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## Notes to Continue Thinking about Feminist Artivism in Mexico

### Abstract

Despite the large number of feminist artistic practices in Mexico that clearly ascribe to women's rights and the fight against gender violence, there is a historiographical problem regarding the use of a term capable of accounting for the social impact of these practices. Therefore, one may suggest analysing the plurality of terms to understand the increasingly present use in Mexico in recent years of the term *feminist artivism*. We identify how the use of the term evokes a diversity of cultural agents that may or may not be linked to the world of art, which requires its own discussion so that we might understand the scope and limitations of these artistic practices and how we study them. One of the main problems is the development of feminist activism in the context of neoliberalism and globalisation, where some artistic practices can be ascribed to this term but can end up contributing to mercantilist logic. Likewise, there are many subversive actions with aesthetic potential that this term omits, which force us to rethink artistic frameworks. Thereby, as a way of offering a term that seeks to account for the characteristics of current art, we propose incorporating the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices. It is not our intention to offer an unequivocal and unstable category but rather to show the complexity that goes through the artistic and cultural practices that are positioned by feminism today. Finally, as far as methodology is concerned, we suggest writing based on situated knowledge and acknowledging the potential of oral history. Also, we try to give voice to a plurality of stories and experiences, from different disciplinary fields and to establish intergenerational dialogues, as an exercise in collaborative reflection, or accompanied thought, that allows us to raise the problem in its complexity.

**Keywords:** feminist artivism, Mexico, feminist aesthetic-political practice, historiography of art

## Naming the social impact of feminist art

Since the beginning of the 21st century, an explosion of feminist practices – circumscribed within the field of activism and its fight against gender violence – have emerged in Mexico and Latin America in general. When beginning an analysis of these productions, what is striking is the plurality of terms to depict the intention of feminist art to fight against gender violence. In the Mexican artistic field, some artists refer to their practices as “activism”, some as “social practices”, while others prefer to call their practices “feminist art”. Similarly, from the field of art history and curatorship in Mexico, the term *artivism* has also been used without a clear consensus on the scope and limitations of the term.

Proposing concepts is decisive, because these are tools of the intersubjective and imply transition from mere experience, from the field of subjective perception to a conceptualization that may enable analysis, understanding and naming reality. However, we start from the understanding that “[...] these are not fixed, but travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities”.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the proposal of concepts, it is a fact that when we were trying to define the character of feminist art’s social incidence, we found that multiple terms are used to account for this at different times. In this way, we are faced with the following questions: What terms have been used historically to describe the nature of feminist art’s social incidence? What are the causes and complexities of the plurality of the terms used? Can we propose a term that acknowledges the characteristics and new dynamics presented by feminist art?

To answer these questions, we propose a historiographical and historical journey using concepts that describe the nature of feminist art as a social struggle in Mexico. Likewise, we suggest that the lack of definition relates to multiple factors encompassing different historical moments, as well as to a plurality of media, strategies, and processes. Additionally, some practices may not have a strong social impact, and in a few cases their inclusion in the artistic system might in turn undermine their subversive potential. Finally, there are actions with an important political and aesthetic power but not circumscribed within the operational frameworks of the artistic, which forces us to question the guidelines behind the construction of art and expand the notions of the artistic. In this sense, to raise these reflections it has been useful for us to incorporate the notion of feminist aesthetic-political practices; with the interest of considering in a broad way the variety of creation strategies and places of enunciation that comprise the artistic and cultural productions that are framed in the feminist struggle. Also, this allows us to consider the complexity of the current dynamics in which they are immersed.

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1 M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, Toronto, 2002, p. 31.

When trying to answer these questions, we are faced with an important historiographic gap in the sense that each artist, art historian or curator names their practices independently. For these reasons, as a methodological structure, we decided to focus on interviews with feminist artists Lorena Wolffer (1971–) and Mónica Mayer (1954–). Likewise, we established a dialogue through the “Discussion Artivism and Feminism”, carried out in collaboration with the Gender and Inclusion Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana (*Programa de Género e inclusión de la Universidad Iberoamericana*) *Hysteria! Magazine*<sup>2</sup> (*Revista Hysteria!*), and the *Network Disidenta*<sup>3</sup> (Red Disidenta), with the participation of art historian and curator Karen Cordero (1957–), researcher, curator and performer Julia Antivilo (1974–), artist and cultural manager Liz Misterio (1985–), artist Alejandra Aragón (1983–) and activist Cerrucha (1984–). The intention of this dialogue was to establish links between different fields and generations to conduct a collaborative reflection exercise to understand the complexity of the terms used (Fig. 1).

Our point of departure in writing this text is our experience in the history of art, curatorship, and artistic practice. We position ourselves on the basis of anti/decolonial transfeminism and understand the writing of this text as part of our political commitment to think together to open ourselves to the experience of a “we”, interested in imagining a community, inhabiting the differences, contradictions and blind spots that we embody, which academic writing barely makes visible. Likewise, we start from situated knowledge<sup>4</sup> as proposed by Donna Haraway, which postulates that how we produce knowledge is determined by our context and embodied experience.<sup>5</sup>

We also start from the understanding that feminist art is a political position regarding artistic work, which does not consist of a theme or a style, but rather understands it as a practice to contribute to a social and historical transformation of patriarchy, and how it has oppressed the lives of women and other subjects who are not white cisgender and heterosexual men. In relation to this, it is important to say that it is not possible to speak of one single

2 *Hysteria! Magazine* is a digital publication founded by Ivelin Buenrostro and Liz Misterio that, since 2013, has been dedicated to disseminating works of art and reflections that are made from feminism and sexual dissidence towards the politics of bodies, gender, and sexuality (<https://hysteria.mx/>).

3 The *Network Disidenta* is made up of the artist Cerrucha, Lorena Wolffer and the art historian María Laura Rosa and consists of a collective project that works as a platform for artistic and pedagogical experimentation online, located at the crossroads between feminist practices and digital methodologies (Disidenta, 2022, <https://www.disidenta.com>).

4 Donna Haraway is the most recognized proponent of the concept of situated knowledge, however, it is an epistemological critique that feminists have claimed since the 1980s with the contributions of different women authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval, from Chicano thought.

5 D. Haraway, *Ciencia, cyborgs y mujeres. La reinvención de la naturaleza*, Madrid, 2015, pp. 313–330.

**Fig. 1.** “Discussion Artivism and Feminism”, 21 March 2023, file of the Gender and Inclusion Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City



feminism, because we have different contexts and ways of embodying the various oppressions, and in that sense, is important to consider the diverse experience of women, which has led to the critical and vital need to develop other interpretive approaches – even rethinking what we understand as the political subject of feminism and its practices of struggle and resistance, as well as how they are conceptualised. As previously commented, the political commitment of feminist art is necessarily intertwined with feminist struggles in their broadest sense. For this reason, it is essential to insist on problematizing our understanding of feminist art today, its spaces and forms of circulation, as well as the related methods of teaching and historicizing; with the aim of updating its relevance in the production of practices and narratives that question, oppose and transform the modern/colonial, patriarchal/capitalist power structure.

## The background of feminist art since the 1970s, political militancy and activism

During the 1970s in Mexico, the feminist art developed in the context of the second wave of feminism, where the bodies of women subjected to submission became a place of subversion. During this time, seventies feminist art

was linked to political militancy since the artists in those years were feminists and militants. Militancy implied belonging to a group and more precisely to a political party. In Mexico, the 1968 movement, with the most critical point involving the massacre of students in Tlatelolco, was a decisive moment that caused a social, political and artistic reorganisation. Art could no longer be oblivious to what was happening. In this way, the 1970s are characterised by the emergence of artistic groups such as *Tepito Arte Acá*, *Proceso Pentágono*, *Grupo Suma*, *No Grupo*, which proposed a socially committed art with innovative and experimental proposals.

Many artists were active in various social and artistic groups. However, with the passage of time they recognized that only by acting autonomously would they be able to gain space. For these reasons, several artists made the decision to separate from political parties and various student movements, where gender discrimination was a constant. In this way, we can identify several feminist groups in Mexico such as the National Women's Movement (1973), (Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres), the National Women's Liberation Movement (1974) (El Movimiento de Liberación Nacional de la Mujer), the Feminist Women's Coalition (1976) (Coalición de mujeres feministas) and La Revolt (1975) (La Revuelta).<sup>6</sup> In these groups, feminist artists contributed their creativity and carried out multiple artistic and curatorial projects. In this way, during the seventies, the use of the term feminist art was also circumscribed within political militancy. In this sense, artistic productions sought to claim the rights of women. Julia Antivilo explains that "feminist art is an expression of the political art of the avant-garde of the 70s".<sup>7</sup> It is important to mention that the case of Mexico is exceptional, since there were early initiatives of feminist activism. For example, very early, Mónica Mayer – a Mexican feminist artist whose work is key in the evolution of Mexican art history – was linked to the International Women's Year in 1975 and to the developments of North American feminism. However, in the rest of Latin American countries we find ourselves in the absence of feminist artistic activism. This vacuum in Latin American countries was related to the complicated relationship between Marxism and feminism and to the repression of Latin American dictatorships.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Mónica Mayer has called her production feminist art without being ascribed to any other concept, although she links it to the demarcation from political militancy.

The link between feminist art and militancy gradually disappeared in the following decades. Mónica Mayer explains that around the 1990s and later, with the social and political transformations characterised by the processes

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6 J. Antivilo, *Entre lo sagrado y lo profano se tejen rebeldías: arte feminista Latinoamericano*, Bogotá, 2015, p. 16.

7 Antivilo, op. cit., p. 63–64

8 A. Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano, Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Mexico, 2019, p. 83.

of globalisation and the introduction of neoliberalism in Mexico, the term *political militancy* had run its course.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the transition to the term *activism* as a replacement for *militancy* was also related to the fact that on some occasions the grassroots work of the artists was visibly displaced by an artistic production that was financed by grants and national funds.<sup>10</sup> So, we find that the nineties constituted a complex moment culturally, also characterised by the emergence of alternative art spaces and the imminent development of performance. This is reflected in the inauguration of *Ex Teresa Arte Actual* in 1993 that – in opening a cultural, experimental, and alternative space – focused on non-object practices. Lorena Wolffer – a Mexican feminist artist and cultural activist – during the 1990s, was intensely productive in the field of performance, and later she began to organise participatory events in the public space to fight against gender violence. During that period, she called her actions participatory cultural interventions, to emphasise their collective and participatory nature.<sup>11</sup>

The participatory art idea did not emerge in the nineties but had been ongoing throughout the development of art in the 20th century; the first moment can be identified in the artistic avant-garde, in the first half of the 20th century, the second in the post-war period, and later in the 1990s. Regarding the latter, participatory art was strongly promoted by the rise of capitalism and the fall of the socialist bloc, where participatory art emerged with great force to repair the social wound caused by history.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, terms such as “community art”, “socially committed art” or “relational art” began to diverge. It is in this context that the term *participatory art* and its different equivalents became more recognised and the subject of dialogue in the Mexican cultural context.

Within this conceptual complexity on how to account for the character of social incidence in feminist art, from the 2000s the term *artivism* began to be introduced, which comes directly from urban art, situationism and graffiti art. This term began to be used generically to talk about artistic works with a strong social impact.<sup>13</sup> In this way, *artivism* arose with the clear objective of making artistic proposals that entail modifications and social transformations, to generate new narratives capable of changing pre-established codes and signs. This implies that art activists do not simply want to critique the

9 Interview with Mónica Mayer conducted by Una Pardo and Cecilia Noriega on 18 March 2023.

10 N. de la Rosa y A. Bojórquez, *¿Cuál es la herencia mexicana del arte de izquierda?*, Mexico City, 2023.

11 Interview with Lorena Wolffer by Una Pardo and Cecilia Noriega, 16 March 2023.

12 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, 2021, pp. 1–11.

13 E. Aladro-Vico, E. Jivkova-Semova, D. Bailey, “Artivismo: Un nuevo lenguaje educativo para la acción social transformadora”, *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 2018, 57, pp. 9–18.

art system or the political and social conditions in which they operate, but rather to change these circumstances through art. Artivism seeped into the feminist arena and the denomination of feminist artivism began to emerge.

In this way, a generation of artists emerged, such as Cerrucha, who identifies her practice as activist. Cerrucha explains that artivism represents a non-place, a space between art and activism. Likewise, combining both concepts in the same word implies giving the same weight to both actions, recognizing their aesthetic and political value. The visual artist, cultural manager, and director of *Hysteria!* Magazine, Liz Misterio suggests that this term implies the need to consider a form of art operation outside the museum, with the intention of achieving a true transformation, although she acknowledges that this has also conditioned a certain depoliticisation of art.<sup>14</sup> *Feminist artivism* is framed with an increase in gender violence, but also with a mediatization and massification of protest, all characterised by the emergence of a generation associated with Internet and social networks, used as a means of political activism manifested by events such as *Vivas nos queremos* 2015, the *Me Too* movement, a feminist manifestations and graffiti in different monuments in Mexico City in 2019.

Despite the affiliation of several artists with the term *feminist artivism*, in the field of art, the use of *feminist artivism* has also come under question. Lorena Wolffer considers that the delimitations of artivism are ambiguous, and each practice has particularities, characteristics, and their own forms of operation, so it is difficult to categorise them under the same term. Currently, some artists have incorporated the term *social practice* to refer to their artistic productions, like an artistic strategy to make visible and denounce gender violence, that have an impact on social issues. In relation to this discussion on how to name these actions, the Disidentia Network, which fosters collaboration between artists, managers, historians, and curators, suggests incorporating the concept of “Social Practices” as in the international context of “social practice” or “socially engaged art”, where it is argued that social interaction is somehow art itself.

“This concept is incorporated into the field of feminist art to talk about projects that link art strategies and activism through artistic strategies of visibility, enunciation, and agency to transform specific contexts and problems; in this way it acknowledges that the artistic strategies are different and complex for each project and can consist of several stages; They also resort to a plurality of activities that involve workshops, meetings, performances and exhibitions. Likewise, the heterogeneity of the practices is recognized where the main thing is the collective process that is developed in each one of them, with the intention of social transformation”.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Género e Inclusión IBERO, “Conversation ‘Artivism and Feminism’”, *YouTube*, 21 March 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP08H18EDuA&t=3252s> [accessed 10 May 2023].

15 Disidentia, <https://www.disidentia.com> [accessed 15 March 2023].

These terms have been raised mainly by the artists themselves, who have named their work in this way. However, these terms have also been discussed in the scope of theory and curatorship. Art historian Karen Cordero says that *feminist activism* arises from the explicit recognition of creative practices, which form part of the social actions that highlight and protest the political problems facing feminism. Also, this concept arises from a desire to distance oneself from the artistic system and from the mechanisms of commodification, by going out into the public space, in many cases. Regarding this term, scholar and performance artist Julia Antivilo has also commented that “activism” combines art and activism, to synthesise both practices; it acknowledges that feminist art is recent and as political art it is under-recognized. In the 1990s, being a feminist did not imply being an activist; this transition occurred in the 2000s, when activism within the Latin American feminist movement was recognized and the importance of placing the body in the public space began to be questioned, circumscribed in a mass movement that makes it possible to think of other forms of action.

In the same way, it is possible to cite exhibitions circumscribed in the field of feminist activism such as the exhibition *¡Vivas estamos, estamos vivas!, Violentómetro Artivismo y género en la CdMx*, (We are alive, we are alive!, Violentómetro Artivism and Gender) which was presented in 2022 in the context of the *Festival Internacional Cervantino* (International Cervantino Festival) in the *Museo Regional de Guanajuato Alhóndiga de* (Guanajuato Regional Museum Alhóndiga de Granaditas). The exhibition was co-curated by Karen Cordero and Cecilia Noriega and sought to understand activism as the ability of art to influence gender issues; the exhibition proposed that an activist component has been present throughout the development of feminist art, establishing intergenerational dialogues. Likewise, it suggested understanding the action of activism as a fight against the different types of violence. The curatorship wanted the spectators to have an experience when touring the rooms; at the same time, that feminist collectives worked on campaigns to respond to local problems. In this way, the historical value of the action was recognized including through reactivations in collaboration with the collectives, we achieved a social impact.

Within this plurality of terms, what underlies is a lack of consensus for various reasons. The first is linked to its emergence in a specific context; we are not passive recipients who manage to have an objective and perspective view, but we are part of the processes in which we find ourselves and our approach is partially dependent on the context in which we live as well as our own experience.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, this plurality of terms lies in the great difference that exists in the practices and diversity of media and processes used, from performance, installation, graphic work, as well as digital resources and media. We must also consider transdisciplinary studies, which invite us to understand the complexity.

<sup>16</sup> Haraway, op. cit., pp. 313–330.



Another factor that makes it impossible to use a single term, lies in the political and social power of each one of these actions, which is very diverse. On some occasions, the practice gains traction, while on other occasions no real commitment is achieved. Its incidence is not only determined by the relevance of its formal and conceptual resources, but also by the visibility, infrastructure, circulation, development over time that generate conditions for the practice to repeat to any significant extent.

## Now a flowerpot: the issues of feminist artivism

It is useful to point out that for more than a decade now in Latin America the category of *feminist artivism* has gained traction and legitimacy, both in art historiography and in exhibition spaces as well as in the art market, a phenomenon circumscribed in a complex context marked by globalisation, massification and mediation of the feminist movement both regionally and worldwide. Nowadays in particular, as art critic and academic Katy Deepwell<sup>17</sup> reminds us, neoliberal logics and the massive trans-regional agendas of the UN have defined the feminist outpost in contemporary times, which is why, following Deepwell, we should ask ourselves how we situate ourselves in feminisms and to open what paths? In this case, in art history, what are we investigating? What for? How? With this, are we only settling for inclusion in the canon of art history of cis and trans women, sex-gender dissidences, and other marginalised subjects, thus helping to neutralise the critical and political spirit<sup>18</sup> of its incidence in the discipline itself and in the social sphere?

According to Invasorix,<sup>19</sup> their collective artwork is based on their experiences, precariousness, and power dynamics in their environments, among others. In their artwork “Full Body Workout: 10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings”, the art collective questions the massification, mediation and commodification of feminist adherence:<sup>20</sup>

“Even decades ago, and before feminisms were in vogue on a planetary scale, many people intersected by their feminine gender, sexuality, race, class, different abilities, migratory status among others, have militated and resisted sustaining feminist struggles in their comings and goings.

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17 K. Deepwell, *Narratives of Feminist Art In/Out of n.Paradoxa*, Online Seminar, *Narrating Art and Feminisms: Eastern Europe and Latin America*, 25 October 2021.

18 R. Segato, *Contra-Pedagogías de La Crueldad*, Buenos Aires, 2021.

19 Invasorix is an art collective formed since 2013, their work is interested in songs, videos and self-publishing, as a form of queer-feminist protest, currently formed by Liz Misterio, Nabil Yanai and Una Pardo – artists living and working in Mexico City.

20 “Full Body Workout:10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings” was content thought for social networks (2020) that was rendered in a folding brochure and an audiovisual installation (2022) to problematize extractivist dynamics within artistic practices that are named as feminist.

Now as feminisms are fashionable, those who change their ideology like changing clothes turn around to look at the work that has been done for years within feminist struggles. *Turning around* to look has resulted in stealing their work without acknowledging or committing to feminist struggles; In voiding meaning and commercializing actions that were once germs of resistance. [...] Those who exploit, plagiarize, steal, co-opt in the name of feminist struggles are doing all the work of the white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist, monopolist patriarchy which robs us of our ideas, struggles, and the surplus value of our work”.<sup>21</sup>

The above issue invites us to consider that the term feminist *artivism* could be used and converted into a market niche, which in part has led many artistic practices to be labelled as feminist, when a decade ago in Latin America they implied the exclusion of the art field.<sup>22</sup>

For art historian Hans Belting, the globalisation of art has implied a crisis for the history of art as a narrative because it has challenged its modern linear and evolutionary understanding, and so Belting mentions:

“[...] participation in the art world does not require the old entrance ticket of formal novelty and purity, as proof of advanced art. It is rather the conscience that matters, preferably understood as a critical analysis of today’s most debated (or neglected) issues. Originality, once expected from the artist’s self-expression, has become a way to take position in contemporary issues. This also applies to the claim of identity other than Western that lives from an old resistance against modern hegemony. Inclusion and visibility are the new battle cries when artists from formerly neglected cultures enter the stage”.<sup>23</sup>

However, it seems to us that this apparent openness, diversity, locality/globality in artistic production – as well as the implications it may have for the history of art that Belting points out – again hides the hierarchies, inequalities and oppressions configured in this modern/colonial patriarchal/capitalist world-system, and ends up lubricating and updating Western abstract universalism.<sup>24</sup> So, it is the global market that dynamizes artistic production and its historicization, and limits participation to those who have concrete and adequate

21 Invasorix, “Full Body Workout: 10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings”, *Instagram*, 21 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBtyCGFjrPj/> [accessed 5 May 2023].

22 As an example, the online initiative *Hysteria! Magazine* arose in Mexico City in 2013 due to the lack of spaces that welcomed and gave visibility to feminist and sex-gender dissidence artistic practices that had no place in conventional art spaces, in the same sense it has been a space that given its characteristics has enabled for a decade the generation and strengthening of artistic/activist networks in the region.

23 H. Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate”, in: *The Global Art World*, eds. H. Belting, A. Buddensieg, Ostfildern, 2009, pp. 38–73.

24 R. Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Transmodern Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas”, in: *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, eds. S. Castro-Gómez, R. Grosfoguel, Bogotá, 2007, pp. 63–78.

structural conditions, the participation of a few blurs or flattens the complexity of embodying the intertwining of different oppressions and occupying different places in the hierarchy of domination.

In this sense, the reflection of the feminist anthropologist Rita Laura Segato on the multicultural phase in which, after the Cold War, nation-states have turned and delineated their policies is useful. Segato proposes that multiculturalism is an expression of neoliberalism, as it processes and translates cultural, social and identity differences in order to assimilate to state functioning and maintain its patriarchal and colonial coherence, giving continuity to the universal paradigm of what she calls “the world of the One” or of “Man-Humanity”, thus Segato suggests that: “[...] [I]n anodyne and global multiculturalism, political identities are a processed, pasteurized adaptation of the world of the One, which cans them and transforms them into equalized types suitable for digestion. The radical difference of historical projects, of divergent welfare goals, is extinguished there”.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, it is important to problematize and understand how our feminist artistic, curatorial, and historiographic practices can relate and respond to neoliberal dynamics. Some feminist artistic practices end up being accommodated and consolidated under the dynamics of tokenism and within the multicultural mercantile diversification products offered by the art world. So, it is even more valid to recall what Griselda Pollock already said in 1982:<sup>26</sup>

“[Feminist art practice and] feminist art history rejects the necessary confrontation with the dominant ideologies and practices of the discipline. Instead, feminists are content to incorporate women’s names into chronologies and to include women’s work in inventories of styles and movements. Certain liberal politics [in feminist art practice and] art history have allowed this inadvertent and additive feminism to arise, [...] the critical implications of feminism for art history as a whole have been stifled and have not been allowed to change what is understood as art history, nor how it is studied and thought about”.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, feminist approaches and practices would radically transform the colonial white capitalist patriarchal concept of art and therefore from its spaces and ways of being studied and narrated.<sup>28</sup> According to art historian Andrea Giunta, it is an emancipatory art whose counter-hegemonic radicality is also about the art system.<sup>29</sup>

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25 R. Segato, *Contra-Pedagogías de la Crueldad*, Buenos Aires, 2021, p. 97.

26 G. Pollock, “Visión, Voz y Poder: Historias Feministas Del Arte y Marxismo”, in: *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, eds. K. Cordero Reiman, I. Sáenz, México City, 2007, pp. 45–79.

27 Ibid., p. 50.

28 Ibid.

29 A. Giunta, “Feminisms and Emancipation. Mónica Mayer: Radical Aesthetics and Latin American Simultaneities”, in: *When in Doubt... Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibit*, ed. E. Álvarez Romero, México City, 2016, pp. 84–99.

Of course, the question is not so simple because we deal all the time with the precariousness of our role as art and culture workers, as women and sex-gender dissidents in Latin America. The dynamics of precariousness and self-exploitation is the order of the day, and is about being able to live with dignity from what we do. But, in that sense, the feminist art project should also mean devising and developing strategies of alliance and mutual care that – as a politicised community – allows us not to depend only on the linkage of a few to the revenues that the field of art can offer.<sup>30</sup> The introduction of *feminist activism* within capitalist logic guarantees the resources, infrastructure and dissemination of these actions. However, there are important risks of its incursion, which may end up depriving it of critical potential and therefore of political impact. So, many proposals with the aim of reaching other audiences or having wide-ranging visibility can run the risk of trivialising their discourse and blurring the specificity and radicality of certain struggles.<sup>31</sup> According to Pollock, “‘art history’ cannot survive feminism because what art history as a discipline has

30 In this sense, initiatives such as the Red Disidenta, made up of artists, curators, managers and researchers of feminist social practice in Mexico, collaboratively seek to contribute to a regional exchange and dialogue in Latin America to confront the different forms of violence and reduce precariousness in the artistic field.

31 A related event to think about these issues is the intervention that took place on 20 May 2023, at the Colegio de San Ildefonso located in the Historic Center of the Mexican capital, where the French fashion design company Dior presented its latest collection *Dior Cruise 2024*. To raise awareness of violence against women, Mexican artist Elina Chauvet, known for her artwork *Zapatos Rojos* (Red Shoes) (2009), coordinated, towards the end of the runway, about twenty models wearing a series of white garments with handcrafted red embroidery with different messages, most of them different insults commonly directed at women, they also wore red Dior heels, while “Sin miedo” [Without fear], a song by singer-songwriter Vivir Quintana about the violence suffered by women, was played, which since 2020 has become an anthem of feminist protests. Is important to mention that *Zapatos Rojos* of Elina Chauvet is considered as feminist activism. With the intent of contributing to the discussion we are proposing, it seems to us that this event can account for the complexities that feminist artistic productions go through in terms of their massification, mediatisation and spectacularisation, and this invites us more specifically to ask ourselves about the meaning of feminist artistic practices. This event is interesting, not merely from the perspective that fashion scenarios can or cannot be a scenario of denunciation, but what this participation reveals, in addition to the neocolonial substrate in which they participate, is the superficiality in which certain strategies can fall, which end up working as a simulation, especially when in Mexico embroidery has been one of the most recognizable practices of feminist protest and against disappearance. And that leads us to question ourselves: are these spaces necessary as spokespersons? In what other ways, beyond the show, are they committing themselves to this problem? How does this intervention work as an exercise in translation (either from a social issue or from artistic strategies situated to a fashion scenario)? What was the priority? What and how are the aesthetic-political criteria that are being discarded and underestimated?, Ch. Dior, “The Dior Cruise 2024 Show”, *YouTube*, 20 May 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab\\_channel=ChristianDior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab_channel=ChristianDior) [accessed 29 May 2023].

enacted and performatively iterated is a continuing production of a classed, raced, gendered and heteronormative representation of art contested structurally by feminism".<sup>32</sup> This disruptive statement shares with us an exercise of radical imagination since it calls us to a visionary positioning towards the future (or towards other pasts): How could it be the artistic, cultural and aesthetic practices of a feminist anti/de(s)colonial project? How would it be their spaces, their subjects, their narratives? Can we imagine them? In what way could we rehearse them?

The fractures that cross the feminist movement with the advance of conservative, neoliberal, punitive and fascist expressions, and projects are more and more evident. For us the scope of radical transformation of feminism can only be in the joint alliance of the anti/de(s)colonial and anti-capitalist struggle. In this sense, from our areas of work and our forms of struggle, a permanent self-critical exercise on what we have done and what we can do is indispensable. How do we define and narrate what we do? For what and for whom is it convenient? Why?

While everyone makes strategic use of the terms that allow them to underpin the meaning of their work, and this reflection on the terms we use is not intended to catalogue or contribute to the configuration of a linear narrative, it is relevant to understanding the scope and limitations that such terms have had in terms of giving meaning and specificity to our feminist practices in art and art history. What are we nurturing and blurring in their implementation? This is important because, as theorist and artist Simon O' Sullivan states, "a transformation in how we think about art necessarily alters the topology of how we think about ourselves and vice versa".<sup>33</sup>

We believe that a necessary task in this dialogue and (self-)critical reflection is related to the reproduction of dichotomous logics, which separately analyse aesthetic productions that are not enunciated from the field of art. We understand the latter as an area determined by a cultural system that tends towards professionalization and that generally separates what emerges from the art world and what happens externally. In this sense, the term *artivism* seems to be one which, as we pointed out, some artists like Cerrucha and feminist historians like Julia Antivilo (with academic trajectories in art) use to name and insist on the power of art to influence reality and contribute to social transformation. In this sense, the term seems to be a precision within the broad panorama that feminist art practice comprises and the way in which much of this enunciation has been shaped (accommodated) with its "thematic" character.

In turn, the term has been used by some activists who, without recognizing themselves in an artistic academic trajectory, find in it the expansive

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32 G. Pollock, "Historia y Política. ¿Puede La Historia del Arte Sobrevivir al Feminismo?", in: *Feminisme, Art et Histoire de l'art.*, ed. Y. Michaud, Paris, 1994.

33 S. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari. Thought Beyond Representation*, Chippenham-Eastbourne, 2006, p. 16.

possibility of challenging the classist mood of art and the artist, and of retaking art means and strategies such as murals, graphics, and performance, among others, which are circumscribed as forms of response to the different patriarchal violence. In this sense, researchers such as Natalia Eguíluz<sup>34</sup> have used the term to analyse and account for such activist practices in Mexico. However, it is also true that within these aesthetic repertoires that have constituted the struggle of women—not only now, since they have historically configured their radicalism and identity—<sup>35</sup> they have not been interested in defining themselves in relation to the field of art, since their priority lies in the urgency of responding to a concrete reality, and in the effectiveness that these forms of expression have in their specific contexts, both in personal and communal terms, as a way of agency in the face of a brutal and terrifying reality. To discuss whether this can be linked to the field of art is not a concern that articulates what they do, although we consider that their actions must question our actions, as people who work in culture and art. So, in the face of the question regarding what art does and, moreover, what we want feminist art to do, it is necessary to identify what understandings, ways of acting, and classist, colonial, racist, patriarchal, and capacitating divisions we continue to perpetuate in the analysis and creation of aesthetic repertoires for the struggle.

Another major problem that the term feminist activism faces is the inability that art history may have to account for productions that are not limited to the field of art, it is not without reason that much of the recent research in Mexico on feminist artistic and cultural practices comes from the social sciences. In this sense, approaches from visual culture, for example, have allowed challenging disciplinary frameworks to understand aesthetic, creative and feminist protest practices in a complex way. Feminist researcher Rían Lozano<sup>36</sup> focuses on graffiti painted during the feminist march of 16 August 2019 in Mexico City where the Monument to Independence (*Monumento a la Independencia*) was altered (Fig. 2) and the different physical and digital expressions made by the organised women from the Faculty of Architecture of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Facultad de Arquitectura de la Universidad Autónoma de México) in the strike that began on 22 March 2021 to demand educational spaces free of violence, to understand them, as the author proposes, as feminist gestures “that more than generating imaginaries, seek to squat, muddy, disorganize, dirty the existing ones and, with this, suspend the course

34 N. Eguíluz, “Tomar La Calle: Artivismo Contra La Violencia Feminicida En México (2012-2019)”, PhD thesis, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2022. [https://tesiunam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find\\_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz](https://tesiunam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz) [accessed 05 March 2023].

35 Let us think of the pink cross that the mothers of women murdered in the 1990s in Ciudad Juárez contributed as an icon of struggle against femicide violence.

36 R. Lozano, “Desacompasada y sobrepuestas. Reescrituras y reconocimientos feministas”, in: *GRRRRR Género: Rabia, Ritmo, Ruido, Risa y Respons-habilidad*, ed. M. Belausteguigoitia Rius, Ciudad de México, 2022, pp. 169–179.



**Fig. 2.** Nirvana Paz, Victoria Alada II, Mexico City 2019, Nirvana Paz personal file.



**Fig. 3.** Pink Crosses placed in Lomas del Poleo Planta Alta in the place where eight bodies of women victims of femicide were found in 1996, Ciudad Juárez, 2022, Una Pardo Ibarra personal file.

of meaning produced from the politics of the dominant visual representation".<sup>37</sup> It is worth mentioning that this type of intervention in heritage and the institution have unleashed a polemic on historical and patrimonial narratives and aesthetics. Therefore, the Monument to Independence (*Monumento a la Independencia*), which was inaugurated in 1910, presents a historical account of the heroes who had contributed to the nation, from a progressive and evolutionary vision, and was graffitied more than a century later with slogans such as "*Mexico feminicida*" (Mexico feminicide) or "*se va a caer*" (is going to fall), in a way that confronts two versions of history: on the one hand, the official historical acts and, on the other, the history of women. In this regard, they are actions that are not framed in the field of art, but which, of course, have qualities in the aesthetic realm, whose power and transgression force us to rethink the frameworks of the artistic.

So, it is essential to question how – in our artistic, historiographic, and curatorial practices – we continue to reproduce the myth of the creative genius, who possesses a sensibility capable of revealing and attending to things that the creative practices of ordinary people could not (Fig. 3).

## Towards other concepts

As we may see, there is a conceptual differentiation to name these artistic and cultural productions in the interest of accounting for the nature of their social impact. The diversity of terms that emerges responds to the complexity of historical dynamics, the different frameworks of action and places of enunciation, which are constantly changing.

On the other hand, the use of the term *feminist activism* seems to entail a certain ambiguity, even contradiction. This fact reveals discrepancies on the strategies and means used, which in turn account for both the specific contexts in which these practices emerge, as well as the social place occupied in the hierarchy of power by those who hold these practices and the material and symbolic access they entail. This situation again demonstrates tensions between art/life, academia/activism, theory/practice, which are a constant challenge for a transformative artistic practice.

This is why we use the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices, to recognize the singularity of each process, that each practice has its own features, purposes and techniques that cannot be compared with any other, unlike *feminist activism* whose use has tended to homogenise and even trivialise a multiplicity of practices that show different ways of seeking social initiation.

In the same way, with the idea of feminist aesthetic-political practices we seek to open the reflection to a panorama of activist practices that in their

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 173.



forms of protest articulate creative, symbolic, and aesthetic disruptions that exceed the institutional and academic codes of artistic practice. Likewise, the notion of “practices” emphasises the active component implied by the action and underlines the process. As opposed to the prevailing objectual connotation of art and the dissociation that it entails between the artist and what he or she produces. In this sense, even though the term of social practice accounts for the intention of incidence and the importance of participation and process, we find it fundamental to recognize that these feminist practices possess aesthetic qualities. Understanding that it is precisely there where their potential for social potential is found by creating tools and strategies of perception that seek the configuration of other sensibilities and that other fields of action cannot offer. The existence of aesthetic-affective qualities circumscribes these practices in a symbolic register to enable the questioning, denaturalization, and transformation of the structures of gender violence.

Likewise, we consider the feminist aesthetic practices as a political issue. Jacques Rancière explains that the essence of the political is dissent, which implies a confrontation of interests, where the aesthetic produces a reconfiguration of the *sensible*. In the same way, there is also a political component in the aesthetic, where art transforms the sensible, intervening in the division of the sensory experience.<sup>38</sup> However, we place ourselves in what is proposed by the scholar Nelly Richard who, unlike Rancière, is in opposition to the sole disruption of order caused by aesthetic action, and states that a time of consolidation, aggregation and integration is necessary. A more complex process is necessary, which enables art to give this power of social transformation.<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, she explains that the political in art is limited to an area that critically reflects on the social environment, from its own organisation of meanings. In this way, there is an underlying rejection between the direct correspondence with art and social content, thus recognizing an intrinsic force that arises from the rearrangement that artistic production fosters.<sup>40</sup> What happens with current practices is a disruption of order, of symbolic structures, but they need to be processed, analysed, and given meaning to be translated into concrete social actions. In this sense the social incidence implies not only the mere correspondence between art and society, but also entails a series of critical processes and reflections that can be translated into a social impact. In this way, the use of this concept allows us to understand the dynamics, recognize other practices that are outside the canon and escape from the co-optation of the capitalist system by acknowledging the need for disruption from the political field.

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38 J. Rancière, *Sobre políticas estéticas*, Barcelona, 2005, pp. 9–19.

39 N. Richard, *Crítica y Política*, Santiago de Chile, 2013, pp. 40–53

40 N. Richard, “Arte y política; lo político en el arte”, in: *Arte y política*, eds. P. Oyarzún, N. Richard, C. Zaldívar, Santiago de Chile, 2005, pp. 190–208.

## In conclusion

As we can see, the development of concepts is important to name and locate our work, especially since it allows us to articulate the specificity of our practice, given its context, and the meaning we try to give it. So, feminist artistic practices have strategically used different terms to manifest the subversive nature and social impact that motivates them, and for that reason, both concepts and practices must be questioned, transformed, and reinvented. However, we believe that we need to contribute to this discussion to identify our scope, limitations, and blind spots as a political collectivity.

It is difficult to find a term because what persists are interdisciplinary and undisciplined practices that break with the status of the artistic and other fields, whose evolution and development is conditioned by multiple factors. Likewise, the term *feminist activism* arises within a capitalist and globalising context, so that many actions may use the term with the intention of social vindication but end up circumscribing themselves in mercantilist logics. In this same sense, the term activism works at least in two ways, as a legitimising resource of the activist character of artistic practices circumscribed in some way to the professional and institutional field of art and on the other hand, as a strategy to visualise and position practices of social mobilisation that find, in the artistic media and in the aesthetic field, a subversive potential and a model of social agency. For these reasons it is important to question the frameworks that determine the artistic, but it is also necessary for a critical and self-reflexive review of our work within the field of art, which gives coherence to what we do. In this sense, with the use of the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices we seek to give rise to the plurality of actions, techniques and processes, and different places of enunciation, while at the same time acknowledging their aesthetic-affective qualities and their ability to venture into the political, by dismantling symbolic structures they condition gender violence. Of course, this notion arises from our own experience in curating, theory, and artistic production, to respond to our work and the mechanisms by which art is involved in the social, so they work for our purposes and quest. In this way, rather than offering a closed term, it is an invitation to think about the problems of concepts, their transformations and the search for terms that explain and allow us to analyse the coordinates of artistic production.

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