



Colectivo A+C, Art Cage.

Diana Santísima Kitch, *Ensamble*, 2021. Photographic documentation of the performance.

Emmanuel Razo*

The Rebellion Of Shadows. Art, Territory, And Dissident Bodies

Women in social rehabilitation at male-only prisons in Mexico City. Indigenous languages woven into poetry. Scenes braided against the stigma, binaries, and precariousness of Mexico. Performative action rebelling against exclusion. Diverse images of fat, feminized, racialized, tattooed, and sick bodies. Representations of those lives condemned to bear the

unthinkable monstrosities of dominant iconographies. That which is foreign, different, or strange — according to social norms — has become the focus of Mexican artists whose work deploys revolutionary poetics in a quest to transform a society that they view as unjust, exclusionary, sexist, violent, fragmented, and dystopic.

This text will review several artistic proposals that cast light on how visual artists are informed by the study of feminist, transfeminist, and queer/*cuir* thought. Through such thought, artists question the heteropatriarchy, our

*Emmanuel is a writer, cultural manager, and independent art curator; you can contact him at emmanuelrazogomez@gmail.com.



Rodrigo Jardón, CASA VIVA

Lechedevirgen Trimegisto, *Black Exorcisms for White Times*, 2019. Documentation of the performance.



Fernando "Fershow" Escárcega, *Neza Drag*, 2010.

consumerist society, and gender violence while emphasizing experiences around gender, migration, identity, sexual orientation, the mestizo, vulnerability, race, social class, and place of origin. These artists understand such conditions as cross-cutting and intersecting us all, thus leading to individual identities that exist in tension with hegemonic norms. Thus, we will observe how artistic becoming is expressed through transformative action that can impact the collective imaginary and the recognition of diversity and otherness in Mexican society.

Moving beyond academic categorizations and classifications, artists act from a place of dissidence in the face of norms that they view as exclusionary. Consequently, they aim to rebuild a sense of the social, collective, and political from a critical position that seeks sometimes utopian-seeming solutions. Still, we must keep in mind that it is in the utopic that we often find art's most important contributions. Amid the dystopic-seeming reality of a world assailed by crises, they see no space for pessimism and believe that we must act, transform our present, rethink the future, and imagine utopia.

By approaching dissident work, we may detect a certain quest to eradicate the shadows of prejudice and reveal those existences

Artists act from a place of dissidence in the face of norms that they view as exclusionary. Consequently, they aim to rebuild a sense of the social, collective, and political from a critical position that seeks sometimes utopian-seeming solutions.

that have been invisibilized by what is deemed proper, common, normal, or accepted. These proposals stray from histrionics and instead operate within the poetics of diversity. For instance, by presenting himself as the sum of all evils, Fernando *Fershow* Escárcega (Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico, 1986) recognizes himself as embodying a myriad of conditions that would place him at the margins of the norm: "I am gay, brown-skinned, poor, and tattooed — and I come from Neza," he states. By denying pity, his work emerges as a way of subverting the presence of color, diverse bodies, playfulness, and the fantastic — erasing prejudices around urban peripheries and, by extension, those who inhabit them.

The diversity latent in Mexican society has also been approached by those who have focused on the study and representation of dissident bodies, that is, on human bodies that diverge from dominant social and aesthetic norms, either due to their physical structure, expressions, or pigmentation.

Fershow Escárcega's statements on his own sexual orientation, skin color, class, and place of origin recur in his pieces, through a narrative that shifts from the political to the popular, the collective to the individual, the critical to the playful, and vice versa. In his photographs, the gloom of prejudice is dissipated. To behold Escárcega's work is to understand the irony of festive existence, the poetics of life, and precariousness — a condition that he doesn't deny, instead viewing it as something that people across large swaths of the country inhabit despite the marketing, glamour, and fiction depicting a homogenous Mexico.

The diversity latent in Mexican society has also been approached by those who have focused on the study and representation of dissident bodies, that is, on human bodies that diverge from dominant social and aesthetic norms, either due to their physical structure, expressions, or pigmentation. The artist Diana *Santísima Kistch* (Mexico City, 1984) uses performance to showcase her confrontational nudity and challenge consumerist aesthetics. The sheer volume of her body stands out as the container of a sublimely erotic femininity, with a sensuality and mysticism that rebel against the norm, the patriarchy, and machismo by appropriating a body that has been condemned to the shadows. These conditions also intersect the work of Miguel Pérez Ramos *Santo Miguelito Pérez* (1986), from Cholula, Puebla, who not only exposes a fat body but showcases the cultural features of his place of origin. Diana *Santísima Kistch* and *Santo Miguelito Pérez*'s artistic practices endow the body with a monumentality that interrupts space with its lyrical presence, subversion, and existence in a way that adds tension to the norms of how one "should be." They enunciate their axioms from a place of cultural syncretism, femininity, eroticism, the popular, and the territorial.

To recognize and inhabit what is different, individual, collective, one's own, or foreign is a maxim within this movement's proposals. The artists do so in a way that isn't transgressive but that presents, visibilizes, considers, and acts. In the work by Felipe Osornio (Querétaro, 1991), *Lechedevirgen Trimegisto* (Trismegistus Milk Virgin), sickness, the vulnerable body, sexuality, desire, masculinity, and violence are often approached from the rigor of



Lulú Sánchez Puig, *Where There Were Wings*, 2022, from the series *Transformations*.



Lulú Sánchez Puig, *New Marilyn*, 2022, from the series *Transformations*.

The term *muxe* is used to refer to people born with male genitals but who assume, in their everyday lives, trades, aesthetics, and tastes not usually associated with men.

existence. Rather than denying such conditions, he recognizes and collectivizes them, as we may appreciate in *Pensamiento puñal* (Faggot Thought), published in 2012. Osornio enunciates the conditions that tie him and others to exclusion and dissident existence: “I write for those who are targeted [...], subordinated at the margins [...]. For those who, one dismal morning, realized they donned the face of the Indian, the skin color of shit [...] incarnating the phenotype of the delinquent Latino [...], of the undocumented, the construction worker, the unemployed, the drug addict [...]. I’m a Fag because I am against the law of nature, social order, and propriety.”

Felipe Osornio’s transdisciplinary work also stands out because he depicts how art and Latin American activism have contributed to defining an artistic movement that emerged within the Global South. His references to work by artists like Rocío Boliver (also known as *La congelada de uva*, or The Frozen Grape), Pedro Lemebel, and Francisco Casas, as well as to collectives like the National Organization of Sexual Dissidence in Chile (CUBS), to name a few, bolster his active, transformative, and decolonial narrative, in which territory, the appropriation of contempt, femininity, the collective, and historical memory emerge as battlegrounds for the revolution of iconography and thought.

Critical revisions of heteropatriarchal and consumerist society have led the artists to undertake structural philosophical analyses. In her books *Capitalismo gore*¹ (Gore Capitalism) and *Trans-feminismos y políticas postmortem* (Post-Mortem Transfeminism and Policies),² the Mexican poet, artist, and philosopher Sayak Valencia (Tijuana, B.C., 1980) has significantly contributed to tying feminism and queer theory to resisting the violence assailing Mexico. She also registers how these currents shift according to the local conditions that intersect individuals and collectives across the South. These arguments allow us to understand the connotations of terms like transfeminism and *cuir* (queer, as pronounced in Spanish) in artistic narratives with the goal of casting out the exclusion embedded in binary, colonizing, and classist discourse.



Mar Coyol, *Men Who Love Other Men. Men Who Love Herselves. Free and Diverse Infancies*, 2021.

The sense of the local in dissident artistic practices emphasizes differences as factors that are binding rather than fragmenting as artists take social action to recognize otherness. The artist, writer, and anthropologist Lukas Avendaño (Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, 1977) highlights these features by reflecting upon his condition as a *muxe*, a way of life circumscribed within the Zapotec culture of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca. The term *muxe* is used to refer to people born with male genitals but who assume, in their everyday lives, trades, aesthetics, and tastes not usually associated with men. These people are subject to prejudice outside of the Isthmus, as Avendaño states: “in the Isthmus, one is a *muxe*; outside the Isthmus, in the eyes of the other, I am called a fag/homosexual or any other similar term.”



Photo in collaboration with Herani Enriquez

Lechedevirgen Trimegisto, *Xenobinary Chants*, 2020.

To label is to standardize and, thus, to invisibilize, which is why, according to the artist, curator, and academic Benjamín Martínez Castañeda (Mexico City, 1988), practicing art from a place of dissidence demands self-enunciation and its recognition. Not everything is queer or *cuir* when it comes to the cultural singularities of Lukas Avendaño and the Zapotec poet and translator Elvis Guerra (Juchitán, Oaxaca, 1993), who recognize themselves as *muxes* while refusing any folkloric or mercantilist term that might cast shadows on the inhabitants of the region's specific conditions. Guerra dissects these conditions in his poem "Muxe es..." (To be a *Muxe* is...), of which I will cite a few excerpts: "A *muxe* is an indigenous person who dreams that she's a princess. / *Muxe* is the body of a man with the voice of a woman [...].

Muxe is to look at the person who disdains you in the eye. / *Muxe* is to arrive at the altar of the arm of the father who never knew how to love you [...]. *Muxe* is a 25-inch waist and a 7-inch penis. / *Muxe* is the corn that won't yield flowers. / *Muxe* is a poem that will never die."

The conditions that intersect people's lives in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec differ from those in other regions of Mexico, but there are also similarities, as we will see in the pieces by multidisciplinary artist Alejandra Aragón (Ciudad Juárez, 1983), whose work reveals the aesthetic, historical, anthropological, and sociological experience of being a woman in a city like Juárez, where necropolitics, stigma, violence, war, and border conditions disturb people's everyday lives. We may also consider the experience of being a transexual woman incarcerated in a male readaptation center in Mexico City, as Lulú Sánchez Puig's (Mexico City, 1970) recent work, *Transformaciones* (Transformations), portrays. Her body of work liberally explores the feminine and the tyranny of the masculine in persons whose identity and gender expression have been banned from the male-only space, as if the feminine did not intersect men at all.

These proposals in the Mexican art scene reintroduce the social and the political within artistic practice in a way that resists banality. Paintings, collages, performances, drawings, sculpture, poetry, and digital mediums emerge as devices to awaken consciousness, alter images, and extinguish the shadow of sameness in order to recognize difference and understand that the feminine intersects us all, that the strange exists and inhabits our territories. Beyond the artists explored here, the movement also includes Alejandra Rodríguez (known as *La Bala Rodríguez*), Antonio Zaragoza, Roberto Zamarripa, Mar Coyol, Nicolás Marín (known as *Mrpaper*), Víctor Esquivel, Almendra Sheira (known as *Rurru MiPanochia*), el Colectivo A+C, and many other artists whose work is based on reflections that not only yield substantial aesthetics but also the poetics that we need to face the dystopia that has given way to one of the first and most paradigmatic artistic and philosophical movements in twenty-first-century Mexico. This practice has surged from a true rebellion against the shadows.

▼ Notes

1 Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo gore* (Mexico: Paidós, 2010).

2 Sayak Valencia, *Transfeminismos y políticas postmortem* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2022).