



AÑO INTERNACIONAL DE LA MUJER



IGUALDAD
DESARROLLO
PAZ

1975



“¿POR QUÉ NO HA HABIDO GRANDES MUJERES ARTISTAS?”



La fiesta de 25 años

▲ Ana Paula Castro Garcés, 1975, 2021 (digital illustration).
* Illustration courtesy of the author.

Marifé Medrano Flor*

Black Hen Powder: Feminism's Beginnings In Mexican Art

When we talk about Mexico's Generation of the Groups (Los Grupos), we often mention clusters like Pentagon Process Group (Grupo Proceso Pentágono), Germinal, Art and Ideology Workshop (TAI), Look (Mira), Peyote, and Tepito Art Here (Tepito Arte Aquí). And what do all these groups have in common? They were all founded after a state-led-massacre-battered Mexico City on October 2, 1968. They emerged with the common goal of denouncing Mexico's political conditions through art. However, there's one other thing most of these groups have in common: they were founded by men. Where were the women amid this critical generation of Mexican artists?

Well, they *were* there, but art history is patriarchal and hegemonic and has dedicated itself to making women invisible. The feminist art groups that established themselves at the time tend to be overlooked when it comes to the Groups Generation. In an interview, feminist artist Mónica Mayer noted that, every now and then, a feminist collective might be cited in a footnote, if at all.¹ However, the artistic practices and discourses of these groups of women also sought to denounce the country's politics—and not only that—; they also sought to appropriate and inhabit spaces as women, deploying feminist discourse to redefine what it means to be a “woman” within a patriarchal system.

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A Few Notes on Feminism In Mexico: The Second Wave

Across the globe, the 1970s were marked by social movements, and feminism in particular stood out for reclaiming the rights of women. In Mexico, the feminist movement mostly developed in Mexico City in the early 1970s and was known as new-wave, second-wave, or Mexican neo-feminism, as Ana Lau Jaiven has described. This kind of feminism sought equity, with women's bodies and their manifestations at its core.²

Mexico's second-wave feminism was urban and university-based, rallying around shared dissatisfaction with the scarcity of women in Mexican politics. The 1970s saw a variety of feminist collectives and groups emerge across multiple disciplines, including art. The feminist movement gained strength as the synergies between women who sought collectivity among shared spaces became palpable. These women aimed to resignify such spaces through their disciplines and demands for justice in a country that had made them invisible—as is still the case today.

With all the ground that women had gained in Mexico and across the globe, feminism and feminist art in Mexico reached a turning point in the year 1975, declared International Women's Year by the United Nations. That year, Mexico hosted the World Conference on Women, the first of its kind. The conference program included an exhibition on women in Mexican art titled “Women as Creators and Theme in Art.” The pieces shown were created by men, relegating women to the background while reinforcing male-centric dis-

course. Women were present as muses, but not as creators.

Where were the women at this event? Well, parallel to these activities, Carla Stellweg —founder and editor of the magazine *Artes Visuales* (Visual Arts)—organized an interdisciplinary discussion seminar based on Linda Nochlin’s article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971). The seminar presentations were published in *Artes Visuales* in 1978. This not only helped spread the word, but it was also a precursor to the exhibition “Room 77/78: New Trends” in Mexico City’s Museum of Modern Art, one of the first exhibitions of feminist art. Magali Lara, Mónica Mayer, and Pola Weiss participated, ultimately breaking with art’s patriarchal, hegemonic discourse, in contrast to the 1975 exhibition.

The Quinceañera Party: The Birth of Feminist Art Groups

Within this political, social, and cultural context, feminist art emerged with the goal of inhabiting and enunciating from the collective, with certain political proposals seeking to make the demands of women visible and question the patriarchal system. These groups started consolidating themselves simultaneously as feminist ideals started to pave the way in the 1970s, while the 1980s saw the consolidation of groups like Tlacuilas (the Nahuatl word for “painter”) and Retrateras (meaning “portratists”) (1983-1984), who took on a painstaking investigation of the role of women in Mexico’s artistic and social scene. One of their most emblematic actions was a performance held in the San Carlos Academy in 1984: *The Quinceañera Party* (La fiesta de xv años).

Two other feminist art groups participated in this performance, Bio-Art (Bio-Arte, 1983-1984) and Black Hen Powder (Polvo de Gallina Negra, 1983-1993). Both groups’ performances questioned the implications of *quinceañera* parties and the way this celebration presents women as objects that respond to the demands and desires of men. In doing so, these groups not only made visible the backdrop of Mexico’s popular and almost ritualistic *quinceañera* parties, but also incorporated a new medium in their artistic practice: the

body. The body became a medium for protest, untethered from the idea of the body as an object. The body was re-appropriated and re-signified through the condition of womanhood. Tools such as humor and sarcasm were deployed to cast light on the dynamics imposed by the patriarchal system.

Black Hen Powder

Soon after *The Quinceañera Party*, the groups Tlacuilas and Retrateras fell apart, as did Bio-Arte. However, Black Hen Powder (PGN) remained active for almost another decade (1983-1993), producing art prolifically. PGN emerged when Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer invited their friends to create a feminist art group. However, many women weren’t interested in joining due to the group’s “radicalism,” or feared being identified as feminists, Mónica Mayer has explained.³

The group called itself Black Hen Powder in allusion to a common remedy for the evil eye. Bustamante and Mayer played with the idea of an amulet for feminist artists —it was a hard undertaking back then— and the humor and sarcasm that marked the group’s artistic production could be gleaned from its very name.

Now, one of PGN’s main successes was that it set forth a number of goals as foundations for its practice, which was common at the time, echoing the manifestos of the twentieth-century avant-garde.⁴ The PGN’s goals were to study, promote, and analyze women in art; question and respond to the idea of the woman as a muse for art; and address the representation of women in the Mexican media.

This is why their artistic practice involved creating images and performative actions through the feminist perspective. The artists’ experiences as women in a patriarchal system allowed them to question and transform imposed stereotypes. Speaking from personal experience —and hoping to avoid reification— it’s interesting to think about how being a woman conditions the creative processes. It is in these intimate experiences that we can find ourselves with and in other women, generating a kind of empathy that emerges as both critical and political.

PGN's first piece, "Evil Eye for Rapists, or Peace Is the Respect for the Other's Body," took place at a feminist march against rape on October 7, 1983, at the Benito Juárez Semi-circle in Mexico City. The performance consisted of hexing rapists. Mayer and Bustamante dressed up as witches and mixed several ingredients in a cauldron to concoct a potion that they gave out to their audience. A few months after the performance, the recipe was published in *FEM* magazine's 1984 issue. The potion called for the following:

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 DOZEN EYES AND HEARTS OF WOMEN WHO ACCEPT THEMSELVES AS THEY ARE
- 10 KILOS OF THE SPARKS AND LIGHTNING OF A WOMAN ENRAGED BY HARASSMENT
- 1 TON OF THE STEEL MUSCLES OF A WOMAN WHO DEMANDS RESPECT FOR HER BODY
- 3 TONGUES OF WOMEN WHO WILL NEVER SUBMIT, EVEN IF THEY'VE BEEN RAPED
- 1 POUCH OF SPINACH-FLAVORED GELATIN FROM A WOMAN WHO HELPS AND COMFORTS A RAPED WOMAN
- 30 GRAMS OF POWDERED VOICES THAT DEMYSTIFY RAPE
- 7 DROPS OF MEN WHO SUPPORT THE FIGHT AGAINST RAPE
- 1 PINCH OF LEGISLATORS INTERESTED IN THE SOCIAL CHANGE THAT WE WOMEN DEMAND
- A FEW SPOONFULS OF RELATIVES AND SCHOOLS THAT REFRAIN FROM PROPAGATING TRADITIONAL ROLES
- 3 DOZEN MESSAGES FROM RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATORS WHO ARE STOPPING THE DISSEMINATION OF IMAGES THAT PROMOTE RAPE
- 3 HAIRS OF A SUPER-FEMINIST
- 2 EYETEETH OF AN OPPOSITION PARTY MEMBER
- ½ AN EAR FROM A SPONTANEOUS AND CURIOUS PERSON

BY CAREFULLY FOLLOWING THE STEPS TO THIS RECIPE, YOU WILL SUCCESSFULLY BREW THIS EXPLOSIVE CONCOCTION, WITH WHICH YOU CAN TAKE BY SURPRISE ANY RAPISTS WHO MIGHT LIVE AT HOME OR AT YOUR NEIGHBOR'S, THE SHY AND THE AGGRESSIVE, THE PASSIVE AND THE PROACTIVE, THOSE LURKING IN THE WORKPLACE OR ON THE BUS, AND THOSE HIDING IN THE NIGHT WE'VE COME TO TAKE BACK.⁵



▲ Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer from Black Hen Powder in a scene from the performance *¡MADRES!* part of a visual project from 1983 to 1987.

* Photos courtesy of Mónica Mayer.



▲ Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer from Black Hen Powder performing the *Recipe for Hexing Rapists, or "Respect for the Rights of Other's Bodies Is Peace,"* a take-off on Benito Juárez's famous saying, "Respect for the Rights of Others Is Peace" (1983).

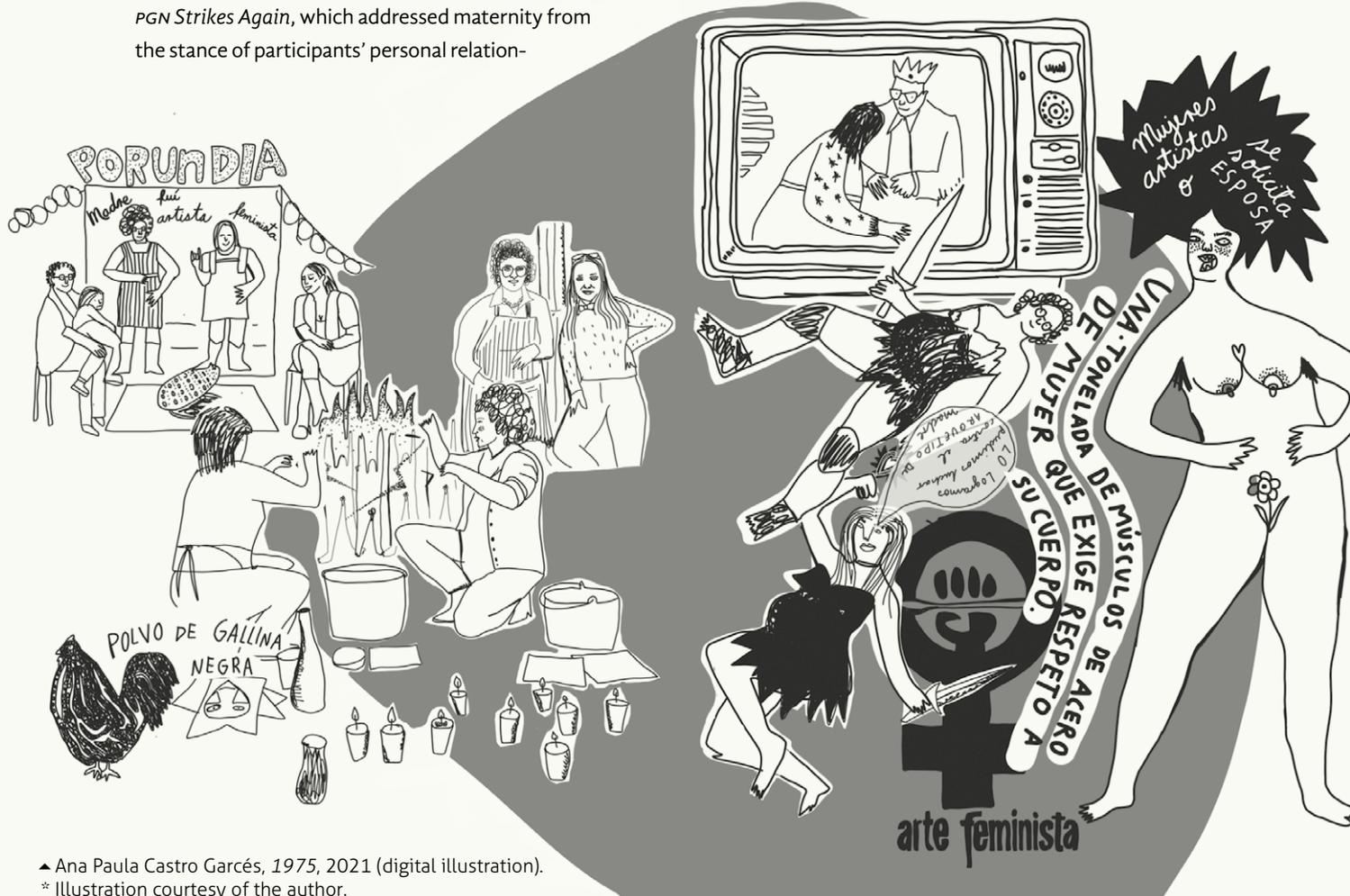
Both this performance and the recipe wield the group's characteristic humor, which is not only palpable in the list of ingredients, but also in the way the text re-signifies "womanly duties." Usually, when we think of a recipe, we think of a kitchen—a place where women have been boxed in by the patriarchy. This style of writing, protesting, and making the issue of rape and violence against women visible in Mexico is not only creative, but also very meaningful, because every time a woman raises her voice, we hear voices that say, "Send her back to the kitchen." This performance's discourse subverts this idea and speaks from a space where we have been boxed in by imposed gender roles.

Likewise, another of their greatest projects, "¡MADRES! (MOTHERS!)", which can also be read as an emphatic, vulgar interjection, is rooted in Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante's parallel motherhood. This series of actions and performances was based on motherhood. It all started with *Liberty, Equality, Maternity: PGN Strikes Again*, which addressed maternity from the stance of participants' personal relation-

ships with their mothers, conjuring a fictional future scenario in which the artists' descendants would successfully destroy the archetype of the mother.

This art-mail exercise drew power from the collectivity involved. This introspective action questioned the relationships created and experienced around the maternal figure. Putting together an entire art project around the mother as a theme speaks to the cultural weight that we grant such a figure, whom we associate with childrearing, love, and the home, or to whom we transfer our own mistakes. The figure of the mother is an archetype imposed by the heteropatriarchal system, a goal to which this system says women should aspire. To reconsider and question this figure through writing and correspondence helps us see ourselves in the other's lived experiences.

The second performance was *Mother for a Day*, which took place on Guillermo Ochoa's program *Our*



▲ Ana Paula Castro Garcés, 1975, 2021 (digital illustration).
* Illustration courtesy of the author.

World, on Mexico's Televisa television network. For the show, Ochoa cross-dressed as a pregnant woman, and since Televisa has always been the cradle of Mexican soap operas, the performers played with gender stereotypes—which are deep-rooted in such TV shows—as well as with the dichotomic ideas of good and bad that mark Televisa's narratives.

The TV program served as support for this live performance, in which all participants—the performers, TV host, and audience—completed and mediated the piece's cycle and intentionality. *Mother for a Day* melds performance with spectacle, but the latter is conceived as a kind of rite that draws the spectator in. This performance took place on mass media—Televisa—which directly relates to the PGN's goal of disrupting the way women are portrayed in the media. Reaching this audience was highly significant—while Televisa might have viewed the whole performance as a mere comedy, its underlying meaning was important. The performance was ultimately a satire of the TV network, mocking and laying bare the way women are represented and talked about in Televisa's programming.

MOTHERS! stayed active for several years, with several performances inciting reflection on the idea of the maternal figure. This project always relied on audience participation to satisfy its goal: to deconstruct and re-signify the archetype of the mother, so that the concept might divest itself from the definition of a woman who pours herself into her family and the home. Its goal was to make the woman behind the mother visible anew, no longer limited by the obligations imposed on her by misogynist society. This was the PGN's final project, and in 1993, the group came to an end.

While the handful of projects mentioned here are only a few of the many that PGN put together across a decade of activity, we can already gauge how these pieces center the idea of collective work. In their pieces, the audience was often both performer and witness. It would take part in collective consciousness, mediating between the piece or performance's intentionality and the given support-object-performance. The PGN's performances and pieces revealed the truth: the truth of artists' everyday lives, conditioned by being women in society.

Through such exchanges between the piece and the audience, PGN created a symbiotic relationship between its pieces and the public. That is, both agents complemented each other to fulfill their respective missions. The piece would share this truth with the audience, while the audience members participated in exposing this truth, recognizing it within their own context and lived experience.

Through reflection, PGN made an impact beyond the play or performance, articulating several circuits around the meaning of womanhood, of being a feminist-woman-artist, thus amplifying the possibilities of interaction and exchange beyond the museum and gallery environment. This group's production was rooted in its purpose as a social and communicative vehicle for women's personal and collective experience.

The fact that we know about PGN can be attributed to its members' hard work, as they wrote down and registered everything they ever did. This work was crucial, especially given that women artists and feminist art in Mexico weren't talked about in the 1970s and 1980s. There was generally little awareness of the matter. And curiously, this remains the case. Mónica Mayer has said that PGN is still just a footnote in many texts and that there's been no mention of it when alluding to "the Groups" and the counter-cultural movement in Mexico. ■■■

Notes

1 The information in this article comes from an interview with Mónica Mayer that I did on May 24, 2021 in Mexico City for my senior thesis, "El inicio del arte feminista en México. Una mirada al grupo Polvo de Gallina Negra (1983-1993)" (The Beginnings of Feminist Art in Mexico. A Look at the Black Hen Powder Group [1983-1993]).

2 Ana Lau Jaiven, "Emergencia y trascendencia del neofeminismo," in Gisela Espinosa Damián and Ana Lau Jaiven, comps. *Un fantasma recorre el siglo. Luchas feministas en México 1910-2010*, (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011), p. 150.

3 Mónica Mayer May 24, 2021 interview, Mexico City, Mexico.

4 Andrea Giunta, "Feminismos artísticos en México, Manifiestos, conferencias, exposiciones y activismos," in *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano: Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2018), pp. 137-179.

5 Grupo Polvo de Gallina Negra, "Receta del grupo polvo de gallina negra. Para hacerle el mal de ojo a los violadores o el respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz," *FEM* vol. IX, no. 33 (1984), p. 53. Digitized by Archivos Feministas de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, https://archivosfeministas.cieg.unam.mx/ejemplares/fem/volumen_9_n_33_Abril_Mayo_1984.pdf.