



Helen Escobedo, *The Death of the Forest*, 2.50 x 7 x 4 m, 1990 (iron lattices and dried leaves).
Lebanese Center Gallery. Photo: Helen Escobedo Archives.

ON WOMEN, ART, PUBLIC SPACE, AND ACTION

HELEN ESCOBEDO

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Women and their bodies. Women and their micro- and macro-social surroundings, from life as part of a couple to how to be an actor in the collective. Ephemeral, critical creative action, which with the bittersweet mark of humor and denunciation, throws darts to point out the (non)human ways of nature, not just animal nature, but that of all life on the planet: from trees to turtles, in the seas and in the forests, among waste and fires. Above all, reflection about vulnerable human life, with the marks of aggression, violence, and exile, both on geographical maps and the cartography of thought and emotions.

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Helen Escobedo and Lorena Wolffer are two Mexican women artists through whose work common threads cross, get tangled, take shortcuts, darn the multiple feelings of our two main houses, the personal and the shared: body and city, mind and street.

Helen Escobedo (1934-2010) was a gatherer of quality; not only of ideas and dreams, but also of materials, waste, and problems that each place in the world made a gift of to her. All she needed was just to put her feet on a sidewalk, beach, convent, or forest in cities in Germany, Denmark, Finland, Mexico, or Costa Rica, and her head would start to design creative *solutions* for the place; or, at least, *accents* so the public could see the myriad problems in their immediate surroundings: the deforestation of the forests in Helsinki or the



Lorena Wolffer, *Look Me in the Eyes*, 2014 (cloth hangings and prints on paper).
Ex-Teresa Today's Art Museum and Mexico City Subway System. Photo: Gerardo Alberto Sánchez Aguilera.

AND LORENA WOLFFER

illegal hunt for turtles on Costa Rican beaches; the forest fires in Copenhagen or a street garbage dump in Chapultepec Forest.

The ephemeral was something she loved. It offered her the freedom to go to a place, investigate its ecological or other social problems, and create local working groups (with students, street sweepers, housewives) to find *in situ* the materials that would become her installations. Through donations, inexpensive purchases, or picking through the garbage, she would gather old chairs, tires, umbrellas, and dried leaves, later turned into the spirits of ancient trunks, turtle shells, and reconstructed trees.

After the exhibit, the artist dismantled it, returning the borrowed, improved materials (old chairs, restored) and the rest

was waste. No bothersome, expensive customs red tape, insurance, or transportation. A video, a photo, and memory—her memory—were the important thing about every project.

But, if passion for the ephemeral marked her work from the 1970s on, Escobedo's first steps were more conventional. Born of an English mother and a Mexican father, she began her journey in sculpture with her teacher Germán Cueto. First, bronze was the raw material for the pieces that brought her honors at the Gallery of Mexican Art (1956) and prizes in art biennials in the 1960s, and allowed her to participate with her *Doors to the Wind*, a public sculpture on the Route of Friendship, part of the cultural program for the nineteenth Olympic Games in Mexico City (1968), one of the three works that were central to her artistic life. In addition,



(de)marcations, 2014. Autonomous Metropolitan University, Cuajimalpa campus, Mexico City. Photo: Lorena Wolffer Archive.

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starting with this piece, placed on the Outer Beltway Freeway in the southern Mexico City neighborhood of Xochimilco, she became interested in how her monumental creations permitted the passage of light and the containment of shadow.

A decade later, working collectively brought her to one of her highest points when, in 1978, she was the only woman who participated, along with Manuel Felguérez Hersúa, Mathías Goeritz, Federico Silva, and Sebastián, in the design of the UNAM's Sculptural Space: a circular marvel open to the sky, surrounded by 64 concrete polyhedrons placed on the rough volcanic surface of the Pedregal de San Ángel area.

About the piece, which she considered the second among her three main works, she wrote, “[a] dialogue between the primeval and the modern. . . . There, space and time merge. The four winds, the four lunar phases, the four elements, and the four phases of human life all pass through there.”¹

The complement to that monument, but this time an individual work, was her steel sculpture *Coatl* (1980), a penetrable, transparent serpent with the colors of fire spread along the stony walk in University City. Transparency was a



Survey of Women about Violence, Mexico City's central Zócalo Square, 2008. Bus and subway stations, Jamaica Market, Academia Street, in downtown Mexico City. Photo: Lorena Wolffer Archive.

substantive element of the third of the top three pieces that marked her art: *The Great Cone of Jerusalem* (1986), painted iron rods woven together to form a yellow mesh cone inside a red cylinder. Eight meters high and seven meters in diameter, it stands on a Jerusalem street without obstructing the public's view of its surroundings.

Just as she had paid homage to nature in the Sculptural Space, with the passing years and their ecological tragedies, she dedicated herself to a critique of humanity's predatory acts against ecosystems. *The Death of the Forest* (1990) was one of those critiques. On iron mesh, she placed thousands of dead leaves that recreated trees in a dried-out walkway. What she called her “ephemeral sentinels” were the verification of the whirlwind of deforestation of our forests and jungles, as well as the little attention we pay to tree life.² In other installations, she simulated summer fires, put up umbrellas that *brought relief* to the trees from acid rain, or placed crutches to support old tree trunks.

Metaphors full of humor, tender, acerbic winks, accents on the perspective for their survival in forests and seas that

humans have lost. Because in that other universe, the watery, lavish universe, the hand of humankind commits abuses, and Helen was always there to *point it out* with art. *For the Turtles* (1993) was one of her celebrated pieces in San José, Costa Rica. One hundred turtles made of old tires, umbrellas, plastic bags, and wood *wandered* in the Park of Peace to create awareness about the unrestricted hunt for these animals, just as dozens of figures filed through ex-monasteries, patios, galleries, and museums of Germany and Mexico as *The Refugees* (2004). Seventy-one full-sized figures made of lengths of cloth, bent over, begging. On their voyage, the refugees were the painful translation of the human migrations that today define the world of hunger, discrimination, poverty.

Sensitive to “the spirit of each place,” Helen was faithful to the end in order to achieve her creative and ethical aspirations.³ “Being an artist means sharpening your feelings about beauty. . . . I am concerned about society and the system I live in. What can I do? Politically, nothing. Perhaps just improve what’s around me. Make beauty. What beauty? Mine. I hope it’s useful.”⁴

NARRATIVES FOR EQUALITY

She is her body, but she also represents the others, who are not her, but it is as though they were. Her body is metaphor, cartography, map. She tattoos it with felt pens, she laces it together with yarn, and puts up bridges of perception with that string to the people she has in front of her, whether women or men. Because Lorena Wolfffer (b. Mexico City, 1971) tries to put an end to those binary gender definitions. She thinks that those static categories, together with the norms and customs that second them, generate a large part of the violence in our societies today.

Each of her projects, whether performance art, a survey, or a billboard, tries to build an intermediate space between art and activism; to generate immediacy and communication with the public; to lead to questions about the construction of gender identity, to understand, give to understand, and understand each other in the attributions assigned to women, their sexuality, their social role, and the naturalization papers of violence.

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For the Turtles, 150 m² installation, 1993 (tires, rubber, and umbrellas). La Paz Park, San José, Costa Rica. Photos: Helen Escobedo Archives.

If in her first steps in Barcelona, she found art through painting, in the United States, she found the medium that fit with her social and aesthetic concerns: performance art. *Miss Mexico*, *Alienation*, and *Mapping Shaheeda* became actions that she presented in Spain, the United States, Quebec, France, and Mexico, her own country, which has pained her for decades because of the murder of thousands of women in Ciudad Juárez, but also in the State of Mexico, and a growing list of other states.

In *While We Slept* (2002), she named 50 women murdered in the border city at the same time that she used a surgical marker to circle on her body the places where the blows and wounds had ended the lives of Rosa, Alma, Lucía . . . turned into a single number, nameless and deprived of justice.

As one of the many aspects that generate gender hatred, sexist advertising became another critical focus. Her counter-campaign, *I Am Totally of Iron* (2000), took up 10 billboards in different areas of Mexico City. For two months the black

and white ads with touches of red displayed a dark-skinned, defiant, powerful, ironic woman before the lascivious gaze of men on public transportation or in the midst of the city's chaos, its own "Iron Palace."⁵

Another strategy to approach the feelings of women who are psychologically, physically, or sexually violated was her *Survey on Violence against Women* (2008), which she carried out outside subway and bus stations and popular markets in Mexico City's Federal District. The questionnaire asked anonymous respondents about any kind of violence they might have experienced, whether they continued to live with their partner, and if they had made a formal complaint about it. A red pin and a green pin stuck on each person polled was the public recognition of their condition. The red pins (an alert to violence) circulated much more widely than the green.

Another performance experience has been *States of Exception* (2013), presented in London, Mexico City, and Querétaro, where a group of women passersby sat at a table and

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Coatl, 3 x 15 x 3 m, 1980 (steel). UNAM University Cultural Center. Photo: Helen Escobedo Archives.



I Am Totally of Iron, 2000 (iron frames and printing on paper). Different public spaces. Photo: Lorena Wolffer Archives.

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chatted for three hours. Regardless of age, marital status, socio-economic level, or sexual preference, they talked in the middle of the street, showing the multiple ways of relating to each other pleasurably. In addition, the menu stipulated women’s rights under Mexican law and international agreements. At the end, each one left written testimony of her experience. This project earned Wolffer the 2014 Artraker Prize in the category of social impact.

Look Me in the Eyes (2014) was another collective declarative action. That is how the artist defines her work of articulating the presence of 26 women who live, work, or circulate on Licenciado Verdad Street in the middle of downtown Mexico City. After asking the question, “What do you do to be a woman?” she presented the participants’ reflections and portraits of their backs. The women “transported their gender identities to the terrain of the visible and intelligible, of the word and the declaration.”⁶ The result was an exhibit of photo-murals plus a conversation in four public rooms of the Ex-Teresa Today’s Art Museum. More recently, in *(de) markings* (2014), Wolffer attempted to weave a network of complicities. Starting from the marker “woman” as a category of identity, she built a dialogue with the male and female participants in a circle in which they responded to medical and psychological test questions about sexual and gender *normality*.

With a piece of red yarn and a wooden loom, she intertwined the participants with the yarn as well as with the personal responses that become public. This open sample of subjectivities broadens out the lines of identity and empathy with male and female others with regard to their differences and similarities.

With this kind of artistic and collective work, Lorena Wolffer maintains her status of outsider, since she is not part of any group in the so-called artistic community. By contrast, her freedom is corroborated in each action in the face of women, their circumstances, and their yearnings. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Amalia Benavides, Irela Gonzaga, and Magali Lara, comps., *Paisajes: Helen Escobedo* (Mexico City: Conaculta, Fonca, UNAM, 2011), p. 88.

² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³ Angélica Abelleira, “Reinventar la naturaleza,” Angélica Abelleira, ed., *Mujeres insumisas* (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2007), p. 28.

⁴ Amalia Benavides, Irela Gonzaga, and Magali Lara, comps., op. cit.

⁵ This is an allusion to the Mexico City department store named Palacio de Hierro (Iron Palace) and its ad campaign “Soy totalmente Palacio” (I Am Totally Palace), considered sexist. Source: “Conversar con el cuerpo,” *Mujeres insumisas*, Angélica Abelleira, ed. (Monterrey: UANL, 2007), p. 238.

⁶ Lorena Wolffer’s text at the public chat and exhibition *Look Me in the Eyes*, at the Ex Teresa Arte Actual, April/June 2014.