perhaps the masculine experience was different, but women were not especially agreeable among themselves. They tended to bare their teeth at each other, though perhaps not so much at the men. Childhood and Latin passed by, and one day I realized that women were taking their anger into public spaces. Feminism clearly did that, but here I am referring to the individual expression of this rage. The thirty-something women were beginning to show signs of antipathy.

The path to self-awareness

‘The difference between happiness and unhappiness is very simple’, wrote Dickens in his *Pickwick Papers*, ‘you have thirty pounds and you spend twenty-nine; you are happy. You have the same thirty pounds and you spend thirty-one ... you are unhappy’. He makes a good point with such a precise measure of happiness; especially because money can be replaced with something else, even intangibles. For example, you desire respect and get it; you are happy. You desire it and do not attain it, even if only by a little, and you are unhappy. Any thinker in espadrilles can shine with the particularly odious cliché that those with least are the happy ones, whether in our societies or better still in the less-developed world. Those open smiles, that joy in being alive... we seem to have lost those qualities here. Even women have ceased to be the source of solace and peace that they once were! Today, they show as much antipathy as anyone else and do not feel themselves bound by any code of pleasantness to raise the level of private or public happiness. There are even some who contemplate the world with something of an irate disposition.

Women did not seem to be an angry sex. I mean that this trait has not been attributed to them in our culture or many others. Generally, they are considered helpful, agreeable, peaceable, eager to please, timid, fearful, cowardly, hypocritical, artful, even shrewd at times ... all qualities that are commonly allied with those who have no means of offending, or of defending themselves from the offenses of others.

Throughout the silenced history of female subjection, which spans millennia, we don’t know if rage has existed or has had to be systematically transformed into longing and weeping. Women have not exactly had many places in which to shout, except into the air. In some festivals, they have been allowed to do so on specific dates. The less scrupulous ones have tended to do it at home, with subordinates, which is not exactly to their credit. The world they inhabit has denied them access to righteous anger. A woman does not become enraged, she shrieks; it is only considered shouting if she is calling for help. At most – and only recently – women are winning the right to get angry, though always in moderation, naturally.

About ten years ago, I saw a dense cloud of rage forming on the horizon. It was the rage of disappointed hopes, the rage of those who must face a world in which they cannot find their place. However, I don’t really know what kind of fuel rage is; I imagine that it can move something, though the conduit and the results elude me. I will try to explain.

In the last two centuries, women have been acquiring, little by little, self-awareness as a sex, as an interest group. In the process, they oppose a patriarchal value system shared by men and women, so they find it dianoetically difficult to point a finger at the other. Let us assume that all the forward leaps by which the West broke through heterodesignations had easily identifiable oppressor groups: the nobility, the capitalists, the enslavers... In this instance, however, despite the intellectual virtue and importance of identifying the opponent, women have never made men responsible for their diminished situation. I say this to point to something beyond – or beneath – intellectual virtue: it is not that feminism at times fails to understand the masculine role in the oppression of women; it understands these matters but pragmatically is not in a position to broadcast them. There is no advantage in it; or at least there has not been so far.

Feminism has always avoided, or even felt panic at the idea that its work and struggle might be interpreted as a war against men. It has habitually sought and still seeks abstract enemies and faceless adversaries: laws, customs, patriarchy, etc. Nonetheless, many enemies to



the liberty of women fulfil Hegel's masterful observation that there are only 'particulars' at work; women could hardly be humiliated, subjected, abused, or ignored unless others — men and women — actually and effectively made it a reality. But perhaps there are still deeper, darker reasons to avoid pointing the finger: if nothing is lived as an injustice, there is nothing to oppose with righteous anger or indignation. The subjugation of women, as I have said, is in the process of being perceived as unjust, but throughout most of the world it is only *in process*. Devices for thought and action are difficult to assemble, and those who feel the greatest outrage are probably those who bear the least humiliation.

The battle of the sexes

I still don't know very well what type of fuel rage is, though I know it is beginning to blossom. The more pertinent question, however, is against what or whom it should be aimed, which takes us to another, better-known question: Is there a battle of the sexes? Since the feminist revolution began a good three centuries ago, the most common response has been to deny it: it does not exist, nor has it, nor will it. The sexes get on well, which is logical, spontaneous, natural; but with each new demand, they will also have to peacefully find a new point of equilibrium. Obviously, it is the proponent¹ — in this case organized feminism — which tends to affirm that the battle exists; the opponent is comfortably entrenched in the system and less likely to recognize it. The processes of self-awareness are neither easy nor simple, nor are they peaceful. The fact that violence against organized feminism has been sporadic or of low intensity² does not imply its past or present absence from the microphysics of masculine power.

For example, does violence against women form part of the battle of the sexes? Almost all those implicated, including ordinary, peaceable people argue that it does not: such violence corresponds to isolated events stemming from accidental weaknesses of character or social position, or from special circumstances associated with alcohol, bad living, a bad upbringing, or with abnormal, bellicose, or marginalized neighbourhood experiences. In sum, it is an accidental accumulation that presents no identifiable structure. Only a few voices will say that part of the violence women suffer — a good part of it — stems from the reaction to their new and hard-won freedoms; that it is an episode of a war in which one of the contenders uses the new space of the law and words while the other makes traditional recourse to force. The same voices will speak of the ongoing violence of the system, but it will not be easy for them to make themselves heard. The shared truth is inscribed within an irenicist idea of progress that understands women's freedoms as "gallant rationalist concessions" emanating directly from the spirit of the age. These have no antecedent claims and have not caused suffering or violence to anyone. The multiple violences against women are smothered because to tally them up would be most inconvenient.

Notably, one way of dissuading feminism from the first was to label it as resentment and those who carried it forward as resentful, but without remembering or keeping score. How is it possible that those who suffer unavoidably do not feel resentment or desire vengeance? There are two possible reasons: either they are assumed to be made of different stuff than normal humans, or they are not allowed to take on suffering as such. This is similar to not allowing a tally, but with an additional evil. No one has the right to suffer for another, only for oneself and under orders not to be caught crossing that border, because "wetback" suffering is embarrassing. And, when one gets this angry at oneself, one becomes self-harming, useless, depressed. Betty Friedan expressed it well in *The Fountain of Age*. Verbalizing and acting seem better strategies than eating oneself alive.

¹ I use the terms "proponent" and "opponent" based on the studies in logic and rhetoric of the Erlangen School.

² This is less clearly the case, as there have been imprisonments, beatings, forced feeding that breaks the nasal septum and many other things.



That day in New York

When all this is transferred to creativity and aesthetics, where the language of specific meanings breaks down, the panorama is even less idyllic. Yet, rage has some stories to tell us; let's recall one of them. On a certain day, specifically 3 June 1968, a thirty-something woman whose surname was Solanas fired several shots at the pop icon Andy Warhol. She had worked with him previously on a couple of vanguard films that Warhol had made at The Factory. Solanas had even proposed another film with her own script, which she titled *Up Your Ass*. We all know these were filthy years, with the progressive element happily caught up in something called "transgressing". Warhol took an interest in the script, then lost interest, along with the script itself. Solanas then took revenge by entering his office and shooting him and his colleagues.

Valerie Solanas is probably not very well-known by lovers of pop, but she has a place in the Third Wave of feminism — the one we are now living — as the author of the singular *SCUM Manifesto*. Supposedly, the initials correspond to the 'Society for Cutting Up Men'; but as a word it literally denotes that dirty froth on the surface of a stagnant liquid. Figuratively, it can be used to identify someone as low or base, associating them with slag, refuse, trash. Solanas was writing the Manifesto, or may have been in the final phase of it when she decided to kill Warhol. They hadn't exactly had much interaction with each other, but Solanas seemed to unleash on Warhol a rage that had been accumulating for a very long time; and in this a backdrop of insanity appears. We see an undoubtedly intelligent woman, who suffered abuse in her home, who occasionally prostituted herself to survive, who was looking for publishers, and who shot Warhol because her main objective — a different environment — was out of reach.

She wrote: 'Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex.'³ That was only the beginning; in the Manifesto she also stated that 'the male is a biological accident' or 'the male is an incomplete female', understood from the perspective of embryonic development. This was not new; psychoanalysis had been saying similar things for some time, only about women. Solanas proceeded to moral attributes: 'The male is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, or love, friendship, affection or tenderness ... His responses are entirely visceral ... his intelligence is a mere tool in the services of his drives and needs'.⁴ Man, here understood as the male, 'is nothing more than a walking dildo', who, passive by nature, desires to rid himself of that stigma by the only means he can find: screwing.

Solanas uses the verb time and again, hammering it in: 'Eaten up with guilt, shame, fears and insecurities and obtaining, if he's lucky, a barely perceptible physical feeling, the male is, nonetheless, obsessed with screwing. He'll swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him.'⁵ She sees war, money, repetitive work, and finally, paternity as derivatives of this single emotional channel: 'The effect of fathers, in sum, has been to corrode the world with maleness. The male has a negative Midas Touch — everything he touches turns to shit'.⁶ With her acid humour, she unpacks all the aptitudes of the typical male: weakness, envy, self-hatred, incapacity for intimacy ... and mixes them with typical lifestyles, from houses in the suburbs to hippies in communes. It all springs from one source: the male does not understand true individuality and is thus only able to think in terms of family or tribe. All his experiences pass through the sieve of his one drive: screwing.

Solanas turns words upon themselves in her rage until sparks fly: 'Having no sense of right and wrong, no conscience, which can only stem from having an ability to empathize with others... having no faith in his non-existent self, being unnecessarily competitive, and by nature, unable to co-operate, the male feels a need for external guidance and control.' In her furious paragraphs, she echoes the modern misogynous traditions surrounding women but reverses the genders. It is as if Solanas, racquet in hand, was one of the first to return the serve on some of the insults produced by that tradition, such as this one: 'Like animals that function the same way since the dawn of time,

³ Solanas, V. *SCUM manifesto*. Original English version taken from http://kunsthallezurich.ch/sites/default/files/scum_manifesto.pdf p.1

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 4.



the human being would find itself stuck in its original state if only women existed. Men are behind all progress. For this reason, women are a heavy burden for them: hindering them from applying all their energy and insatiable curiosity and bold innovation and also blocking their noble initiatives, because they have no capacity to distinguish good from evil for themselves'.⁷ Here's another from the same source: 'Instinct makes women similar to beasts, more dependent, secure, and content'. Another reads: 'Dissembling, in other words lying, is the natural and indispensable weapon of the woman'; or finally, 'the mental deficiency of the woman not only exists, but is furthermore very necessary ... If the feminine faculties reached the same level of development as those of men, the maternal organs would atrophy and we would find ourselves before a repugnant and useless *androgon*. Someone has said that it is not necessary to desire anything more from women except that they be healthy and stupid'.⁸ Within the logic of responding in kind, using the same calibre of munitions, the *SCUM Manifesto* updated the medieval genre of mutual reproach, praise of one's own excellence, and insults between the sexes, which has had its defenders since the Middle Ages. Misogyny had resurged as a front opposed to "sixty-eightist" feminism, and Solanas was adding her voice to the female response. However, there is one significant difference: the catalogue has disappeared. In the medieval genre, with its refrains that carried through to the Enlightenment, the defence against misogyny was always launched by reciting a long list of counter-examples of female achievements in literature, politics, or piety. Usually for better, and occasionally for worse, feminist political theory interrupted this practice and formed a nucleus around the demands for universalism and the same measuring stick.

Solanas sought to emphasize the manifestation of rage and nullify the paradigm. First, she reduced all characteristics to a single entity, the male as a being that was always the same, identical to himself, and only plural in appearance. Then, she denied all respect to the figure it sought to incarnate by stating that the average male had not the remotest idea of universalism, bewildered as he was by a single feature of his anatomy. She indicated that far from being a measure for anything, the male was merely biological and had become technically non-essential for the maintenance of the species. Dysfunctional, though unfortunately powerful, the sensible thing would be to do away with him. Solanas made no pretension of achieving a later peace or arriving at a new sexual contract. She simply expressed her rage without nuance and almost without limit. The only parallel that can be found is in clerical misogyny: Solanas was not interested in the ultimate goal of preserving the species that was implied by the sexual strategy.

Preserving the species

Let's review for a moment what the *SCUM* text thought of the world, as a whole and in parts. Philosophy, morals, and religion were male inventions based on sex, but the author's creativity had declined. Her final diagnosis was that the world is absurd. It was true; hers was. The male was obsolete, brainless, without morals. The world she invented for women was simple: anything that did not serve male needs was wrong and it was abominable that any woman would refuse the role imposed upon her, specifically, to be a woman within that order. Throughout her analysis, we can hear echoes of Beauvoir in the philosophical concerns that Solanas attributed to her contemporaries: 'So they label the male condition the Human Condition, pose their nothingness problem, which horrifies them, as a philosophical dilemma, thereby giving stature to their animalism, grandiloquently label their nothingness their "Identity Problem", and proceed to prattle on pompously about the "Crisis of the Individual", the "Essence of Being", "Existence preceding Essence", "Existential Modes of Being", etc. etc.'⁹ Women, by contrast, know perfectly who they are and what is wrong. The only wrong is to hurt others, and 'the meaning of life is love'.

For Solanas, male rebellion was always a farce: some were on top and wanted to remain there, and those below wanted to rise to the top and stay there. Ideas passed through their hands to be used, but never to be handled or believed. The male never shared ideas or freedom, because what mattered to him was status, prestige, social classes. Thus, the goal of education was not to educate, but to exclude. In sum: '[...] this is the male's 'society', made by him to satisfy his needs. [...] The male changes only when forced to do so by technology, when he has no choice, when 'society' reaches the stage where he must change or die. We're at that stage now; if women don't get their asses

⁷ J. P. Moebius, *La inferioridad mental de la mujer*, (1900), Ed. Esp. Bruguera 1982, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ Solanas, *Ibid.*, p. 7.



in gear fast, we may very well all die.¹⁰ She concluded that the situation could not be resolved by talking, because dialogue has no place on the male horizon. In reality, the only thing that works is contempt. It permeates everything: relations between the sexes, between individuals, all of social life.

Finally, Solanas arrives at art. Underneath the name and the aura of 'Great Art' or 'culture' she finds a ridiculous, infantile, fictitious, typically male world that men have constructed to see themselves as winners. It's a complete fraud; everyone knows it but is afraid to admit it. Solanas does not clarify whether she is referring to everything prior to the vanguardists also, or only to what came after them. From her way of expressing it, probably the latter. In any case, she writes: "'Great Art' proves that men are superior to women, that men are women, being labelled 'Great Art', almost all of which, as the anti-feminists are fond of reminding us, was created by men. We know that 'Great Art' is great because male authorities have told us so, and we can't claim otherwise, as only those with exquisite sensitivities far superior to ours can perceive and appreciate the slop they appreciated."¹¹ Culture is formed by people very much without their own world, who want 'to be admired for admiring'. They are obliged to 'see beauty in turds because, so far as they can see, turds are all they'll ever have'. The male artist is 'totally sexual, unable to relate to anything beyond his own physical sensations'. They have undermined the confidence of women, who consequently renounce it; but to live in the margins is to reinforce the system.

Deflated expectations

I'm coining this concept as a sort of chimera between sociology and economy, because it seems a good idea to me. If someone is promised something and for whatever reason does not receive it, how do they feel? Don't they feel cheated? The sensation is one of having been defrauded.

Women have been promised important things, the most important being equality, since the early victories of the feminist movement and the suffragettes. Time and again, they find that what they have obtained is not at all what was promised. I will use some lines that Maryse Choisy dedicated to the 1960s as an example:

The new slavery, who was happy? The women. Who had been tricked once again? The women. They had believed that thanks to their good move, thanks to their strength of protest they had finally and completely earned their citizen badges. It took thirty years of war and twenty-five more of peace to realize that men had only granted them the right to work because they needed workers after two collective massacres. If they obtained the privilege to be members of parliament or judges, they never became ministers or magistrates in robes and, with the same diplomas in hand, were always less well paid than men. Even when they did attain high posts, their friends had a curious tendency to think of them as typists. Mrs. Debray, the municipal councillor who for many years was responsible for the budget of Paris, which is no small thing, told me how very often her male colleagues would ask her if she could 'type this up for me?'¹²

Feminism in the 1980s identified such practices and referred to them collectively as the *glass ceiling*. Apparently, women had the same possibilities and opportunities as men, but they never moved upward in the same proportion as men. Men and women were equally represented in the lower echelons, and the proportion was around 60/30 in mid-level jobs; but when it came to the very top posts, women either disappeared or showed up in scandalous percentages of 1, 2, or 3 per cent. Having given this invisible — but clearly effective — barrier its lively name, women set out to break through the glass ceiling with the quota system, in theory.

They were really talking about formal organizations. Feminism in the 1980s quickly began counting heads, and had statistics available within a decade. The 1990s showed that the glass ceiling appeared and reproduced itself in many spheres of power, informal as well as organizational. I directed two research projects during the late 1990s. The findings indicated that where authority and prestige were in

¹⁰ Ibid. 7-8.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 11.

¹² Maryse Choisy, *La guerre des sexes*, Publications Premieres, 1970, p. 224.



play, co-optation reigned as the mode of access and women disappeared from all the higher echelons. In fact, I identified at least six great systems in which the glass ceiling was functioning at full capacity: politics, information, corporate structures, economic power, knowledge, religion, and creativity. Another possible way of putting it: politics, money, opinion, and respect.

The case presents itself in this way: after the unquestionable victories of the 1970s, which laid the groundwork for the contemporary feminist agenda — including sexual and reproductive rights and rights to power — at least two generations of women have come into the world convinced that everything had been accomplished already. They have also been socially inoculated to believe they actually have equality. Indeed, they do have some things: they have been educated in the same spaces as their male contemporaries and have accordingly lost their reverence for them; they are more highly educated than any prior generation; they can contemplate a horizon in which gynophobia is not expressed in explicit laws; they have diplomas and drive. Nonetheless, like the generations before them, they get lost in the side corridors of the system. They never arrive. Adding some standard generational individualism to the mix, they fail to see how they could transform their personal rage at being exposed to the elements into a common agenda. It seems that others — other men, other women — always get there faster and have better contacts.

Ten years ago, the thirty-something women were beginning to show their discontent, their rage. Now, they are forty-something and the thirty-somethings are no less angry. However, I still can't make out what kind of fuel rage is; I only see that it is a novelty for women and I imagine that it is partly due to a new imposture-representation of the physical individual and partly attributable to deflated expectations. Even so, I find it consoling that it comes out — even if only through the eyes — because to keep it inside is far worse.

The fate of female talent

Stendhal wrote that he felt sorry for geniuses who were born women because they would be lost to humanity. He wasn't especially misogynist, so we can take his lament as a sincere one. Women would never find a place to grow, nor help, nor a way forward. After much thought, he concluded that the only remedy left to them was to turn on themselves and self-destruct. In a world that upholds the old, common norms, rebellion is impossible and destroys possibilities for growth. Rage neither develops character nor inspires trust. Even the most ill-tempered genius must be seen as having the best manners by a very select group of loyal supporters. Schopenhauer is irrefutably the best example of this: never was there a more active misanthrope who more carefully tended to his support group, and with patent results as he became one of the most influential modern thinkers.

However, grudges do little to increase fame. Very possibly, over the centuries we find some small signs of all this hidden and transferred rage. St. Teresa of Avila had one of her texts censored because she protested that there were simple women who knew more than the most acclaimed theologians. A similar note can be traced in women writers; like the flash of a fingernail (or claw) that is just as quickly hidden from view. One must not challenge the order that allows one to be, precisely because it does allow one to be.

A little later on, though not until the late nineteenth century, disbelief in male superiority acquired a sharper edge and created a chink, a crack. Looking through it from this side, we can verify that very little got through. Where open rebellion is scarce — again to uphold the fragile statute of consent — then we are likely to encounter quite a lot of self-punishment. This seems to be exactly the case. If you look at the rates of suicide, alcoholism and miserable deaths among twentieth-century female creators, you get the strong impression that they are an extremely high-risk group. A decade ago, in a superb article, Benjamin Prado wrote a chilling review that was mainly concerned with female writers.¹³ His devastating calculations of suicides and self-harm indicated that society does something to exceptionally talented women that dashes them to pieces. I think it could easily be expanded to include the multitudes of women who have tried to get ahead in any of the arts. I would suggest that male malevolence is difficult to bear, while to expose it is forbidden due to the survival of patriarchal values. Women walk around like ghosts, blinded and stumbling against all the corners of side streets and alleys.

¹³ "Mujeres solas en la oscuridad" [Women alone in the darkness], *Opinión*, 11-2-1998.



Beauvoir was born a century ago. In her memoirs, she writes 'I had become different and I needed a different world around me'. She also tells of a sensation: 'I would never progress, I would never do my great work. For the first time I thought it would be better to be dead than alive'. Though she claimed that she 'loved herself enormously', or perhaps because she did, she confessed:

'This could not last; it did not last. Always the same, seemingly unresolvable conflict! A burning awareness of my strength, of my **superiority over all men**, of what I could do; and the feeling of the complete futility of all these things! No! It cannot go on like this! But it did. Perhaps it will be like this forever after all'.¹⁴

What I am going to do now is almost like trying to split hairs, but it will serve to distinguish between misogyny and gynophobia. I will refer to misogyny as the "normal" way patriarchy functions in the systems of exclusion — accepted by both sides — and of self-esteem — also common to both parties — that are currently operational. Each sex knows what is expected of it and things only get pushy along a very narrow border of confrontation. All societies, including our own, are misogynous. They limit women and women accept it; women limit themselves to rightly avoid "something worse". They stop going, even to the places where their talent or ambition would nudge them, and modulate themselves 'according to places, according to times, according to...'. It is a known phenomenon, for example, in employment. Over-qualified women accept mid-level jobs where they can enjoy a degree of success without needing to compete. The same can occur in creative work. The limits placed on female creativity and recognition admonish those who find themselves there to be quiet. Girls in co-educational schools today operate no differently: they hide their intelligence, they do not speak, they avoid confrontation. They don't want beatings of any kind.

Misogyny is how the system runs. Gynophobia seeks a target, takes aim, and pulls the trigger. Like those who take aim at the wooden ducks in the funfair stalls, they select a victim, which requires an act of volition. It might surface in the removal of a good section of dialogue from the film *Cleopatra* ('if a woman spoke to me like that I'd slap her across the face', one of the producers apparently commented as he struck it out) or in the labour market (where, by tacit agreement women never enter certain sectors) or in seeking the downfall of certain prestigious female figures, to keep them from creating a different atmosphere or setting an example. Obviously, misogyny and gynophobia are not mutually exclusive, rather, they are mutually supportive. Gynophobia tries to castigate what prevalent misogyny has pointed out as punishable.

Rage and self-destruction among so many female creators warns us that they are desperate. In the bullring, however, it's more entertaining when the animal thrashes about and moans. If you are writhing, it is because you are in pain. If you are in pain, you deserve it. You rush forward and hurt yourself? Perfect; we already know how fragile your mental recourse — read intelligence here — is. Orlane dear, please don't hurt yourself more. If you aren't frightening, I'm afraid you're just laughable.

¹⁴ *Memorias de una joven formal*, Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1973, p. 283.



Two by two: a phenomenology

At times gynophobia has even more fun, when it uses “nets for small fish”: along the lines of promoting young women over mature ones, glibness over intelligence, or the bedroom over merit. This is all rather commonplace. The net that gives perspective is this one: a woman isn't compared to a man in the same category (homologous in the true sense), women are compared to other women. This one is measured against that one, the two are compared in order to eliminate one and keep the other as the sole representative of her gender. “I want this one, not that one”, “she'll do or she won't do”, as if they were only measurable against each other. Behind this, it is understood that we only compare women to each other, as they themselves do, so that they will hasten to comply with our divine commands, which is where they acquire the capacity for sparkle and individuality. This is why female creators so often hate being in exclusively female collections; they believe that by evading it they will evade this old strategy. They want to figure among their peers, but why do all their peers have to be women? They want to be chosen for the other team which, painfully, only wants one female button in their lapel ... for show.

Consequently, some women aim for “the middle road”. The marriage bed seems a proven path, since *más tiran tetas que carretas* [a pair of breasts is more powerful than a yoke of oxen]. A woman's most basic unit of talent can be applied to appearing dim-witted and happy-go-lucky, while craftily seeking to become attached to some venerable old tree. Of course, if the tree is really big, nothing will grow in its shade, and that much pre-meditation is virtually impossible to find in the company of true talent; the two tend to be at odds. While male creators often find patrons or even devoted patronesses, female creators have no such luck. They must make do on their own, or find protection through the insidious bed chamber. Many uneven matches between male artists and females have such antecedents, and some consequences. The first and most obvious strategy is well-known the world over: waiting for age to do its work. Some women have had to limit their talent to caretaking in hopes of being included in the will.

For those who opt for the common path, forming a couple also involves risk. There is no mathematical equation that enables two to remain two if they unite as a couple, but only for one to be annihilated on the altar of the other in a system of “shared liabilities”. In Spanish law, shared assets involve those things that a married couple possesses which are not the property of either individual spouse, because they have been obtained by both together. This is the most common and widespread practice: what's yours is mine and vice-versa. Shared liabilities involve a system of symbolic compensation in a couple by which any increase to one is subtracted from the other. It is not commutative, subtracting from one does not mean that the other receives anything: let's say that it only serves to subtract. Consequently, alert males do not look for equals, so the principle will not be applied to them. As for women ... they sit on a sabre's edge; in these times of liquid love they don't know which card to keep. They want it all.

Independent women knew what was at stake half a century ago.¹⁵ It was one or the other, that was the harsh law. If independence, then singleness. If a partner, then risk and probably annihilation of the free self. Now, because the “broken record” that so tirelessly insists on equality between the sexes has been playing for some time, people have believed it to a certain point. However, it also means that women under forty have come to believe themselves to blame for everything they have not achieved. If they cannot have success, love, and family at the same time, they must be doing something wrong. In reality, these three things don't mix well for women. To borrow from an old story, it is as difficult as ferrying a wolf, a sheep and a lettuce across a river without any of them being eaten. You would have to take them only two of them at a time and it would involve more than one trip. The same applies to this triad, it only works for an overcommitted person who has at her disposal the unlimited hours ... of other women. I say women, because the obligations of women, which have not lapsed, range from making conversation to making meals to dressing others to ... all those things that *laetificant cor (hominis)*. Women

¹⁵ An example of this is the self-examination of Beauvoir in *La force de l'âge*: ‘I never wanted to see my own flesh in someone else's flesh. I also had such little affinity with my own parents that any children I might have had would have seemed foreign to me ... No affective ghost incited me to maternity. Moreover, it did not seem compatible with the path I was taking: I knew that I would need a lot of time and freedom in order to become a writer. I was not against playing a hard game, but this was not a game: the value, the very sense of my life was in question. For me to have risked it all would have required seeing a child as an object as essential as one of my works: that was not the case.’ Op. cit. Gallimard, 1960, p. 92.



don't have such women to gladden their hearts. Equality brings with it new ways of living and "taking time out" which still lack social compensation.

Achilles and the tortoise

More than a decade ago, in *La política de las mujeres* [The Politics of Women], I wrote that:

Women who are now awakening to citizenship and adult life will not settle for what has been achieved, not only because it is fragile, but because there is so little of it. I do not believe they will be satisfied in the lower ranks and mid-level administration. I do not think they will fulfil their educational aspirations by being primary and middle school teachers. I do not think they feel comfortable with how the free market labour world works, ruled by informal networks to which they have no access.¹⁶

Have we made any progress? Undoubtedly, we have gained ground, little by little. We lost some of our momentum during eight years of conservative government, which we have recovered and increased. However, there is an imposing truth here that in spite of everything, very little has been achieved. Why has there been no rebellion? Anyone from the old school would tell you that the inert mass is already living above its expectations and doesn't know how to handle it. Actually, so much has been achieved that, except for a handful of elite neurotics, no one is asking for more. Conservative men and women have no concern for the discriminated elite. I have heard it myself: they live and breathe for what happens to the moaning masses.¹⁷

Another explanation would suggest that women have been atomized as individuals who individually seek their own success, and what we see floating in the atmosphere is the confused sum of their wills. Meanwhile, there is still one more matter to bring to the table, to see how it combines and compares with this: the sense that with every advance the finish line seems further away.

We have all undoubtedly noticed the effect of perspective by which mountains occupy more of the horizon from a distance. As we approach them, they become lower and are substituted by medium-sized ones, until what was virtually a curtain of stone eventually disappears from sight. In the same way, at the beginning of any of its phases, feminism has known how to identify the final objective, but it dissipates and disappears as specific obstacles appear and must be overcome.

Calculating final objectives is a matter of situational intelligence, of breaking them down into meaningful schemes and interpreting symptoms; but to confront a specific situation involves strategy, means and ends, prudence. It is relatively easy, once a universal theory of justice has been affirmed, to state a will to achieve parity in a relevant sphere, which is happening. It is rather more complicated to identify the means and reach a consensus about them. However, we do know a few things.

We know about numbers; that they are not based on clear qualitative divergence but on ingrained ideas and intertwining support networks. Sometimes women with ambition must feel that they are living within a paradox: come on, someone must certainly recognize the feeling. Achilles will never catch up to the tortoise because they are separated by a prior distance: the tortoise started out ahead. Achilles may be the greatest runner, but first he will have to run half of the distance that separates them; then half of the half, and so on. The tortoise will maintain its initial advantage forever, no matter how slowly it advances. The tortoise has worked hard for it and has a lot of support. Almost all reptilian brains — and we all have one, men and women alike — function at their own rate.

Linda Nochlin began her classic article 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' by demonstrating the paradoxical trap we fall into when we try to answer that question as it is formulated. In responding, we run the risk of "swallowing the bait, hook, line, and sinker". Rather, it is more interesting to ask what art is and why it is so resistant to female talent. In classical art, there are almost no women

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 193.

¹⁷ It is true that the context for this was the Law of Equality, which was being debated in a summer course in El Escorial. These comments were made by two female parliamentarians of the conservative Popular Party during a Round Table; but it seemed to me that the public in attendance was not convinced that discriminating against the elites was unimportant.



creators ... in the same way there have been no great tennis players among Eskimos. It doesn't seem that we can blame it on 'the horoscope, hormones, menstrual cycles, or empty internal spaces'. Women have a problem, but presenting any human problem implies re-interpreting the nature of the situation. It is this: 'those who have privileges inevitably cling to them and hold them tight, regardless of how marginal the advantage obtained, until they are obliged to abandon them by any other kind of superior power.' As I said, the tortoise has always been ahead, and female runners have been better represented by Atalanta than Achilles.

Raised by a bear, Atalanta became the servant of Artemis and a great huntress, but she mainly excelled at running. No one could outrun her, not even the father of Achilles, until a young man, aided by Venus, challenged her to a race. Every so often, Venus dropped a golden apple; Atalanta stopped to pick them up, and in doing so lost her advantage. As Nochlin astutely pointed out, not only is the great canon constructed against female talent, but women have a lot more to lose than their chains. Patriarchy is a very complex world of implicit understandings. Women do not rebel because they are atomized, but also because they have a lot to lose. I suspect that every woman in elite spheres, which are scarce by definition, knows which apples she has stopped to pick up. We would do well to talk about that.

Humour is required

Humans are highly social beings, to the point that we only complain if there is someone to hear it. I will conclude by saying that feminist art has an unmistakably choleric vein. On the other side of the river, you would have to explain why and how women are represented; on this side, we need to know what they create. But the truth is that violence is inscribed in the production on both sides. For three decades, everything in feminist art has been butchery. I can verify that the battle of the sexes is being expressed in art, and that the victims are all in the same camp. The samples of what we could call "assertive art" out there seem a lot like concoctions based on role reversals and Jungian retractions of the collective memory. They fundamentally consist of inverting the most redundant iconography to place males and females in mirrored situations, or of developing the iconography of the most archaic female deities. None of them find their way into the canon or even make the cut to get into the big galleries. There are certainly a lot of transgressive authors, but very little audience for so much rage, which needs an outlet lest it turn to bitterness.

You have to mix some humour into it, and I dedicate this point to my esteemed Guerrilla Girls. Though I may believe that the time for humour is at an end — because the obligation to apply humour and wit is also burdensome if it is socially imposed as the only path for critique — we have need of it for a while longer. Humour is one of the ways in which intelligence protects its wounds. However, I should warn that this playing field offers us no advantage: feminist humour requires a sharpness that coarse joking and misogyny can easily sidestep. I am not proposing that we compete in the arena of humour, because a bad joke will always hit the mark before clever sarcasm; nor am I suggesting an obligation to laugh off what we have endured. I don't seek to perfect the duty to assimilate oppression as if there were something funny about it, or to refine the nervous laugh with which women so frequently respond to misogyny. I only suggest we let humour take the lead, though I know full well that this is a serious and urgent matter, because self-esteem and life projects are in play.

In consequence, there are collectively imposed strategies for head counts and quotas. Assertive strategies are also being imposed in the realm of "prestige", because when Lady Prestige lifts her peplum, her hairy legs show. The measures that have promoted parity in politics should be extended to other qualified areas.

At ARCO 2005, a manifesto was promoted that can still be signed. To date, it has been cited in a non-legislative proposal of the Spanish Parliament, but I am not aware that it has had any other effects. The manifesto included some rather specific demands. First, to create a commission to study real numbers related to the presence of female artists in events and exhibitions financed by public funds: to take a count as a necessary starting point. Second, to implement measures to ensure that female artists can work in an impartial environment, which includes a public acquisitions policy. Third, to implement feminist measures including the establishment of quotas.

If only things were different, if only there was no oppression or widespread and abundant discouragement, if misogyny and gynophobia were not still calmly seated in their headquarters... There are still too many "if onlys". We will enjoy it when it happens; but for now,



female artists need space and feminism also must come to an aesthetic understanding of itself. Ethics and aesthetics flow together asymptotically, but are separated in space and time. Feminism is ethical and political, with implications for totalization; its aesthetics allow for differentiating traits that the universalism of ethics cannot tolerate. Someone has to carry the torch of the early vision up the mountain. Feminist theory should do that; raise its hand tirelessly to point toward the summit, and make a collective memory by which we can locate ourselves on the road that takes us there. But art is something different, it is life. Solanas wrote as much; the same Solanas who raged against art that was merely contemplative and passive, which she called 'the drunken stupor of the poor'. After such an invective, she assured us that in its maximum expression, 'the only Art, the only Culture, will be conceited, kooky, funky, females grooving on each other and on everything else in the universe'.¹⁸

For now, our female creators continue their conflicted existence between the *Venadita*, the little deer, and Medusa. We lack the distance that allows the aesthetics to appear. Someone who is sad cannot write a magnificent poem about pain. Becquer wrote how a writer had to be removed from a feeling before it could be expressed masterfully. The rage that overflows feminist art is still only half-way to achieving its aesthetic. It is immediate, visceral, emotional, direct. In other words, it is not yet aesthetic; distance is required.

¹⁸ Solanas, *Ibid.* p. 9.

