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The Inclusion Of Feminist Art in Mexico¹

In art history, feminist theories underline the silent presence and dismissal of women based on a supposedly natural incapacity for artistic creativity, preventing them from openly expressing their opinions and social and political condition.

Women in art have a medium, language, to express themselves and communicate what they have experienced from their own perspective. It speaks to their experience, even if it transgresses the commonplace, as well as what happens or doesn't happen to them, and how their emotions are suppressed or guided. It's a "dual voice" that lets women be heard in writing or figures. Similarly, feminism shows how these obstacles prevent female artistic creativity from expressing itself and communicating experiences to other women, exteriorizing and sharing being a woman.²

However, women's art is not only repressed: it is condemned. It is made invisible, barring the manifestation of intra-personal relations by considering female artists as non-normative, marginal, or their work minor or informal creations. Roxana Sosa adds to this idea that the history of art favors one sex over the other, tending to exclude women from the list of the main artistic movements on which the history of Western art has been built.³ For that reason, gender relations acquire a solid, undefinable structure using a stereotype in its different contexts, both public and private. In response, feminist theories contribute elements to transform these forms of behavior ruled by stereotypical prejudices, to achieve an equitable society that can uncover the different manifestations of art and eliminate discrimination.

For her part, Pilar Vicente de Foronda adds that the art history that we get from manuals, books, catalogues, etc., has silenced women creators,⁴ and, as incongruous as it might seem—at least in many of our country's Fine Arts

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Schools—, both male and female students become familiarized with very few women artists and are only able to identify a few exceptions when they finish their major. What's interesting about this is that most gallery managers/owners, museum directors, art critics, or people linked to this milieu have been educated in a similar system in which masculine interests prevail. Feminist theoreticians deal with situations like these.

Art and Feminism

Women have always made art, but in the late 1960s, feminist efforts and achievements emerged. In the 1970s, women's creations became visible; and women artists began to be recognized, becoming part of art history and female artistic practices.⁵

At the same time, feminist artists were making their mark, ensuring that the female experience be seen as just as valid as the male experience. Thus, they carved out a principle for awakening consciousness: their method was to use their own experience as the most valid form for formulating a political analysis, as they reformulated new roles in society both for men and for women. Therefore, the feminist movement examines the representations of women in art as well as art made by women. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, feminism has expanded its observation to the needs of different women and cultures, making clear the need to talk about “feminisms” and not “feminism.” The term “feminism” evokes the struggle for equality between women and men. The 1960s and 1970s in the United States saw a way of seeing art in which the way of representing the woman's body is different: for the first time it was women who were representing themselves through their own artistic vision.⁶

It should be pointed out that previous artists did represent other women, but feminism makes a very strong

statement, since it emerges from the influence of the literature of feminists who worked on identity, gender, and politics. Among them are Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Judith Butler, and Linda Mochkin. Together with them are the precursors of feminist art, such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, who proposed art done by and for women. Translating this thinking into artistic production was called vaginal iconology (allegory), *Female Imaginary*, which reformulated feminist art.⁷

Women have had —and have— to overcome huge obstacles down through history to be able to develop their capabilities and be duly recognized. Despite this, they have made art, although their names often do not appear in textbooks or encyclopedias. This is because art is a need of the artist herself, an opportunity to speak, denounce, document the control, repression, and exploitation she suffers, to demand to take control of her own body, to have the ability to decide her own actions, and talk about the sexual or symbolic violence she is subject to, and thus recover the representation of her female body. It is a moment to express herself with imagination, to be authentic and spontaneous, a moment that leads to personal realization when she contemplates the body with a connection between the corporeal and the subjective.⁸

Women artists became aware of the social and economic transformations that began in the 1960s and participated by reflecting them in their work, testing out ways of articulating ethnicity, social class, and gender, as well as fighting against traditional axioms of identity.⁹ These artists showed art as a tool capable of expressing questions involving difference and identity, the processes of female emancipation, the problems surrounding artistic creation, as well as the relations of domination between the feminine and the masculine. In this way, female creation reflects in their work their own space and begins a different way of handling codes of expression with different materials and new techniques, distancing themselves from the traditional media exclusive to male artists.

In this context, the generation of women attracted by the so-called “second wave” of the feminist movement became involved in the quest for “female identity.” Their searches have been multiple and varied, not only because of the supports they used —ranging from writing, painting, and sketching to performance or xerography—, but also because of their particular vision of how women artists imbue their production with those searches.¹⁰

Feminist Art in Mexico

In the entire first half of the twentieth century in Mexico, women artists were marginalized both in teaching and participating in exhibitions, reinforcing traditional roles and female stereotypes.¹¹ This was the case despite feminist thinking and the fact that there was already a list of painters like María Izquierdo, Isabel Villaseñor, Lola Cuento, Aurora Reyes, Nahui Olin, and Frida Kahlo, as well as immigrant women artists like Remedios Varo, Olga Costa, Tina Modotti, and Leonora Carrington, among others. They were not as frequently mentioned then as they are now, although some of them are not recognized even today.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the concepts of feminist art in Mexico questioned the artistic and its manifestations as well as the political, and an artistic generation was formed made up by male and female artists joining together in what were called “groups.” These groups were characterized by creating an alternative to elitist, a-political, mercantilist art. Their work was seen as combative art that dealt with the reality of the country, whether through environmental photographs, performances, urban poetry or engravings with social content, unconcerned with fashion or artistic currents.¹²

The Feminist Art Proposal

In the first place, they proposed taking art out of museums and galleries, and that’s what they did, holding events in the street to have more contact with the public as the main way for disseminating their art. The artistic groups maintained, “Feminist Art is an eminently political movement, created by women artists interested in participating actively in the field of culture,” proposing the following:

- Promoting women artists’ work, recovering those who have been forgotten or defending their rights as professionals;
- Working on themes linked to feminist issues, with a constant critical outlook on an exclusively masculine world;
- Influencing society to change or replace sexist images generally associated with women.

Different artistic groups were formed on a feminist basis.

One of the first Mexican art collectives was the No-Group, active from 1977 to 1983, with the participation of, among others, Maris Bustamante, Melquiades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez, and Rubén Valencia. They innovated the Mexican art scene by involving the public in what Bustamante called “montages of visual moments,” that is, performance. These collectives of artists called themselves “cultural workers” and were the beginning of a new proposal for artistic creation and for the use of innovative materials.

The groups coexisted as artists’ collectives that stood out in the context of feminist art groups in 1983, seeking to renovate the country’s artistic system by creating new critical spaces where artists had the opportunity to create public, political art, and thus participate in the process of change in Mexico and the world:

- *Tlacuilas* (Women Scribes/Painters) and Portraitists emerged in 1983 out of the Feminist Art Workshop coordinated by Mónica Mayer, with members who were art school students and women historians, painters, and photographers. Their research was based on the situation of Mexican women visual artists and how they managed to—or intended to— become artists and the difficulties they faced. To do this, they interviewed about 400 visual artists. The group’s main event, with both artistic and sociological aims, was the xv Fiesta, held at the San Carlos Academy in 1984; it was an important event for society as it represented artistically our country’s idiosyncrasy through performance.
- The Bio-Art Group began in 1983 with a clear interest in political art, social change, and new languages. Its main topic, women’s biological transformations and metamorphoses, was expressed in the mural *Women Artists-Artistic Women*, at the Toluca, State of Mexico Fine Arts Museum.
- I should underline the group Black Hen Powder, founded in 1983,¹³ considered pioneers of feminist art in Mexico. Its members, among others Mónica Mayer, Maris Bustamante, and Herminia Dosal, carried out

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very solid actions for more than ten years and included both men and women artists. The group deserves mention because it contributed reflections for situating women in a female artistic position.

- Among the other groups were Pentagon Process, Look, Germinal and Sum, all short-lived.¹⁴

As can be seen, this pioneering generation of feminist artists proposed new images of women to replace the stereotypes imposed by a patriarchal system. However, women's art continues to be largely invisible. The work of the groups mentioned above requires a detailed analysis to understand their contribution to women's empowerment, not only in art, but in all contexts, as a valuable tool against exclusion. **MM**

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Notes

1 Part of this article was published in issue 42 of the magazine *Alternativas en psicología* (Mexico City), in 2019.

2 Rocío de la Villa Ardura, "Crítica de arte desde la perspectiva de género," *Investigaciones Feministas* vol. 4 (2013), pp. 10-23.

3 Roxana Sosa, "Modelos de prácticas artísticas en torno a la sociología feminista," *Asparkía* no. 21 (2010), pp. 65-73.

4 Pilar Vicente de Foronda, "La mujer como objeto de representación hasta principios del Siglo xx," *Atlánticas. Revista Internacional de Estudios Feministas* vol. 2, no 1 (2017), pp. 271-296.

5 Yamileth Chacón Araya, "Una revisión crítica del concepto de creatividad," *Actualidades investigativas en educación* vol. 5, no. 1 (2005).

6 Soledad Novoa Donoso, "Historia del arte y feminismo: relatos lecturas escrituras omisiones," *Seminario Historia del Arte y Feminismo: relatos lecturas escrituras omisiones*, Fine Arts Museum, Santiago, Chile, (2013), pp. 11-18.

7 Rocío de la Villa Ardura, "Crítica de arte desde la perspectiva de género," *Investigaciones Feministas* vol. 4 (2013), pp. 10-23.

8 Elena Sacchetti, "El cuerpo representado y actuado en el arte contemporáneo," *Revista de Antropología Experimental* no. 10, (2010), pp. 35-53.

9 Lourdes Méndez, *La antropología de las artes plásticas: aportaciones, omisiones, controversias* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2003).

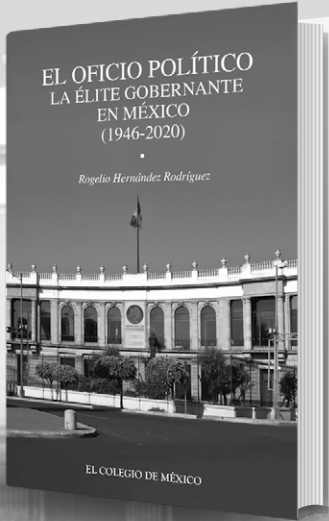
10 Gladys Villegas, "Arte y perspectiva de género," *Revista Qadro* (April-June 2003).

11 Mónica Mayer, "Sobre el arte feminista en México. Un recorrido personal," paper presented at the seminar "Historia del Arte y Feminismo: relatos, lecturas escrituras, omisiones," held at the National Fine Arts Museum in Santiago, Chile (2013), pp. 85-103.

12 Gladys Villegas, "Los grupos de arte feminista en México," *La Palabra y el hombre* (January-March 2006), pp. 45-57.

13 This issue of *Voices of Mexico* includes an article about this group's work. See "Black Hen Powder: Feminism's Beginnings in Mexican Art." [Editor's Note.]

14 Gladys Villegas, op. cit.



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