

Art in America

DRASTIC TIMES

by Julian Kreimer

Based on seven years of research, the Pacific Standard Time exhibition “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985” forges a new significance for previously excluded artists.



Sandra Eleta: *Edita* (the one with the duster), Panama, 1978-79, black-and-white photograph. 30 inches square.

THE NEWEST INSTALLMENT of the Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time, titled LA/LA, focuses the attention of almost every Southern California art institution on Latin American and Latinx art and culture.¹ Of the more than seventy shows under the LA/LA banner (fifty received Getty Foundation funding), none perhaps is more ambitious than the Hammer Museum’s “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985.” The curators, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, have been doing research since 2010, before the Getty’s LA/LA project was conceived, and the show brings together more than 270 artworks by 120 women from fifteen countries stretching the seven thousand miles from California to Tierra del Fuego.

The curators went deep, finding artists who had disappeared, both literally and metaphorically, starting in the years after World War II. Many lived in exile or were jailed and tortured for their political activities. The scope eventually became unwieldy, leading Fajardo-Hill and Giunta to select a period in which they saw utopian abstraction give way to an experimental scene, with works often directly addressing political and social themes.

Most of the artists had active careers during the decades covered by “Radical Women,” including solo shows at important international biennials and museums like the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. However, the majority have been left out of the big survey exhibitions and books on postwar Latin American art. Luis Camnitzer, for example, in his canonical book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (2007), includes only two women (and one of them, his then-wife Liliana Porter, was part of the New York Graphics Workshop with him from 1965 to 1970).² With this show, Fajardo-Hill, an independent British-Venezuelan art historian, and Giunta, an art historian based in Buenos Aires, strove to recover these neglected artists for the history books.

1. Latinx is a gender-neutral replacement for the exclusionary Latino or the cumbersome binary Latino/a.

2. Luis Gamnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007.

3. Andrea Giunta at arteBA Open Forum on "Radical Women," Buenos Aires, May 21, 2016, youtube.com.

4. Fajardo-Hill, "The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices," in *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Los Angeles and New York, Hammer Museum and Delmonico/Prestel, 2017, p. 21.

5. *ibid.*
6. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill interview conducted in Spanish, Feb. 16, 2017, Los Angeles.

7. Andrea Giunta interview conducted in Spanish, Feb. 7, 2017, New York, and Fajardo-Hill interview.

The curators have encountered opposition to the idea of an all-women exhibition, hearing dismissals like "ya fue" (that's over). Some feared that it might ghettoize women. (Several artists declined to participate for this reason.) Others worried that feminist work critiquing sexism would exacerbate the stereotypes of Latin machismo. The curators' theme, which is the female body as a site of political struggle, was considered by some to be passé or neo-essentialist, given contemporary gender and queer theory.

Speaking at a symposium on the exhibition at the art fair arteBA in Buenos Aires, Giunta posed a key question: why are the numbers of women artists in Latin American art exhibitions still so dismal? In response, she argued that many sensibilities and ideas are blocked by patriarchal taste.³ Fajardo-Hill, in her catalogue essay, describes this vicious circle bluntly: "the system . . . judges the quality of artists' work on the basis of visibility and success, which are often denied to women."⁴ She points out that "only a few women artists have been chosen to represent the field at large, and these figures have been highlighted again and again."⁵

Fajardo-Hill and Giunta go beyond performing due diligence on twenty-five years of art history; their goal is a complete overhaul of taste. As Fajardo-Hill put it: "how can you create a context to recognize these women, given that they are left out?" She said that, as a curator, she doesn't want to continue the history of segregation and invisibility.⁶ To these ends, the curators divided the works into nine thematic categories (such as "The Self-Portrait," "Performing the Body," and "Resistance and Fear"), bringing artists from different countries together. The dense catalogue meanwhile sticks to national borders, as does much scholarship on the region.

THE WORKS IN the show are unified by a turn toward the body, thanks especially to the experimentation that came with Portapaks, which facilitated performance documentation.⁷ Lacking long-established artistic conventions, video let in the messy realities of class and race.

María Luisa Bemberg's early short *El mundo de la mujer* (The World of Women, 1972) documents an event at La Rural, a vast convention ground ensconced in the ritzy north side of Buenos Aires. A man's voice announces: "Femimundo Incorporated organizes the first international fair of women and their world, appealing for the first time to the most powerful factor of consumption of our time: Woman." The camera captures the Argentine middle classes clustering to catch up on the latest ways to set hair, make dinner, and clean house. Brilliantined men in dark suits spear hors d'oeuvres with toothpicks while well-coiffed ladies watch young models demonstrate rotating beds, electric looms for the home, and space-age fashions. From a shot of a small girl getting her makeup done, Bemberg cuts abruptly to a platform presenting what appear to be swimsuited mannequins. But then, one figure in a green wig and matching bikini turns her head slightly, revealing that she is only pretending to be a doll. Bemberg (1922–1995), one of only seven or so artists in the show to label herself a feminist, was a leading female director in Latin America. This approximately fifteen-minute film included in "Radical Women" prefigures her feature films, such as *Camilla* (1984), depicting well-to-do women who chafe at the confinement created by social expectations.

Lack of physical freedom is explored in the videos of Brazilian Leticia Parente, who became an artist at forty-one while continuing her career as a chemist. She treats her own body like a product in her best-known piece, *Marca Registrada* (Trademark, 1975), which shows her sewing the phrase MADE IN BRASIL into the sole of her bare foot. In *Tarefa 1* (Chore 1, 1982), the white-clad artist unceremoniously lies down on an ironing board, and a black maid, dressed in black, irons her. The power of the repressive regime, which is dependent on the export market, is reinforced by racialized class hierarchies and, within them, sexist divisions of labor.

In Victoria Santa Cruz's spoken-word performance *Me gritaron negra* (They Shouted "Black" at Me, 1978), the artist recites: "I wasn't even five, when some voices in the street shouted 'black' at me." She ends with the proud line "Negra soy!" (I am black!). Panamanian Sandra Eleta's black-and-white photograph *Edita (la del plumero)*, *Panama* (Edita [the one with the feather duster], Panama, 1978–79) portrays a maid staring at us regally from her employers' gilded armchair. Her dark skin set off against her white uniform, she holds a duster in lieu of a scepter. From Bemberg to Eleta, these artists address not social homogeneity but rather the hierarchies and divisions that shape each woman's life.

In her essay “An Introduction to Mestizo Poetics,” in the *Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, the Chilean multidisciplinary artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña (represented by several works in the show) points out that the vitality of Latin American literature arises from its *mestizaje*, the mixing of indigenous, European, African, and Asian influences.⁸ Likewise, cultural blending is evident in much of the art in the show. For *Brasil native/Brasil alienígena* (Native Brazil/Alien Brazil, 1977), Anna Bella Geiger, who is Brazilian and of Jewish-

8. Cecilia Vicuña, “An Introduction to Mestizo Poetics,” in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. xvii–xviii.

Polish descent, pairs postcards of indigenous subjects with postcards of herself imitating their poses, such as aiming a bow and arrow at the sky. The absurdity of her staging these postures in Western dress highlights the constructed exoticism at the heart of the Brazilian self-image. The pioneering video work of Mexican artist Pola Weiss emerged after a 1973 meeting with Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota in New York. The eighteen-minute *Mujer Ciudad Mujer* (Woman City Woman, 1978) intercuts and overlaps images of a nude dancer, psychedelic patterns, and mundane scenes of Mexico City.

Another kind of mixing appears in Vicuña’s drawing *Nuevos diseños eróticos para muebles* (New Erotic Designs for Furniture, 1971), which depicts a combination recliner/work bench on which a naked woman leans over an open book with a pen at the ready. The artist’s poem typewritten below the image announces that fixed positions have become too limited and proposes DIFFERENT FURNISHINGS / THAT OFFER A MULTIPLICITY OF MOVEMENTS OR CORPOREAL SITUATIONS / TO THE USER OF HER OWN BODY. Lourdes Grobet’s black-and-white photo series “La doble lucha” (The Double Struggle, 1981–82) foils coherent identity. Grobet pictures masked and costumed women wrestlers performing everyday activities, such as feeding a baby or applying makeup, adding tenderness to a public persona that is equal parts aggressive and sexual.

THE NEED TO SPEAK openly about specifically female experiences, like maternity and menstruation, motivates many works. Lea Lublin’s 1968 performance, *Mon fils* (My Son), in which she cared for her seven-month-old child at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris during a group exhibition, is presented in several photographs. Performance artists Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante, who formed the feminist art group Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black-Hen Dust), used their appearance on a Mexican TV talk show as the conduit for their piece *Madre por un día* (Mother for a Day, 1987). When the straitlaced host asks about the duo’s name, which refers to a folk remedy against hexes, Mayer tells him: “It’s hard to be a woman in this world, it’s hard to be an artist, it’s hard to

be a woman artist, but to be a woman, an artist, and a feminist is very hard! So we said, a name like Polvo de Gallina Negra protects us against any evil eye that comes our way.” In the approximately fifteen-minute video, Mayer and Bustamante discuss their work and motherhood, telling the host that they will demonstrate how art can use mass media to change society’s views of women’s issues. Pulling out props, they ask him to try out pregnancy by dressing in a big-bellied yellow apron and a tiara. They play the cues and gags of television to bring attention to a subject usually absent from such forums.

The performances of Colombian artist María Evelia Marmolejo focus on the shock of exposing what’s usually hidden. The nine black-and-white photos documenting *11 de marzo—Ritual a la menstruación, digno de toda mujer como antecedente del origen de la vida* (March 11—Ritual in Honor of Menstruation, Worthy of Every Woman as a Precursor to the Origin of Life, 1981) show her marking the gallery walls with her menstrual blood by pressing her pelvis against them. In the catalogue, Carmen María Jaramillo recounts a conversation with Marmolejo in which the artist said she was inspired by a Chocó myth. “First came woman. She menstruated, mixed her blood with mud, and made a phallus. She buried it and out came man.”⁹

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María Evelia Marmolejo quoted in Carmen María Jaramillo, “In the First Person: Poetics of Subjectivity in the Work of Colombian Women Artists, 1960–1980,” in *Radical Women*, p. 263.

Many of the works are more conceptually driven, emphasizing an analytical approach and challenging the notion of any reductive female aesthetic. The short film *Por la mañana* (In the Morning, 1980) by Colombian artist Patricia Restrepo presents the same domestic morning scene three times, each with different audio and visual perspectives. First, we hear a woman describing a man’s ritual of having coffee and a cigarette. We see her face slowly dropping as we hear her voice: “And he left, in the rain, without saying a word, without looking at me. And I covered my face with my hands, and cried.” The second version shows repeated close-ups of a man pouring coffee, lighting a cigarette, and blowing smoke rings. The camera changes position and focus slightly with each take. He carefully ends each pour with a crisp wrist-twist to avoid spilling the final drop. We sense his effort at keeping his own attention on his immediate action, lest a stray glance throw an emotional line to the unseen woman seated across from him. The third time, the film cuts back and forth between the man and woman, following the rhythm of pouring coffee, milk, and so on. The repetition captures the distance between the two characters’ perspectives and the claustrophobic tension of a relationship where communication has stopped.

The curator Andrea Giunta argues that many sensibilities and ideas are still blocked by patriarchal taste.

The exhibition also examines women's responses to the violence that plagued Latin America during the show's focus years. The works in the "Resistance and Fear" section reflect the dark tenor of state terror by right-wing dictatorships from the late 1960s into the '80s, which was supported by the US. In Argentine Diana Dowek's 1975 acrylic painting of a car's side-view mirror, a mutilated body is seen in overgrown grass. Chilean Luz Donoso created a thirteen-foot scroll of photocopied images of the "disappeared," titled *Huincha sin fin* (Endless Band, 1978), which she unfurled, at great personal risk, in public actions throughout Santiago.

AS BOTH CURATORS emphasized in my interviews with them, pressure from leftist groups in Latin America to maintain a unified political front greatly decreased the number of women artists who explicitly labeled themselves feminists. Mexican-American artists, however, dealt more directly with the problem of "double militancy."

10. Carla Stellweg, "No son todas las que estan ni estan todas las que son," in *Radical Women*, p. 296.

Carla Stellweg explains in the catalogue, "Chicana feminists saw that the sexism within the Chicano movement intersected with racism in the larger society and made addressing both *simultaneously* a central component of their ideology."¹⁰ The exhibition includes Chicana artist Isabel Castro's series of photocopied slides titled "Women Under Fire" (ca. 1980). A gun's crosshairs appears over portraits of the artist's smiling female friends. According to Stellweg, Castro was responding to the federally funded nonconsensual sterilizations of Mexican-American women at an East LA hospital in the mid-1970s.¹¹

11. Ibid., p. 295.

In the catalogue, curator and critic Rosina Cazali clarifies the complications of political action in a stratified culture. Discussing the influence on feminism of Guatemalan Ana María Rodas's book *Poemas de la izquierda erotica* (Poems of the Erotic Left, 1973), she writes, "the slender volume of poems spoke of something that the authoritarian structures did not expect, something that they could not fathom. . . . The book's title became a sort of manifesto."¹² Cazali notes, however, that Rodas's book affected primarily middle-class and urban women. The sexual liberation of her poems was of little use to poor indigenous and mestiza women, particularly outside cities, since their bodies "became war booty and cannon fodder" in the vicious Guatemalan civil war and many other conflicts in the region.¹³

12. Rosina Cazali, "One Hundred Times One," in *Radical Women*, p. 246.

13. Ibid., p. 247.

Gender roles are explored most directly in Chilean Paz Errázuriz's photographic series of transgender female prostitutes in a Santiago brothel, titled "La manzana de Adán" (Adam's Apple, 1982–90). At the symposium at arteBA, Errázuriz addressed the challenges she faced. She was told that a housewife couldn't be an artist and that photography wasn't a serious art form; in addition, her subjects were in danger of being killed if the police caught them.¹⁴ Her photos finally appeared in a book with a text by culture critic and poet Claudia Donoso in 1990, but it was banned and removed from stores after selling only one copy. Over time, Errázuriz befriended the sex workers and their families. Almost all the workers died of AIDS in the coming years. What remains are these images of tenderness, boldness, and solidarity. At the same time, the closed-in reality of the brothel parallels the nation's claustrophobia under Pinochet's regime.

"Radical Women" makes a compelling case that women artists in Latin America were central to joining social engagement with formal experimentation. In doing so, they played a large role in shaping our contemporary understanding of art. The subsequent omission of their contributions from the records has left an enormous gap. Happily, the show provides a much-needed foundation upon which to build.