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Alberto McKelligan Hernandez

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MÓNICA MAYER: TRANSLOCALITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ART IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

by

ALBERTO MCKELLOGAN HERNÁNDEZ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

MÓNICA MAYER: TRANSLOCALITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ART IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

Advisor: Professor Anna Indych-López

This dissertation focuses on Mónica Mayer (b. Mexico City, 1954), analyzing her work to understand the role played by the artistic and activist exchanges between feminists from Mexico City and Los Angeles in the development of feminist art in Mexico from the 1970s to the present. While scholars and curators are increasingly drawing attention to Mayer’s large body of work, which includes prints, drawings, installations, and public art interventions, the available literature emphasizes her connections to other artists working in her home country, positioning her artistic production within narratives of contemporary Mexican art. In contrast, this dissertation foregrounds Mayer’s position within different artistic circuits, examining how the artist strategically adapted the model of feminist art developed by the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) in the 1970s to the specific conditions of Mexico City’s art world. This study employs the concept of translocal translation to interpret her work as a deliberate artistic and political strategy that shaped the scope and direction of feminist art in her home country and abroad. Through her artistic negotiations, Mayer explored the role of gender in the visual arts of Mexico, thereby challenging the social structures that shaped women’s experiences in her home country. Her work expanded the repertoire of feminist artistic production, and recognizing her

contributions challenges existing narratives of a universal feminist art movement based in the United States and Europe. This study thus develops an understanding of feminist art in Mexico within a larger translocal arena that remains absent in the available literature, highlighting Mayer’s role as a mediator of different artistic and activist models circulating in Mexico City and Los Angeles.

My examination also emphasizes the ways in which Mayer challenged representations of femininity and maternity in the Mexican artistic canon. Through her artistic projects, the artist developed a sustained critique of the representational systems that aided in the construction of women’s social roles. Mayer’s projects challenged the idealized visions of mujeres abnegadas, or passive selfless women, that emerged in post-revolutionary visual culture but continued to shape understandings of gender in Mexican society during the late twentieth century. This dissertation analyzes the numerous collaborative artistic projects developed by Mayer, including her work in feminist art collectives such as Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Women Scribes and Portraitists) and Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder), as well as the archival project of Pinto mi Raya (I Draw My Line). These art collectives further allowed Mayer to adapt the FSW model of artistic practice, developing a form of feminist art that questioned the hierarchical structures of Mexican society. Her artistic production, or translocal translations, shaped the scope and trajectory of feminist art in her home country, serving as a powerful model that would inspire subsequent generations of women artists, activists, and scholars.
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1. Registration form, Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1972. ......................... 253
Figure 1.2. Proceso Pentágono, Pentágono, 1977. Installation presented at the Paris Youth 
Biennial X. .......................................................................................................................... 254
Figure 1.3. Photograph of a Tepito Arte Acá Mural, 1979...................................................... 255
Figure 1.4. José Guadalupe Posada, Soldadera maderista, c. 1910. ........................................ 256
Figure 1.5. Photograph of soldaderas in training, c. 1910. ..................................................... 257
Figure 1.6. Photograph of soldaderas in training, c. 1910. ..................................................... 258
Figure 1.7. Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer protesters on the Zócalo, Mexico City. . 259
Figure 1.8. Newspaper clipping, showing Mónica Mayer at a protest organized by the Coalición 
de Mujeres Feministas, demanding the legalization of abortion in Mexico, 1977. Mexico City. 
............................................................................................................................................... 260
Figure 1.9. First World Conference on Women, Mexico City, 1975. ................................. 261
Figure 1.10. Catalogue cover of “La mujer como creadora y tema del arte,” 1975. ................ 262
Figure 1.11. Ignacio Rosas, Tomasa Venegas, c. 1910. Oil on canvas................................. 263
Figure 1.12. Alfredo Ramos Martínez, Portrait of Mrs. Belinda Palavicini, 1915................. 264
Figure 1.13. Diego Rivera, La molendera, 1924. ................................................................. 265
Figure 1.14. María Izquierdo, El alhajero (The Jewel Box), 1942........................................ 266
Figure 1.15. Remedios Varo, Presencia inquietante (Unsettling Presence), 1959. ............... 267
Figure 1.16. Frida Kahlo, Las dos fridas (The Two Fridas), 1939........................................... 268
Figure 1.17. Frida Kahlo, La columna rota (Broken Column), 1944. ................................. 269
Figure 1.18. Angela Gurria, Contoy II, 1973 ................................................................. 270
Figure 1.19. Helen Escobedo, Ambiente gráfico, 1972. ......................................................... 271
Figure 1.20. Invitation for “Collage íntimo,” 1977. ................................................................. 272
Figure 1.21. Invitation for “Collage íntimo,” 1977. ................................................................. 273
Figure 1.22. Invitation for “Collage íntimo,” 1977. ................................................................. 274
Figure 1.23. Mónica Mayer, A veces me espantan mis fantasías (Sometimes My Fantasies 
Frighten Me), 1977. ........................................................................................................... 275
Figure 1.24. Gustave Courbet, The Origin of the World, 1866. ............................................. 276
Figure 1.25. Diego Rivera, La muerte del campesino (Death of a Peasant), 1926–27 .......... 277
Figure 1.26. Diego Rivera, general view of The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos, 1930-
1931. ...................................................................................................................................... 278
Figure 1.27. José Clemente Orozco, The Trench, 1926. ......................................................... 279
Figure 1.28. José Clemente Orozco, *Revolutionaries*, 1926................................................................. 280
Figure 1.29. José Clemente Orozco, *Workers*, 1926........................................................................... 281
Figure 1.30. José Clemente Orozco, *Las soldaderas*, 1929................................................................. 282
Figure 1.31. José Clemente Orozco, *La bandera (The Flag)*, 1928...................................................... 283
Figure 1.32. José Clemente Orozco, *Catharsis*, 1934......................................................................... 284
Figure 1.33. Diego Rivera, Detail of murals for the Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1924 .............. 285
Figure 1.34. Diego Rivera, *La maestra rural (The Rural Teacher)*, 1924........................................... 286
Figure 1.35. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *La Buena fama durmiendo (The Good Reputation Sleeping)*, 1939. ........................................................................................................ 287
Figure 1.36. Mónica Mayer, *Pareja (Couple)*, 1977.......................................................................... 288
Figure 1.37. René Magritte, *Le Viol*, 1934. ....................................................................................... 289
Figure 1.38. Hans Bellmer, *The Doll*, 1935-37.................................................................................... 290
Figure 1.39. Faith Wilding, *Peach Cunt*. 1971.................................................................................. 291
Figure 1.40. Faith Wilding, *Womb*. 1971.......................................................................................... 292
Figure 1.41. Promotional poster for “Lo Normal,” 1978................................................................. 293
Figure 1.42. Promotional flyer for “Lo Normal,” 1978..................................................................... 294
Figure 1.43. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Lo normal (On Normality)*, 1978........................................... 295
Figure 1.44. Mónica Mayer, *Lo normal (On Normality)*, 1978.......................................................... 296
Figure 1.45. No Grupo, *Secuestro plástico (Artistic Kidnapping)*, 1978......................................... 297
Figure 1.46. Suzanne Lacy, Dori Atlantis, Jan Lester, and Nancy Youdelman, *I Tried Everything*, 1972. ..................................................................................................................... 298
Figure 1.47. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.................................................................... 299
Figure 1.48. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.................................................................. 300
Figure 1.49. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.................................................................. 301
Figure 1.50. Installation view, *I Tried Everything*, 1972................................................................. 302
Figure 1.51. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978............................ 303
Figure 1.52. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978.................................................. 304
Figure 1.53. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978............................ 305
Figure 1.54. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978.................................................. 306
Figure 1.55. Stamping RAPE on map of Los Angeles in *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977......... 307
Figure 1.56. Chalking sidewalks near sites of rape, *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977................ 308
Figure 1.57. Public event, part of *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977................................................. 309
Figure 2.1. Photograph of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in front of Womanhouse, 1972.

Figure 2.2. Kathy Huberland, Bridal Staircase, Womanhouse, 1972.

Figure 2.3. Documentary photograph of Faith Wilding in Embroidery Room, Womanhouse, 1972.

Figure 2.4. Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, Arlene Raven, c. 1972.

Figure 2.5. Woman’s Building, Curriculum for the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman’s Building, between 1976 and 1980.

Figure 2.6. Sheila Ruth, First day group meeting, second year of the Feminist Studio Workshop, 1974.

Figure 2.7. Sheila de Bretteville, First day group meeting, second year of the Feminist Studio Workshop, 1974.

Figure 2.8. Denise Yarfitz, Jamie Wildperson, Jerri Allyn, Anne Gauldin, Patti Nicklaus, Leslie Belt, Ready to Order?, 1978.

Figure 2.9. All City Waitress Marching Band, created by Jerri Allyn, Leslie Belt, and Chutney Günderson (pictured in front with baton), with Anne Mavor (in sequined suit), plus 29 more waitresses, December 1979.

Figure 2.10. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, Making it Safe, 1979.

Figure 2.11. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, Making it Safe, 1979.

Figure 2.12. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, Making it Safe, 1979.

Figure 2.13. Mónica Mayer, El tendedero (The Clothesline), 1979.

Figure 2.14. Mónica Mayer, El tendedero (The Clothesline), 1979.

Figure 2.15. Mónica Mayer, El tendedero (The Clothesline), 1979.

Figure 2.16. Mónica Mayer, El tendedero (The Clothesline), 1979.

Figure 2.17. Take Back the Night March, 1978.

Figure 2.18. Take Back the Night March, 1978.

Figure 2.19. Float created by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz with members of the Feminist Studio Workshop for “Take Back the Night” march, 1978.

Figure 2.20. Mónica Mayer, Suzanne Lacy working on parade float, 1979.

Figure 2.21. Judy Baca at “Venas de la Mujer,” September 1976.

Figure 2.22. Documentary photography of “Venas de la Mujer,” Chicano Women’s Environmental Mural on display, September 1976.

Figure 2.23. Documentary photograph of “Venas de la Mujer,” September 1976.

Figure 2.24. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Nuestra señora (Our Lady), 1977-78.

Figure 2.25. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Nuestra señora (Our Lady), 1977-78.
Figure 2.26. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Nuestra señora (Our Lady), 1977-78. ...................... 335
Figure 2.27. Yolanda López, Guadalupe Triptych, 1978. .................................................. 336
Figure 2.28. Marí Izquierdo, Altar de Dolores, 1943.......................................................... 337
Figure 2.29. Detail of Mónica Mayer, La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows), 1978-1979........ 338
Figure 2.30. Detail of Mónica Mayer, La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows), 1978-1979........ 339
Figure 2.31. Detail of Mónica Mayer, La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows), 1978-1979........ 340
Figure 2.32. Andy Warhol, The Last Supper, 1986............................................................. 341
Figure 2.33. Andy Warhol, Ingrid Berman, The Nun, 1983................................................. 342
Figure 2.34. Photograph of Mayer’s letter denouncing the removal of her artwork, dated October 29, 1980......................................................................................................................... 343
Figure 2.35. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 344
Figure 2.36. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 345
Figure 2.37. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 346
Figure 2.3. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 347
Figure 2.39. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 348
Figure 2.40. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 349
Figure 2.41. Detail of Mónica Mayer, Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everday Acts of Violence), 1984. ......................................................................................... 350
Figure 2.42. Alma Lopez, Our Lady, 1999 ............................................................................. 351
Figure 2.43. Presentation at Museo Carrillo Gil, Traducciones, 1979..................................... 352
Figure 2.44. Photograph of the Basílica de Guadalupe for Traducciones, 1979.................... 353
Figure 2.45. Documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979..................... 354
Figure 2.46. Documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979..................... 355
Figure 2.47. Pamphlet for Traducciones event, “Feminismo Mujer y Arte”, December, 1979. 356
Figure 2.48. Documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979..................... 357
Figure 2.49. María Eugenia Pulido, documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979.......................................................... 358

Figure 2.50. Yolanda Andrade, documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979.......................................................... 359

Figure 2.51. Yan María Yaoyótl Castro, documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979.......................................................... 360

Figure 2.52. Installation view of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists)......................................................... 361

Figure 2.53. Installation view of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists)......................................................... 362

Figure 2.54. Documentary photography of Suzanne Lacy, The International Dinner Party, 1979. ................................................................................................................................. 363

Figure 2.55. Adelina Zendejas, Amalia Caballero, and Concha Michel, Mexico City, 1979. . 364

Figure 2.56. Alaide Foppa, Ana Victoria Jiménez A., and Lilia Lucido-Mayer, Mexico City, 1979................................................................................................................................. 365

Figure 2.57. Notes from Fred Lonidier, The Health and Safety Game, c. 1976-79.............. 366

Figure 2.58. Correspondence from Fred Lonidier, The Health and Safety Game, c. 1976-79.. 367

Figure 2.59. Detail of Fred Lonidier, The Health and Safety Game, c. 1976-79..................... 368

Figure 3.1. Mónica Mayer, poster for the “Arte Feminista” roundtable, 1976.......................... 369

Figure 3.2. Invitation for La fiesta de quince años, August, 1984........................................... 370

Figure 3.3. Invitation for La fiesta de quince años, August, 1984 ............................................. 371

Figure 3.4. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party), 1984......................................................................................................................... 372

Figure 3.5. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party), 1984......................................................................................................................... 373

Figure 3.6. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party), 1984......................................................................................................................... 374
Figure 3.7. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984................................................................. 375

Figure 3.8. Photograph of installation by Julia de la Fuente for *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984. ................................................................. 376

Figure 3.9. Polvo de Gallina Negra, photographic record of *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983......................... 377

Figure 3.10. Polvo de Gallina Negra, photographic record of *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983......................... 378

Figure 3.11. Polvo de Gallina Negra Group’s Recipe for Giving the Evil Eye to Rapists. Documentation for *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983................................................................. 379

Figure 3.12. Proceso Pentágono, *El secuestro (Kidnapping)*, action presented on a street near Bellas Artes in Mexico City, during the exhibition “A nivel informativo,” 1973......................... 380

Figure 3.13. Indra Olavarrieta, theatrical performance with patriarchal characters, 1976. ................................. 381

Figure 3.14. Poster for “Jornadas contra la violencia hacia las Mujeres,” 1987 ................................. 382

Figure 3.15. Pedro Meyer, cover of *Sucesos para todos*, July 14, 1977.................................................. 383

Figure 3.16. Pedro Meyer, cover of *Sucesos para todos*, June 23, 1977.................................................. 384

Figure 3.17. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage, 1977*. Los Angeles. .............................................................................................................. 385

Figure 3.18. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage, 1977*. ................................. 386

Figure 3.19. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío Número 4*, c. 1987. .................................................. 387

Figure 3.20. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío Número 5*, c. 1987 .................................................. 388

Figure 3.21. Ulises Carrión, *Sistema internacional de arte correo errático (International System for Erratic Mail Art)*, 1977. ................................................................. 389

Figure 3.22. “Calico Kid, 5.” Export Newspaper Service of Mexico. August 31, 1959. .................................. 390

Figure 3.23. “El Libro Semanal, 1257.” Novedades Editores. September 29, 1979. ................................. 391

Figure 3.24. “Biografías Selectas, 50.” Editorial Argumentos. October 11, 1959. ................................. 392

Figure 3.25. “Santo El Enmascarado de Plata, 17.” ................................................................. 393

Figure 3.26. “El Libro Semanal, 1391.” Novedades Editores. April 24, 1981................................. 394

Figure 3.27. “El Libro Semanal, 1383.” Novedades Editores. February 27, 1981................................. 395


Figure 3.30. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *¡MADRES!*, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, 1987........................................................................................................................................... 397
Figure 3.31. Polvo de Gallina Negra, ¡MADRES!, Nuestro Mundo television show, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, Mexico City, 1987................................................................. 398
Figure 3.32. Diego Rivera, general view of Chapingo chapel, 1926........................... 399
Figure 3.33. José Clemente Orozco, Cortés y Malinche, 1926.................................. 400
Figure 3.34. José Clemente Orozco, Soldier’s Wife, c. 1930...................................... 401
Figure 3.35. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Madre proletaria (Proletarian Mother), 1931...... 402
Figure 3.36. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Madre campesina (Peasant Mother), ca. 1931..... 403
Figure 3.37. Isabel Villaseñor, Untitled, 1934............................................................ 404
Figure 3.38. Frida Kahlo, My Birth, 1932.................................................................. 405
Figure 3.39. Luis Ortiz Monasterio, Monumento a la Madre (Mothers’ Monument), c. 1949. 406
Figure 3.40. Kneeling Female Figure, 15th–early 16th century.................................... 407
Figure 3.41. Mother Art, Response to the question “What is feminist art?” between 1976 and 1977............................................................................................................. 408
Figure 3.42. Mother Art, Mother Art Cleans Up, 1978.................................................. 409
Figure 3.43. Mother Art, Rainbow Playground, 1974.................................................. 410
Figure 3.44. Poster for Mother’s day protest, Mexico City, 1971.................................... 411
Figure 3.45. Documentary photograph of Polvo de Gallina Negra, participating in a march for voluntary maternity, 1991................................................................. 412
Figure 4.1. Víctor Lerma and Mónica Mayer at Pinto Mi Raya Archive.......................... 413
Figure 4.2. Víctor Lerma, photograph of a sculptural object produced by Mónica Mayer, 1977. ......................................................................................................................... 414
Figure 4.3. Mónica Mayer, Untitled, c. 1976................................................................. 415
Figure 4.4. Víctor Lerma, Untitled, c. 1977................................................................. 416
Figure 4.5. Photograph of an early meeting of Pinto mi Raya, Mexico City, c. 1991........ 417
Figure 4.6. Flyer promoting “Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar,” 1991.......... 418
Figure 4.7. Julio Galán, Tehuana en el istmo de Tehuantepec (Tehuana in the Tehuantepec Isthmus), 1987................................................................. 419
Figure 4.8. Installation shot of “Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar,” Mexico City, 1991................................................................. 420
Figure 4.9. Diana Guzmán, Polvo en los ojos (Dust in the Eyes), c. 1991.................... 421
Figure 4.10. Arturo Guerrero, Sueños pecaminosos (Sinful Dreams), c. 1991............... 422
Figure 4.11. Marisa Lara, Mejor te lo platico (It’s Better If I Tell You About It), c. 1991.... 423
Figure 4.12. Nahum Zenil, Ex Voto, 1987................................................................. 424
Figure 4.13. Nahum Zenil, Vitrina (Cabinet), mixed media, 1991................................... 425
Figure 4.14. Flyer promoting the “Contaminación No” exhibition........................................... 426
Figure 4.15. Drawing from the “Contaminación No” exhibition.................................................. 427
Figure 4.16. Marcos Kurtycz, sculptural object for “Madrecitas” exhibition, 1991................. 428
Figure 4.17. Mónica Mayer, Tormenta (Storm), 1991................................................................. 429
Figure 4.18. Mónica Mayer, Naufragio (Shipwreck), 1991......................................................... 430
Figure 4.19. Mónica Mayer, Tres (Three), 1990. ................................................................. 431
Figure 4.20. Mónica Mayer, Cuatro (Four), 1990. ................................................................ 432
Figure 4.21. Lola Álvarez Bravo, El sueño del ahogado (Dream of the Drowned), c. 1945. ... 433
Figure 4.22. Lola Álvarez Bravo, El sueño de los pobres (The Dream of the Poor), 1935.... 434
Figure 4.23. Lola Álvarez Bravo, El capital hambriento de sobre trabajo (Capital, Hungry from Overwork), 1935. ................................................................. 435
Figure 4.24. Felipe Ehrenberg, Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis, 1990.............................. 436
Figure 4.25. Altered wedding invitation, 1980. ..................................................................... 437
Figure 4.26. Installation for performance, 1980. .................................................................... 438
Figure 4.27. Documentary photograph of To Love, Honor, Cherish..., performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978....... 439
Figure 4.28. Documentary photograph of To Love, Honor, Cherish..., performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978....... 440
Figure 4.29. Documentary photograph of To Love, Honor, Cherish..., performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978....... 441
Figure 4.30. Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma, Foto falsa a los 10 años de boda (Fake Photograph, 10 Years after the Wedding), Centro Cultural Santo Domingo, Mexico City, November 30, 1990................................................................................................. 442
Figure 4.31. Participant of La protesta del día después (Protest of the Day After), May 11, 2012. ........................................................................................................................... 443
Figure 4.32. Mónica Mayer and other participants of the “Taller: Visita al archivo de PINTO MI RAYA (Workshop: A Visit to the PINTO MI RAYA Archive),” April 5, 2014. .............. 444
Figure 5.1. Flyer for the “Apropiaciones del espacio público ante el acoso sexual en el transporte público” workshop, 2015......................................................................................... 445
Figure 5.2. Photograph of public protest against public sexual harassment, Zócalo, Mexico City, 2015. ................................................................................................................................. 446
Figure 5.3. Images produced by the Red de Reapropiación 2R collective, featuring images by Claudia Espinosa (Cerrucha), 2015. .................................................................................. 447
Figure 5.4. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, El tendedero (The Clothesline), installation, 2016. ................................................................................................................................. 448
Figure 5.5. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, installation, 2016.

Figure 5.6. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, installation, 2016.

Figure 5.7. Documentation of Lorena Wolffer, *Mexican Territory*, 1995.

Figure 5.8. Documentation of Lorena Wolffer, *Mexican Territory*, 1995.

Figure 5.9. Documentation of Lorena Wolffer, *Mexican Territory*, 1995.


# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. vi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ...................................................................................................... viii
ABBREVIATIONS .................................................................................................................. xix

**INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter 1: EARLY EXAMPLES OF TRANSLOCAL TRANSLATION: MÓNICA MAYER**
**NEGO TiATING THE ARTISTIC AND ACTIVIST CIRCUITS OF 1970s MEXICO CITY** .... 22
   Mexico’s Art Scene of the 1970s: *Los Grupos*, Non-Objectual Art, and Artistic Systems ..... 24
   Mayer and Feminist Activist Groups in Mexico ................................................................. 38
   “Collage Íntimo” .............................................................................................................. 53
   “Lo Normal” ...................................................................................................................... 67
   “Salón 77-78 Nuevas Tendencias” ............................................................................... 73
   Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 79

**Chapter 2: MÓNICA MAYER IN CALIFORNIA: NAVIGATING THE ARTISTIC**
**CIRCUITS OF LATE 1970s LOS ANGELES** ....................................................................... 81
   The Emergence of Feminist Art in West Coast of the United States ................................. 82
   Mayer within the FSW ...................................................................................................... 91
   Activist and Artistic Networks of Los Angeles outside of the FSW ............................... 102
   Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international
dialogue of women artists) .......................................................................................... 121
   Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 137

**Chapter 3: MAYER’S RETURN TO MEXICO: TRANSLATING THE FSW MODEL OF**
**FEMINIST ART TO LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN AUDIENCES** ............. 139
   Early Efforts in Feminist Pedagogy: Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Female Scribes and Portraitists,
   TyR) ...................................................................................................................................... 140
   Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder, PGN) ......................................................... 153
   ¡MADRES! and Feminist Activist Efforts in Mexico .......................................................... 176
   Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 181

**Chapter 4: PINTO MI RAYA: CURATORIAL AND ARCHIVAL PRACTICES AS A**
**FORM OF TRANSLOCAL TRANSLATION** ............................................................................. 183
   Origins of the PMR Collaboration and Early Curatorial Efforts ....................................... 185
From Curatorial Practice to the Archive .......................................................... 202
The PMR project and Feminist Activist Efforts in Mexico .................................. 212
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 217
CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 218
BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................. 230
ILLUSTRATIONS ............................................................................................... 253
ABBREVIATIONS

CalArts: California Institute of the Arts
CFM: Consejo Feminista Mexicano, Mexican Feminist Council
C-R: Consciousness-raising
ENAP: Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, National School of Fine Arts
ENP: Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, National Preparatory School
FAP: Feminist Art Program
FSW: Feminist Studio Workshop
INBA: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, National Institute of Fine Arts
LASCS: Los Angeles Socialist Community School
MAM: Museo de Arte Moderno, Museum of Modern Art
MUAC: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, University Contemporary Art Museum
NAM: New American Movement
PGN: Polvo de Gallina Negra, Black Hen Powder
PMR: Pinto mi Raya, I Draw My Line
SDS: Students for a Democratic Society
TyR: Tlacuilas y Retrateras, Women Scribes and Portraitists
UCLA: University of California, Los Angeles
UDCM: Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas, Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies
UN: United Nations
UNAM: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, National Autonomous University of Mexico
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on Mónica Mayer (b. Mexico City, 1954), analyzing her work to understand the role played by the artistic and activist exchanges between feminists from Mexico City and Los Angeles in the development of feminist art in Mexico from the 1970s to the present. As a graduate of the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (National School of Fine Arts, ENAP) in the 1970s, Mayer began her career at a moment in which Mexican artists – primarily in the urban spaces of Mexico City – promoted a vision of collective public art that came to be known as los grupos or the Group Movement. During this period, Mayer participated in the forms of feminist activism emerging in Mexico City, seeking to understand the connections between feminism and artistic production. In 1976, after reading an article in the journal Artes Visuales that described a feminist art movement in the United States, she traveled to Los Angeles, completing a two-week workshop with Judy Chicago. Two years later, she enrolled in the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), the first independent center of feminist artistic instruction in the United States. While in California, she also completed a master’s thesis on feminist art, a document later validated by Goddard College. After these studies, she returned to Mexico City, developing artistic projects that negotiated the model of feminist art developed in California with the conditions of the Mexican art world. As such, her artistic production repeatedly established a link between developments in Mexico City and Los Angeles, allowing Mayer to negotiate different artistic models as she aimed to transform Mexican society as a whole. Through a close examination of her work and activities, I argue that Mayer played a crucial role in Mexican art of the later twentieth century and beyond, familiarizing local audiences with a feminist artistic model that aimed to transform women’s social role in Mexico.
Mayer’s career as a feminist artist and activist has spanned several decades, leading to numerous public art projects, installations, performances, drawings, paintings, prints, and other forms of media. Still, her work remains unnoted in surveys of Latin American art and general discussions of contemporary Mexican art.\(^1\) Recently, however, there has been an increased interest in her work, with multiple efforts to recognize her as a pioneering figure in the emergence of feminist art in twentieth-century Mexico. The exhibition “The Age of Discrepancies” detailed Mayer’s participation in the creation of feminist art collectives in the 1980s, including her efforts in Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Women Scribes and Portraitists, TyR) and Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder, PGN).\(^2\) “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” included individual works by Mayer, inserting the artist into a larger narrative of feminist art.\(^3\) In addition, the exhibition “Arte No Es Vida” highlighted the collaborative public forms of art Mayer developed as a member of PGN.\(^4\) Finally, in 2016, the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) hosted the first large-scale exhibition focused on Mayer, “When in Doubt...Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibition of Mónica Mayer.” This show presented individual works by the artist, as well as the projects she developed in collaboration with other artists and activists.\(^5\)

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5. See Ekaterina Álvarez Romero, ed., *When in Doubt... Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibit of Mónica Mayer* (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016). In the exhibition catalogue, curator Cordero Reiman explained the significance of the term “retrocollective,” linking it to the collaborative artistic practices developed by Mayer throughout her career: “The idea of calling the exhibition a ‘retrocollective’ was suggested by Argentinian art historian María Laura Rosa, in order to underline the integration
Several of these exhibitions emphasized the importance of *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, an early work the artist completed in Mexico City in 1978. In this project, which exemplifies the participatory strategies Mayer would repeatedly employ in her work, she distributed a number of paper postcards emblazoned with the phrase, “Como mujer lo que más odio de la ciudad es (As a woman, what I most about the city is),” asking different women to complete the sentence. Most of the responses focused on street harassment and other forms of sexual violence. Mayer collected the different postcards, presenting them at the Museo de Arte Moderno (Museum of Modern Art, MAM), hanging from a pink-colored frame. Several of the women visiting the exhibition took it upon themselves to write additional statements on the displayed postcards, spontaneously participating in the artistic process. While most exhibitions featuring *El tendedero* have displayed documentary photographs of the original 1970s installation, the more recent “When in Doubt…Ask” exhibition encouraged Mayer to organize a new clothesline, allowing a younger generation of Mexican women to participate in the artistic project.

In addition to these curatorial endeavors, several academic publications have analyzed Mayer’s artistic production in considerable detail. Araceli Barbosa Sánchez, for instance, positioned Mayer within a larger history of feminist art in Mexico throughout the 1980s. Similarly, literary scholar Rosana Blanco-Cano closely examined the artistic production of PGN. of individual and collective work, and the public and private spheres, in Mayer’s production.” Karen Cordero Reiman, “When in Doubt... Ask: Mónica Mayer’s Artistic Project,” in *When in Doubt... Ask*, 33–34.


7 See Mónica Mayer, “El tendedero MUAC y el taller de habitajes,” *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer*, January 29, 2016, http://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/el-tendedero/item/29-el-tendedero-muac-y-el-taller-de-habitajes. I analyze the visual components and significance of the different iterations of *El tendedero* throughout this study, particularly in chapter 1 and in the conclusion.

viewing the works of the collective as a form of feminist discourse that disrupted the notion of maternity in Mexico. Scholars such as Edward J. McCaughan, Andrea Giunta and Gabriela Aceves have also contributed to understandings of Mayer’s work, with scholarship examining the artist’s efforts throughout the late twentieth century. More recently, María Laura Rosa and Julia Antivilo Peña included Mayer’s work in general examinations of feminist art in Latin America, though both scholars emphasized the artist’s activities in Mexico. In addition to these works written by academics, the artist completed a book detailing her work and published several articles in art historical journals.

As a whole, these studies highlight Mayer’s contributions to the artistic circuits of contemporary Mexico, noting the overall structure and content of her artistic proposals. Moreover, most of these examinations note her studies in the FSW in the late 1970s, echoing the artist’s view that the institution played an important role in her development. Still, these studies emphasize Mayer’s activities within her home country, positioning her work within a narrative of contemporary Mexican art that minimizes the significance of the artist’s training and experiences in Los Angeles. In her article for the “Arte No Es Vida” exhibition, for instance, Maris Bustamante included PGN within a genealogy of Mexican artists interested in public artistic

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actions, linking Mayer to earlier artists such as the *Estridentistas*. Similarly, in her discussion of feminist art in the 1980s, Barbosa Sánchez emphasized the efforts of other artists working in Mexico, relating Mayer’s visual production to contemporary figures such as Lara and Pola Weiss.

In contrast, the exhibition catalogue for “When in Doubt…Ask” pointed towards the connections between Mayer’s work and the visual strategies deployed by feminist artists of the United States. In her curatorial essay for the exhibition, Karen Cordero Reiman noted how “in the treatment of word and image in her œuvre, Mayer coincides with both the pioneer of Anglo-American feminist art, Judy Chicago, and one of her colleagues from her own generation of artists in Mexico, Magali Lara.” The exhibition also prominently displayed the works Mayer produced during her studies in Los Angeles, as well as highlighting archival materials, such as her personal journal, that detailed her assessment of the FSW. Similarly, in her discussion of Mayer’s work, Giunta alluded to the similarities between Mayer’s work and the artistic production of Hannah Wilke and Cindy Sherman. In this essay, however, she more closely emphasized the connections between Mayer’s work and the political and artistic contexts in other Latin American countries.

Building on these existing investigations, this dissertation establishes the artist’s work as a form of sustained visual dialogue with feminist artists from the United States, particularly those associated with the FSW and working in Los Angeles. To develop this different understanding of Mayer’s artistic contributions, I employ the forms of analysis developed by a wide array of

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13 See Maris Bustamante, “Conditions, Roads, and Genealogies of Mexican Conceptualisms, 1921-1993,” in *Arte No Es Vida*.
14 Cordero Reiman, “When in Doubt... Ask: Mónica Mayer’s Artistic Project,” 37.
16 Ibid., 85.
feminist theorists. Following the example of scholars such as Amrita Basu and Aili Mari Tripp, I emphasize the ways in which feminist activity originates in different historical and geographical contexts, challenging the notion of a singular form of feminism that emanates from the First World. Rather than viewing feminist art as the product of the United States and Europe, I consider the emergence of distinct artistic practices within a larger network of negotiation and exchange, highlighting individual artists in Mexico City and Los Angeles.

This study aims to understand the contributions of an individual artist working in the so-called Third World, emphasizing her position within the broader networks of contemporary feminist artistic practice. As such, this examination relates to the forms of feminist analysis developed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. As noted by this scholar, a wide range of feminist scholarship has considered the efforts and experiences of Third World women in a simplistic, totalizing manner. In her view, these forms of scholarship discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-representing a composite, singular ‘Third World Woman’ - an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.

As an alternative to reductive readings that minimize the differences between women, Mohanty advocated for analyses that considered “imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic.” Through an understanding of these

strategic allegiances between different communities of women, scholars may understand the ways in which multiple social structures shape the experiences of women in distinct geographic regions. Throughout this study, I consider the ways Mayer established a visual dialogue with feminist artists from the United States, adapting a particular model of feminist art to the specific social conditions in her home country. This reading positions her work as a visual contribution to the complex processes of resistance considered by Mohanty, thereby underscoring the political significance of her artistic projects. Mayer positioned herself within the “imagined” community of women theorized by Mohanty, developing a form of feminist art that highlighted the specific social structures that shaped women’s experiences in Mexico City. Through her creative process, she confronted the sexism of the Mexican art world, even as she developed a nuanced critique of the limitations of the forms of feminist art encouraged by the FSW. By analyzing Mayer’s production in relation to other artists from the FSW, I challenge art historical narratives that occlude the contributions of Third World women in the emergence and development of feminist art as a whole. I hope that my close examination of Mayer’s artwork inspires other feminist art historians and scholars to further question the construction of an authoritative feminist art canon that dismisses the wide breadth of innovation outside the United States and Europe.

The emphasis on Mayer as a case study partly derives from the numerous travels and exchanges between different geographic regions that have shaped her personal life and career. In a discussion of her personal archive, for instance, the artist stressed the importance of family figures such as Anita Mayer, her great aunt.20 Anita Mayer was the artist’s first relative on her father’s side to be born in Mexico; several of the artist’s paternal relatives had emigrated from

their native Germany to Great Britain, eventually settling in Mexico to avoid the growing threat of anti-Semitism in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{21} Mayer also credits her great aunt as the catalyst that convinced her parents to allow her studies abroad; the artist therefore completed two years of high school education in Great Britain.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, Mayer’s close partner and artistic collaborator, Víctor Lerma, also completed studies abroad, enrolling at the Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles in the 1960s; his presence in the West Coast of the United States prompted his life-long fascination with Chicano culture.\textsuperscript{23} These multi-generational experiences further explain Mayer’s willingness to study at the FSW, as well as her interest in developing artistic projects focused on transcultural dialogue.

While I emphasize the exchanges between Mexico City and Los Angeles, Mayer has also been active in forging connections with artists and scholars in other regions of the world. In 1981, for instance, she participated in an exhibition entitled “Künstlerinnen Aus Mexico (Artists from Mexico)” in West Germany, presenting an installation that focused attention on the exchanges between feminist artists and activists from Mexico and the United States.\textsuperscript{24} In 1982, Mayer again exhibited her work in West Germany, participating in a show along with Lara, Bustamante, Rowena Morales, Ilse Gradwohl, and María Brumm.\textsuperscript{25} More recently, in 2002, she developed a performance for the Nippon International Performance Art Festival, further

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. In this text, Mayer also reflects on the ways in which the experiences of migration affected her Jewish ancestors and their religious practices and identity. I further explore the role of these ancestors in Mayer’s artistic production in chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{22} See Mayer, Rosa Chillante, 9.

\textsuperscript{23} For a discussion of Lerma’s years as a high school student in Los Angeles, see Mónica Mayer, “The LA Project #3. Down Memory Lane,” De archivos y redes: Un proyecto artístico sobre la integración y reactivación de archivos, September 8, 2015, http://www.pintomiraya.com/redes/archivo-pmr/proyecto-la/item/187-the-la-project-3-the-performance.html. In this text, Mayer also reflects on the experience of visiting Los Angeles decades after completing her studies at hte FSW.

\textsuperscript{24} I analyze the structure and significance of this particular project, Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), in chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{25} For a discussion of this show, “Formas de producción no apreciadas (Unappreciated Production Forms)” see Mayer, Rosa Chillante, 36.
illustrating her interest in presenting feminist artistic proposals to different audiences. Even though this study emphasizes the significance of the FSW for Mayer’s artistic development and production, I believe future studies that consider her experiences in other geographic regions will further reveal important aspects of the development of feminist art in Mexico.

To understand Mayer’s complex navigation between Mexico and the United States, I rely on the insights provided by Sonia E. Alvarez in “Translocalities / Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas.” In this text, Alvarez considered the ways in which feminist discourse traveled across different regions of the American continent, changing in relation to social structures that shaped different, but interconnected, geographic contexts. The scholar employed the metaphor of translocal translation “to emphasize the ways these travels are politically embedded within larger questions of globalization and involve exchanges across diverse localities, especially between and among women in Latin America and Latinas in the United States.” Mayer’s work, which considered the forms of representation developed by artists in Mexico City and Los Angeles, exemplified the processes of translation under consideration by Alvarez. Her artistic production mediated different artistic ideals, becoming legible to contemporary Mexican audiences through her adaptation efforts, serving as a form of translocal translation that emerged in the connections between Mexico City and Los Angeles.

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29 This examination emphasizes the role of these cosmopolitan urban centers for Mayer’s artistic production. For a larger discussion of the role played by these cities in processes of transnational exchange, see Ulf Hannerz, Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). In this text, Hannerz explained how “world cities are places in themselves, and also nodes in networks; their cultural organization involves local as well as transnational relationships. We need to combine the various kinds of understandings we have concerning the internal characteristics of urban life in the world cities with those which
By examining Mayer’s continuous process of cultural exchange, I question assumptions about the influence of the international art world in Mexico, considering how the artistic and activist dialogue fostered by Mayer shaped the emergence of feminist art in her home country. In this manner, I analyze the extent in which her strategic negotiations shaped the trajectory of feminist art in Mexico.

By establishing Mayer’s artistic production as a form of translocal translation, I underscore how she confronted the unique challenge of creating her own form of feminist art while being aware of developments in the international art world. The artist aimed to forge connections with feminist activists and artists of Mexico City and Los Angeles, a difficult goal given the fraught relationship between Mexico and the United States. Indeed, as employed by Alvarez and other feminist scholars, translocal translation emphasizes how women from the Latin American region strategically employ feminist rhetoric to resist the undue political and economic influence of the United States. Mayer’s work, which employed the visual strategies developed at the FSW, represents a similar form of resistance, as the artist developed projects that questioned simplistic understandings of Mexican women as a passive monolith that required the example of “liberated” women from the First World.

Throughout this study, I emphasize Mayer’s innovative approaches to challenge the sexism of Mexican society. Her deployment of feminist rhetoric and visual strategies from the FSW stands as a deliberate choice made by the artist, one that she modulated with her continuous interest in the specific social structures that affected Mexican women. The artist also recognized
the ways in which her experiences as a Mexican woman could easily contribute to simplistic understandings of the “exotic” Third World in Los Angeles. Mayer repeatedly countered and challenged the expectations placed on women artists in Mexico City and Los Angeles, constantly negotiating and repositioning herself in order to thrive as a feminist artist. Understanding Mayer’s ability to succeed in spite of the different challenges facing her as a Mexican woman artist provides important insights into the ways in which gender hierarchies have affected art historical narratives. The guiding principle of this project is to challenge the canonical narratives of modern Mexican art that position male artists as innovators and artistic geniuses, dismissing the specific challenges women artists such as Mayer had to confront. Understanding the innovative strategies Mayer employed to transform the conditions of the Mexican art world is an important first step in constructing a more egalitarian history of artistic production in Mexico.

Even though this dissertation focus particular attention on the connections between Mexico City and Los Angeles, I rely on the insights from the larger body of scholarship identified as transnational feminist theory. This study, for instance, positions Mayer within the forms of transnational feminist activism described by Manisha Desai. In her discussion of activist efforts across the world, Desai focused attention on a distinct community she described as the “transnational feminist class.” In her view, this particular community relied on emerging technologies, establishing a complex network of constant exchange: “Transnational activists are

educated, middle-class men and women, primarily from the Global North but also from select countries in the Global South… These men and women are recognized as providing a critique of, as well as alternatives to, transnational politics dominated by inequalities of power between and within the North and South.”32 As a student from the FSW, Mayer confronted the specific model of feminist art developed by this institution, even as she maintained an interest in the collective forms of artistic practice developed by Mexican artists of the 1970s. As she developed feminist artistic projects in Mexico, her work established an active dialogue with feminist artists of the United States, thereby contributing to a larger activist and artistic movement that transcended geographic boundaries.

In addition, this study fits into larger academic efforts to reevaluate the ways in which feminist efforts of the 1970s played a role in the development of contemporary artistic practices. In her essay for “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” Cornelia Butler argued that “feminism’s impact on art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international ‘movement’ of any during the postwar period.”33 However, in her view, mainstream art historical discourse has frequently discussed contemporary art in ways that elide the contributions made by earlier feminist artists and activists.34 In a similar critique, Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin stated that the innovations of feminist artists, curators, critics, and art historians “have become so thoroughly embedded in contemporary perspectives that their role in introducing these ideas is in

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34 In her essay, Butler exemplified this broader trend in art historical discourse with the ways in which even a panel focused on feminism at Cooper Union was overtaken by discussions of a male artist: “An opportunity for dialogue on the subject of feminism in art criticism, the event was effectively hijacked by the meteoric ascension of Matthew Barney—a truly unique voice whose practice is deeply imprinted by feminist art.” Ibid., 18.
danger of being erased.” As noted by Jennie Klein, mainstream art historical scholarship enables this historical erasure through the creation of genealogies that exclude feminist artists and their production altogether. This dissertation aims to disrupt these larger trends within art historical scholarship, emphasizing the ways in which feminist artistic practices of the 1970s played an important role in Mayer’s artistic production, and consequently, in contemporary art in Mexico.

This study, however, does not argue for Mayer’s insertion into canonical histories of the feminist art movement of the United States. By examining her connections with the FSW, my goal is not to position her as the Mexican representative within a universal history of feminist art. As explained by Marsha Meskimmon, this simplistic interpretation would position feminist art as an artistic practice “focused upon the United States and emanating outward from it – first toward the United Kingdom, as an ‘Anglo-American axis,’ then through Europe (white America’s cultural ‘home’), and, when venturing very boldly, touching upon the wider context of the Americas, Africa, and Asia.” Instead of this analysis, Meskimmon argued for a “chronology through cartography,” an interpretative model that considered the ways in which artists in different regions negotiated the model of feminist art of the United States: “A spatialized engagement with inter- and transnational feminist practices recasts the center in the full weight of its embeddedness within the world. As a single component within a vital international network, ‘canonical’ transatlantic feminist work demonstrates one particular enunciative position among many that can enter into new and productive dialogues with strategies from diverse

geopolitical contexts.” Consequently, this study examines how specific projects of the FSW served as models that Mayer negotiated with other artistic practices, particularly those developing in the urban spaces of Mexico City. In this manner, I employ Mayer as a case study to understand the ways in which the form of feminist art developed in the 1970s engaged with disparate artistic developments, such as the collective forms of art developed by los grupos, or the emergence of independent art institutions in the 1990s. Through this close reading of Mayer’s work, I repeatedly emphasize the conditions of the Mexican art world that affected her efforts in developing feminist art from the 1970s onward, viewing her work as a powerful example of the ways in which artists negotiated the cultural influence of the First World through their creativity. By framing my discussion of feminist art through the experiences of an artist continuously working in Mexico City for several decades, I challenge interpretations of feminist art that solely consider developments in the United States, providing a more nuanced art historical narrative.

The interpretation I propose in this study falls outside traditional understandings of Mexican or feminist art, positioning Mayer within translocal artistic networks. My use of the term translocal to describe these points of contact parallels recent art historical efforts, such as Zanna Gilbert’s analysis of the activities of the Beau Geste Press. Similar to Gilbert, I am interested in the ways this term “is an open distinction that tries to rethink the way we define and interpret how artistic production originates, doing away with absolute geographical imperatives

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39 Ibid., 326.
40 This study thus resembles other efforts to understand the ways in which Latin American artists negotiated the artistic practices of the avant-garde with the specific conditions of the region. See Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, eds., *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004). In this study, however, I focus closely on the forms of feminist activism and artistic practice that emerged throughout the late twentieth century in Mexico and the United States, contributing to existing art historical examinations.
such as ‘Latin American art.’”  

More specifically, I blur the lines between categories such as “Mexican art” and “feminist art,” viewing Mayer’s work as a translocal dialogue between artists in different circuits. This interpretation highlights the strategic ways in which Mayer navigated different artistic contexts, without ignoring the different artistic models that she appropriated and adapted.  

Throughout this study, I also read Mayer’s work as a deliberate attempt to disrupt traditional understandings of women’s role within the visual arts of Mexico. This interpretation positions her artistic output as a prominent example of the practices that Griselda Pollock has described as feminist art. In *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, Pollock considered the different ways in which artists could explore the forms of gender inequality that surrounded the visual arts: 

Feminist artistic practices and texts have intervened in alliance with other radical groups to disrupt the hegemony of modernist theories and practices even now still active in art education in so-called postmodernist culture. They have done this not merely to make a place for women artists within the art world’s parameters. The point is to mount a sustained and far reaching political critique of contemporary representational systems which have an overdetermined effect in the social production of sexual difference and its related gender hierarchy. 

With this definition of feminist art in mind, I consider the ways in which Mayer’s work was not only a critique of women’s social position, but also of the representational systems developed in twentieth-century Mexico. 

The majority of the available literature emphasizes Mayer’s connections with contemporary artists and activists, focusing on events from the 1970s onwards. In contrast, I

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42 As explained by Gilbert, employing the term translocal in art historical studies “allows for the emergence of the particularities of a place to be accommodated while simultaneously denying deterministic readings of that context or position.” Ibid.  
relate her artistic output to earlier artistic traditions in Mexico, such as the representations of femininity and maternity produced by the Mexican Muralists throughout the post-revolutionary period. Even though the art historical period known as the “Mexican Renaissance” had finished well before Mayer’s artistic training and development, the repertoire of images produced by artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros remained influential in the Mexican art world of the 1970s. Indeed, President Luis Echeverría established Mexican muralism as the cultural patrimony of the nation in 1972, a government decree that exemplifies the prominent position of the iconography developed by these artists.\(^4^4\) The frequently reproduced artistic images of the post-revolutionary period thus continued to naturalize particular understandings of authentic *mexicanidad*, or the “natural Mexican woman.” Through her images, Mayer challenged the legacy of these artists, even as she considered Siqueiros an important inspiration for her own form of political art.\(^4^5\) In addition, this study examines how Mayer’s photographic representations of male and female bodies challenged the traditional representations of idealized female nudes in the work of canonical artists such as Manuel Álvarez Bravo. This interpretation positions Mayer’s work as a sustained critique of the images of modern femininity that flourished in the Mexican artistic canon of the twentieth century.

Through her work, Mayer repeatedly explored the subjective experiences of women in Mexican society, visually challenging ideals of femininity, for instance, or portraying maternity in a variety of guises. Rather than assuming that her representations illustrated unchanging gender roles, I interpret the artist’s work as part of a larger historical process. This study thus


\(^4^5\) See Mónica Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool” (Goddard College, 1980).
follows the example of scholars such as Esther Gabara and Adriana Zavala, viewing the works produced by Mayer as part of the visual culture that shaped women’s social role in Mexico. These two scholars, in particular, examined how images aided in the construction of modern Mexican femininity in the post-revolutionary era. In *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil*, Gabara emphasized the ways in which photography gave visual form to different models of femininity in the newly emerging modern Mexico.46 Similarly, in her scholarship, Zavala emphasized that artists did not simply illustrate the ideals of the time, mirroring a monolithic view of the modern Mexican woman. As she notes, the relationship between gender ideals and artistic production was much more complex: “the more women’s social roles changed, the more some image makers sought to show them as timeless and unchanging, as constants and as symbols of tradition in a rapidly modernizing society.”47

Unlike these existing analyses, which focus on the post-revolutionary era, my interest lies in the connections between the late twentieth century and earlier periods. In this manner, this study parallels the scholarship produced by Jean Franco, which examined the literary output of contemporary women writers in Mexico. Similar to Franco, I am interested in the “incandescent moment when different configurations of gender and knowledge are briefly illuminated,”48 viewing Mayer’s artistic production as part of an ongoing conversation around femininity and maternity in contemporary Mexico. My attention, however, remains on the visual arts of the period, positioning Mayer within the artistic circuits of the later twentieth century and beyond. In this manner, this dissertation reveals how the anxieties surrounding representations of Mexican women that emerged in the post-revolutionary period continue to exist. Indeed,

Mayer’s extensive artistic production gave visual form to changing gender norms and ideals, a process also affected by the contributions of feminist activists throughout the twentieth century.

While this study closely examines the most representative projects developed by Mayer, the aim of this analysis is not to produce a monograph of the artist. This dissertation emphasizes the artistic projects that underscore the connections between Mayer and other self-identified feminist artists of the 1970s in the West Coast of the United States. Mayer’s body of work alluded – and critiqued – the efforts of feminist artists of the FSW, paralleling the forms of resistance developed by other Latin American women’s groups and feminist organizations.

Focusing attention on Mayer reveals as much about this artist as it does about the complex ways in which feminist art developed in Mexico. As such, this dissertation provides a necessary, and previously unavailable, reading of Mayer’s work and the feminist artistic networks of the contemporary era.

Chapter 1, “Early Examples of Translocal Translation: Mónica Mayer Negotiating the artistic and activist circuits of 1970s Mexico City,” begins with an overview of the contemporary art scene Mayer faced as a young student at the ENAP. This discussion emphasizes the emergence of numerous art collectives in Mexico, or los grupos. In addition, I consider how her studies with scholars such as Juan Acha and Nestor García Canclini introduced the artist to a sociological perspective of contemporary art in Mexico. In addition, throughout this period, Mayer began her involvement in Mexican feminist activist groups, which led her to the model of feminist art developed by artists from the United States. This chapter reexamines Mayer’s contributions to artistic exhibitions of the 1970s, viewing her work as a form translocal translation that mediated different artistic traditions in Mexico City and the West Coast of the United States.
The next chapter further considers Mayer’s efforts to develop her own form of feminist art within interconnected artistic circuits. In 1978, the artist relocated to Los Angeles, completing the two-year program at the FSW. Chapter 2, “Mónica Mayer in California: Navigating the Artistic Circuits of Late 1970s Los Angeles,” explores this period of the artist’s career. This chapter begins with a historical overview of the model of collaborative feminist art endorsed by the FSW, linking it to the broader forms of women’s activism in Los Angeles. The chapter then considers Mayer’s position within this institution, considering how she negotiated the form of feminist art developed at the FSW with the earlier forms of collective artistic practice she had encountered in Mexico. This analysis emphasizes the artist’s interest in forms of art and activism present in Los Angeles, such as the burgeoning efforts of Chicana artists, as well as the activities of the Los Angeles Socialist Community School (LASCS). In this reading, I consider the ways Mayer’s artwork, including the collaborative project Traducciones, linked the artistic and activist practices of Mexico and the United States.

Chapter 3, “Mayer’s Return to Mexico: Translating the Model of Feminist Art to Late Twentieth-Century Mexican Audiences,” focuses attention on Mayer’s activities throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, this chapter considers the challenges faced by the artist when she employed the model of collaborative feminist art developed within the FSW in the artistic circuits of contemporary Mexico City. This analysis focuses on the artistic projects associated with feminist art collectives in Mexico, including TyR and PGN. Throughout the chapter, I consider how the forms of representation developed by these collectives challenged the traditions established by the Mexican art historical canon. The humorous forms of maternity represented in ¡MADRES!, for instance, directly challenged the idealistic images produced by the Mexican Muralists in the post-revolutionary era. These feminist art collectives, however, also
echoed earlier examples of feminist art initiated by members of the FSW, further positioning Mayer as an artist that fostered translocal exchanges and communication.

In the early 1990s, Mayer’s efforts with PGN would end, leading her to new forms of collaboration with Lerma: Pinto mi Raya (I Draw My Line, PMR). Chapter 4, “Pinto mi Raya: Curatorial and Archival Practices as a Form of Translocal Translation,” analyzes the different artistic projects associated with this ongoing collaboration. The chapter begins with a discussion of the independent artist gallery established by Mayer and Lerma, relating it to the larger transformations of the contemporary art scene in Mexico in the 1990s. This analysis considers the rise of commercial art galleries, as well as the widespread establishment of independent art venues in Mexico City throughout the decade. In addition, this chapter examines the official establishment of the Archivo Pinto mi Raya (PMR archive), an extensive array of documentary records which includes materials produced by women artists, feminist art collectives, and feminist activists in Mexico. In this chapter, I argue that the PMR archive adapted the model of archival practice developed at the FSW to the specific conditions of the contemporary Mexican art world. This interpretation positions the PMR collaboration as an extension of Mayer’ earlier forms of translocal translation, an artistic project that mediates the model of feminist art of the 1970s to different geographic contexts.

Together, these chapters detail the ways in which Mayer navigated the social and artistic structures of contemporary Mexico, shaping a feminist art movement that continues to challenge artistic institutions and gender hierarchies. By historicizing the practices of a prominent feminist artist in twentieth-century Mexico, this dissertation aligns with ongoing efforts to understand the contributions of women artists in the larger Latin American region. While this study prioritizes the connections between Mayer and feminist artists and activists of Los Angeles, more work is
necessary to understand other circuits of exchange. As new generations of feminist artists, activists, and scholars in Mexico and abroad encounter Mayer’s work, viewers should consider how her efforts cannot be contained, or interpreted, within discrete and specific geographic regions. Mayer’s work challenged the prevalent systems of representation within contemporary Mexico, even as it helped establish larger networks of artistic collaboration and exchange. By constructing a narrative that centers on Mayer’s translocal translation, I hope other scholars continue to question existing studies of Mexican modern art, feminist art, and feminist activism.

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In the late 1970s, several art institutions in Mexico City hosted exhibitions that prominently featured the work of women artists. In 1977, artists Rosalba Huerta, Lucila Santiago, and Mayer organized “Collage íntimo” at the Casa del Lago, an institution affiliated with the Universidad Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM). The following year, these three artists participated in the exhibition “Lo normal,” which also featured the work of Esperanza Balderas, Lara, Carolina Paniagua, and Hilda Ramírez. In addition, the exhibition “Salón 77-78 Nuevas Tendencias” at the Museo de Arte Moderno (Museum of Modern Art, MAM), featured the work of artists such as Mayer, Lara, and Weiss.

In her discussion of feminist art in Mexico, Barbosa Sánchez highlighted Mayer’s contributions to these exhibitions, detailing the visual strategies employed by the artist, as well as her peers. Similarly, Giunta has highlighted how Mayer’s work in these exhibitions related to the forms of feminist activism developing in Mexico throughout the 1970s. This chapter, however, reexamines Mayer’s participation, positioning her work within broader historical and artistic contexts. In particular, I analyze her participation in these exhibitions through the forms of feminist analysis developed by scholars such as Alvarez, establishing her work as a form of translocal feminist translation. As a member of feminist activist groups during this period, Mayer had the unique opportunity to consider and negotiate the emerging model of feminist art developing in the United States. The artist developed projects that linked her efforts with the forms of feminist art and activism endorsed by figures such as Chicago, Arlene Raven, and

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1 See Barbosa Sánchez.
Suzanne Lacy in the United States. Mayer, however, negotiated the model of feminist art developed in California with the realities of the Mexican art world, developing a form of artistic practice without precedent in both countries. As a young artist beginning her career, Mayer also produced works that challenged the conventional representations of femininity in modern Mexican art. Indeed, Mayer’s representations of women countered the images produced during the post-revolutionary period that Mexican cultural institutions still celebrated as the natural expression of an essential Mexican femininity. Her collages, installations, and public art projects deviated from the celebrated representations of femininity found in the work of the Mexican muralists, for instance, or the female nudes contained in the photography of Manuel Álvarez Bravo. In this manner, Mayer developed a repertoire of images that challenged the celebrated representations of femininity in the canon of modern Mexican art.

The models of artistic practice circulating in the contemporary art circuits of 1970s Mexico, however, also shaped Mayer’s work. As a student at the ENAP from 1972 to 1976, Mayer confronted the forms of collective art espoused by los grupos and other contemporary artists of the 1970s. Moreover, her studies with scholars such as Acha and García Canclini in this institution shaped her understanding of the ways in which contemporary art related to social and political structures in contemporary Mexico.

This chapter positions Mayer’s early work as the foundation for the later forms of artistic dialogue she would develop throughout her career. The artist relied on models from different artistic contexts, finding ways to challenge the forms of representation associated with women artists in late twentieth-century Mexico.
Mexico’s Art Scene of the 1970s: Los Grupos, Non-Objectual Art, and Artistic Systems

Mayer began her training in 1972, enrolling at the ENAP, the center of artistic instruction and graphic design of the UNAM. In a written discussion of this period, the artist emphasized how her courses took place at the Academy of San Carlos building, located in the historic center of Mexico City, years before the ENAP moved to a new building in Xochimilco.³ The artist thus began her studies at a site and institution long-associated with official forms of artistic production in Mexico, as the Academy of San Carlos was founded in 1781, serving as the first official art academy of the Americas.⁴ Archival materials salvaged by Mayer reveal the roster of classes in her first semester at the school, including a course in art history and theory, as well as design (fig. 1.1).⁵ These courses suggest a traditional form of academic instruction that emphasizes the progression from basic design principles to more advanced forms of drawing and painting.

Despite the traditional setting, Mayer’s studies coincided with a period of intense transformation in the Mexican art world. Decades after the domestic and international success of the Mexican Muralists, artists of Mayer’s generation reconsidered the value of public art, engaging in a series of projects that questioned the role of artistic practice in Mexico.

Throughout the 1970s, numerous art collectives emerged in Mexico, a phenomenon that came to

³ Mayer, Rosa chillante, 9.
be known as *los grupos*, or the Group Movement. The different artists associated with *los grupos* were not unified by a single artistic strategy or a particular visual style. Still, as noted by Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, “each of the ‘Grupos’ tended to promote collective work as an alternative to the traditional idea of the isolated artist, while at the same time searching for new audiences and spaces for exhibiting their work.”

Similarly, Pilar García has emphasized that the collectives “converted to create strongly political collective work that encouraged taking the streets and generating new spaces and situations to confront and involve the public.” As a whole, *los grupos* expanded the possibilities for contemporary art in Mexico, employing artistic strategies – such as public artistic actions – that Mayer also embraced in her work.

The artists associated with *los grupos* were not the first to denounce the overwhelming influence of the Mexican Muralists in the visual arts of the country. Indeed, art historians characterized the activities of several Mexican artists of the post-World War II period as *la Ruptura*, or the rupture. In the 1950s, artist José Luis Cuevas launched a scathing critique of the programmatic nationalism in the visual arts endorsed by the Mexican government, describing the conventions of muralism as a “cactus curtain” that stifled artistic expression. The criticisms by Cuevas exemplified the dissatisfaction among a larger conglomeration of artists. Artists of *la Ruptura* thus developed experimental forms of artistic representation in various mediums, such as abstract expressionist painting or geometric sculpture. Still, as an emerging artist in the

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9 For a discussion of the writing and publication of this influential text by Cuevas, see Christopher Fulton, “José Luis Cuevas and the ‘New’ Latin American Artist,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* XXXIV, no. 101 (2012): 139–79. The term “cactus curtain” implied the authoritarian influence of the Mexican state, referencing the “Iron Curtain” of the Cold War era.
1970s, Mayer would have been too young to participate in the forms of artistic rebellion associated with la Ruptura. Moreover, in discussions of her early artistic development, she mostly focuses her attention on her contemporaries, such as artists of los grupos, and the artists of the post-revolutionary period. The minimal attention to artists of la Ruptura in her writing further suggests the predominant influence of post-revolutionary visual culture in the arts of Mexico, a phenomenon that still affected artists of Mayer’s generation.

In 1985, Dominique Liquois produced one of the first histories of los grupos, analyzing the emergence of art collectives such as Tepito Arte Acá, Mira, Suma, Germinal, and Taller de Arte e Ideología (TAI). In her view, los grupos echoed earlier art collectives in the country, such as the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios and the Taller de Gráfica Popular, both founded in the post-revolutionary period. More specifically, she positioned los grupos as an extension of the 1960s student movement, emphasizing the participation of art students in the protests at Tlatelolco plaza. In this early exhibition, the forms of public art and political protest developed by los grupos was thus presented as the artistic reaction to the events of October 2, 1968, when the Mexican army opened fire on the student protestors.

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10 See Dominique Liquois, De Los Grupos Los Individuos: Artistas Plásticos de Los Grupos Metropolitanos (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1985). In the exhibition catalogue, Liquois identified twelve collectives as part of los grupos: El Colectivo, Germinal, Grupo de Fotógrafos Independientes, Suma, Marco, Mira, No-Grupo, Peyote y la Compañía, Proceso Pentágono, Taller de Arte e Ideología, Taller de Investigación Plástica, and Tepito Arte Acá. The available histories of los grupos emphasize the importance of this exhibition, as it represented the first institutional effort to historicize the phenomenon. Moreover, since many of the collectives focused on public art actions and temporary, site-specific installations, the documentation included in the catalogue served as one of the few sources for documentation related to los grupos for several years. More recently, scholars such as Bustamante have emphasized the partial nature of the historical narrative encouraged by the Liquois exhibition. In her view, los grupos were a widespread phenomenon that included art collectives throughout the entire country, including groups formed in places such as Mérida, Yucatán. See Maris Bustamante, “Non-Objective Arts in Mexico 1963-83,” in Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas (Routledge, 2005), 231.


12 Ibid., 8.

13 Ibid. For a detailed examination of the Tlatelolco massacre, see Elena Poniatowska, La Noche de Tlatelolco, Biblioteca Era (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1971); Carlos Monsiváis and Julio Scherer García, Parte de Guerra, vols. I and II (Mexico City, 1999-2002).
More recently, Vázquez Mantecón qualified the connections between the student movement of the 1960s and los grupos. In his view, many of the artists of los grupos were too young to have been active participants in the events of Tlatelolco in 1968. According to this scholar, “it might be more accurate to say that the collective organizations of the 1970s were really responding to the political, social and artistic context that emerged in Mexico in the years just following the Tlatelolco massacre.” Similarly, García challenged the notion that the massacre directly led to the emergence of los grupos, linking the collectives to broader changes in the Mexican art world of the late 1960s. In her view, the Salones Independientes – a series of experimental exhibitions that countered the art historical narratives espoused by the Mexican government – served as the foundation for the artistic experiments of los grupos. In addition, Arden Decker has considered the connections between the artistic interventions of los grupos and the experimental practices of artists such as Mathias Goeritz and José Luis Cuevas, further nuancing the history of this movement.

Despite the numerous collectives founded in the 1970s, Mayer was not a member of any of los grupos. Still, the artist has emphasized how the majority of art students at the ENAP

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14 Vázquez Mantecón, “Los Grupos: A Reconsideration,” 197. In her discussion of the Tlatelolco massacre, Mayer expressed a similar opinion. The artist had been abroad during the massacre, completing her high school studies in Great Britain. Still, in her view, the aftermath of the massacre in Mexican society affected individuals even like herself, “who lived a sheltered and fairly apolitical life.” Mayer, Rosa chillante, 10.
15 See García, “Dossier Grupo Proceso Pentágono,” 59. The first exhibition known as a Salón Independiente took place at the Centro Cultural Isidro Favela, two weeks after the student massacre of Tlatelolco. The second exhibition was at the Museo Universitario de Artes y Ciencia (MUCA) in 1969. As noted by Daniel Garza Usabiaga, the critical attention garnered by the Salones Independientes have occluded the experimental forms of artistic practice on view at the “Exhibición Solar,” the official exhibition organized for the 1968 Olympics. For more details on the “Exhibición Solar,” see Daniel Garza Usabiaga, “Plástico, luz, sonido, movimiento: Lloraine Pinto, precursora del arte interdisciplinario y de nuevos medios en México,” in (Ready) Media: Hacia una arqueología de los medios y la invención en México, ed. Karla Jasso and Daniel Garza Usabiaga (Mexico City: Laboratorio de Arte Alameda- Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes - Conaculta, 2012). For more on the Salones Independientes, see The Age of Discrepancies, 78.
17 However, Mayer’s main collaborator in PGN described this particular collective as one of los grupos. This view remains uncommon in the available histories of los grupos, however. See Bustamante, “Non-Objective Arts in Mexico 1963-83,” 231.
sympathized with the revolutionary spirit of the time. Moreover, several of los grupos emerged within centers of artistic instruction in Mexico, including the ENAP. For example, César Espinosa and Araceli Zúñiga founded the Taller de Arte y Comunicación (TACO) de la Perra Brava at the ENAP in 1974, coinciding with Mayer’s years as a student. In 1976, instructor Ricardo Rocha founded the collective Suma at the ENAP. As a student at this institution, Mayer thus learned about the model of artistic practice favored by los grupos through her peers and instructors.

Pentágono, an installation produced by Proceso Pentágono, exemplifies the ways in which los grupos manifested their interest in collective artistic practice, thereby influencing artists of Mayer’s generation (fig. 1.2). Proceso Pentágono created this work for the Paris Youth Biennial X of 1977, which also included works by three other collectives: the Taller de Arte e Ideología, Suma, and Tetraedro. As described by Rubén Gallo, the installation consisted of a small, roof-less room in the shape of a pentagon: “the outside walls contained graphics and statistics illustrating the budget priorities of various Latin American countries (including figures for recent spending on education, the military, and foreign debt servicing)... inside, the group re-created one of the torture chambers routinely used by the Mexican police.”

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19 For an in-depth discussion of this particular collective, and how it relates to more extensive forms of collective action and social transformation in Mexico, see César Espinosa and Araceli Zúñiga, *La Perra Brava: Arte, Crisis y Políticas Culturales* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2002).
20 See *The Age of Discrepancies*, 219.
21 Artists Víctor Muñoz, Felipe Ehrenberg, Carlos Finck, and José Antonio Hernández founded the collective in 1973. Carlos Aguirre, Miguel Ehrenberg, Lourdes Grobet, and Rowena Morales were later additions to the collective.
22 Helen Escobedo chose these four collectives as the representatives of Mexican art for the biennial. Ángel Kalemberg, an art critic from Uruguay, had selected her for this responsibility. See Vázquez Mantecón, “Los Grupos: A Reconsideration,” 198.
shaped installation, such as bottles containing acid, as well as Mexican newspapers detailing the repressive techniques of the Mexican military.\textsuperscript{24} Through this installation, the artists of the collective illustrated how the state controlled the flow of monetary resources and information through physical violence.

Vázquez Mantecón described how the collectives gained national and international notoriety during this biennial, as the participating artists, led by Ehrenberg, protested the organization of the exhibition.\textsuperscript{25} In particular, artists viewed Ángel Kalemberg as a representative of the military regime in Uruguay. Ehrenberg and his collaborators later produced a “counter-catalogue” detailing the events surrounding the exhibition, which they described as a conspiracy.\textsuperscript{26} These events popularized the anti-institutional form of political art espoused by Proceso Pentágono, a perspective Mayer would later adapt for her own artistic proposals.

Even though Mayer was not a member of any of the collectives associated with \textit{los grupos}, the public art projects developed by her peers would also prove influential to her artistic development. Her projects in the urban spaces of Mexico City closely aligned her with the artists of Tepito Arte Acá. This particular collective emerged in 1973, when Daniel Manrique, Francisco Zenteno Bujaider, Francisco Marmata, Julian Ceballos Casco, and Armando Ramirez organized a public event in Colonia Peralvillo, in Mexico City, entitled “Conozca Mexico, visite Tepito.”\textsuperscript{27} The event included a photographic show and other installations, along with music and dancing. As described by Manrique, the project was a spontaneous attempt to present artistic proposals to the disenfranchised communities of the city; the public art project also served as a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 181.
\item \textsuperscript{25} See Vázquez Mantecón, “Los Grupos: A Reconsideration,” 198.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Expediente Bienal X: La historia documentada de un complot frustrado (Mexico City: Editorial Libro Acción Libre, 1980)
\item \textsuperscript{27} See \textit{The Age of Discrepancies}, 209.
\end{itemize}
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way of reacquainting himself with the neighborhood in which he had lived his entire life.\textsuperscript{28} After this event, the collective developed other public art projects, producing murals for the Tepito neighborhood throughout the 1970s (fig. 1.3).\textsuperscript{29} These early experiments in public forms of art within the city’s urban spaces set the stage for Mayer’s later artistic experimentation.

In addition, several women artists of Mayer’s generation directly contributed to los grupos. Bustamante, one of Mayer’s closest artistic collaborators, was a founding member of the No Grupo collective. No Grupo emerged in 1977, with members of the collective meeting at the home of the sculptor Hersúa; other members of the collective included Rubén Valencia, Melquíades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez, Susana Sierra, Katya Mandoki, and Andrea di Castro. No Grupo “remotely” participated in the Paris Youth Biennial X of 1977 sending cardboard masks bearing photographs of the collective to exhibition visitors.\textsuperscript{30} Similarly, Lara was a member of the collective Março, and she collaborated with No Grupo.\textsuperscript{31} Mayer would frequently cross paths with Lara, as the two artists contributed to the exhibitions I detail later in this chapter. Through these interactions, Mayer absorbed the forms of artistic experimentation associated with los grupos, even though her artistic proposals would differ from projects such as Pentágono.

Mayer’s connections to the art theorists and scholars associated with the ENAP also shaped her artistic development. In particular, the courses she undertook with Juan Acha and García Canclini, further expanded her perspective on the role of the visual arts in Mexican

\textsuperscript{29} For a discussion of the murals produced by Tepito Arte Acá see Leonard Folgarait, “Murals and Marginality in Mexico City: The Case of Tepito Arte Acá,” in \textit{Mexican Muralism: A Critical History}.
\textsuperscript{30} See \textit{The Age of Discrepancies}, 229. For a more detailed discussion of the projects developed by No Grupo, as well as an exploration of Bustamante’s role in the group, see Roselyn Costantino, “Lo erótico, lo exótico y el taco: el reciclaje cultural en el arte y performance de Maris Bustamante,” \textit{Chasqui} 25, no. 2 (November 1, 1996): 3–18, doi:10.2307/29741280.
\textsuperscript{31} See \textit{The Age of Discrepancies}, 230.
society. These scholars would develop a critical vocabulary that would be influential for her entire oeuvre, shaping her later efforts in producing feminist art within Mexico.

In an interview, Mayer emphasized how her studies with Acha at the ENAP served as one of the most important foundations for her artistic production, a point she has repeatedly made in written discussions as well.\(^{32}\) As an instructor at the ENAP, Acha analyzed art as a cultural system embedded within the larger systems of exchange of capitalist society, focusing attention on the systems of production, distribution, and reception that affected the visual arts.\(^{33}\) As described by Fabiana Serviddio, Acha solidified his position at the ENAP in 1976, when the institution appointed him as a full-time researcher.\(^{34}\) In particular, the ENAP hired the theorist to research “systems of artistic production,” which led to the publication of *Arte y sociedad: Latinoamérica* in 1979. In this text, Acha considered the ways in which the social and economic structures of the Latin American region affected artistic production and reception. In this analysis, he underscored the lingering effects of the European colonial project on countries of the Americas, aiming to produce a form of art theory that recognized how artists in Latin America navigated social structures characterized by inequality.\(^{35}\)

Even before the publication of *Arte y sociedad*, however, Acha popularized a perspective on the visual arts that would deeply affect artists of Mayer’s generation, including members of *los grupos*. In an article he wrote for *Artes Visuales*, “Toward art criticism as a producer of theories,” Acha detailed a perspective that would inform his subsequent studies on contemporary

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\(^{32}\) Mónica Mayer, interview by the author, August 8, 2013, Mexico City; Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 10.

\(^{33}\) Mayer, interview.


art. In this text, published at a moment in which Mayer was only beginning her artistic career, Acha analyzed the specific conditions of the art world in the Latin American region. In particular, he dismayed at the ways in which “the ideals we have today are nurtured by theories that have simply been transplanted to Latin American soil by our undiscriminating need for development, so meekly submissive to the cultural imperialism of the Occident.” In his view, artists and theorists should therefore not simply incorporate the cultural models produced in the First World, as the social conditions within the two regions of the world were not equivalent. Instead, he argued that contemporary artists and theorists of Latin America should focus attention on the needs and concern of their local communities, allowing for a form of artistic innovation that could transform existing social structures.

A few years later, Acha further elaborated on the ways in which artists could transform the social structures prevalent in the region, developing a critical vocabulary that influenced Mayer and artists of her milieu. In 1981, at the Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano sobre Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano in Medellín, Colombia, Acha highlighted several features of non-objectual art, explaining its relevance to the Latin American region. In his view, non-objectual art represented a newly emerging form of artistic practice, one that radically transformed the role of art in contemporary society. Contemporary artists, he argued, dismissed the distinctions between “pure art” and “applied art,” a dichotomy established by Western culture, or more accurately, capitalism. In contrast to the traditions established by the Renaissance, non-objectual artists focused attention on the presentation of the work of art, highlighting the specific sites and moments in which the public experienced the work. In this manner, artists prompted

37 Ibid., xvi.
39 Ibid., 1.
audience members to consider the systems of production, distribution, and reception implicated in the process. The term non-objectual art thus described a wide variety of artistic strategies and mediums, including conceptualism, body actions, and installations. These techniques emphasized the ways in which artists – and their artistic practice – navigated larger social structures. Through non-objectual art, artists could confront the inadequate artistic systems of their region, countering the influence of state-endorsed museums and galleries, as well as the powerful systems of mass media affected by the influence of the First World.

The concept of non-objectual art related to the experimental forms of art emerging in the international art world of the contemporary period. As discussed by Serviddio, Acha’s artistic theory related to the widespread interest in the “dematerialization” of the art object in the 1960s, a practice initiated by artists such as Allan Kaprow. Acha’s discussion of non-objectual art thus related to artistic experiments at the Centro de Artes Visuales del Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires in the late 1960s, or the exhibition efforts of the Salones Independientes developed in Mexico City. In addition, Acha’s discussions of non-objectual art related to the writings of Lucy R. Lippard. In her art criticism, Lippard employed the term “dematerialization” to describe a wide breadth of artistic activity, including works produced by artists such as Sol Lewitt, Joseph Beuys, and Robert Smithson in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her view, these different artists shared an interest in highlighting the perception processes of audience members, producing works of art that did not rely on traditional artistic mediums. However, Acha’s concept of non-objectual art specifically considered the social conditions experienced by artists.

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40 Ibid., 4.
41 See Serviddio, “De la crítica a la teoría.”
42 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
in the Latin American region. For Acha, the historical legacy of the colonial period still shaped the artistic systems of the region. In Latin America, political and economic elites controlled artistic institutions – such as national museums – that aimed to highlight the region’s modernity. In this manner, the elites of the continent encouraged contemporary artists to imitate the forms of art developing in the First World. As discussed by Robin Adèle Greeley, Acha’s views related to the forms of economic theory developed in Latin America throughout this period. In her view, Acha “recuperated for aesthetic production the moral basis of dependency theory’s socioeconomic challenge to Cold War capitalism’s neo-imperialist project. Dependency theory, pioneered in Latin America in the 1960s, argued that economic underdevelopment was not merely a question of some nations lagging behind others, but was effectively produced by capitalism’s world system.”45

Greeley has related Acha’s theories to the artistic strategies and innovations of los grupos. In particular, she viewed the work of Melquiades Herrera, a member of No Grupo, as a form of aesthetic resistance against consumer culture from the United States. But Acha’s theories also influenced artists beyond los grupos. His lectures at the ENAP provided a model of artistic practice that moved away from a simplistic national/international dichotomy. His perspective on the visual arts did not preclude artists employing artistic techniques or models developed in other regions of the world. Acha, however, emphasized artists should develop projects that considered the needs of local communities, highlighting the existing social structures in these contexts. In this manner, artists would adapt outside artistic strategies to their specific local context, avoiding the direct transplantation derided by Acha. This model of artistic

production – emphasizing the negotiation of First World artistic practices with the structural realities of Latin America – would remain an important feature of Mayer’s entire body of work.

During this period, Mayer also studied with García Canclini, completing a course on the sociology of contemporary art at the ENAP in the late 1970s. Like Acha, García Canclini highlighted the challenges faced by Latin American artists in an increasingly international art market. In an essay published in the same issue of *Artes Visuales* that included Acha, the theorist described several perspectives that would later manifest themselves in Mayer’s artistic career. García Canclini emphasized how artistic traditions had positioned “works of art” as something separate from larger social structures, rarefied objects that only reflected the artistic “genius” of their producer. In his view, the technological innovations of the twentieth-century (including mass media) had challenged the idealized vision of art as a unique and irreplaceable object. As a result, “the study of art is no longer centered on an analysis of the work, or of an idealized Beauty, and we are beginning to see it as a social and communicative process whose elements include: the artist – the work – the middlemen – the public.” He ended the text describing “artists who have been experimenting with different means of establishing a new relationship with the public,” a description that applied to artists of Mayer’s milieu such as los grupos. García Canclini’s interest in the various agents that participate in the “communicative” process of contemporary art anticipates Mayer’s artistic output. In the various artistic projects she developed from the late 1970s onward, Mayer sought to transform, or reinvent the relationships she established with the public in Mexico.

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48 See ibid., 37.  
49 Ibid.  
50 Ibid., 38.
Moreover, García Canclini’s later examinations of transcultural exchange – which he described as a form of “hybridity” – relate to Mayer’s early interest in the forms of feminist art developed in the West Coast of the United States. While the theorist first popularized the term “hybridity” with the publication of his text, *Culturas híbridas* in 1990, Mayer’s early artistic production falls under the forms of cultural production examined by the theorist. Rather than employing earlier concepts such as *mestizaje* or syncretism, García Canclini developed the concept of hybridity to analyze cultural production of the late twentieth-century. In his view, hybridity considered “sociological processes in which discrete structures of practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices.”

Unlike the concepts of mestizaje and syncretism – which imply “original” or “authentic” cultures that come together to create something “new” – Canclini employed hybridity to emphasize how Latin American cultural producers engaged in a continuous process of transformation. Visual artists, like other social subjects, navigate an interconnected network of social structures through their efforts. In addition, Canclini was interested in how these processes of hybridity engaged with “traditional” or folk practices, even while cultural producers inserted their efforts into transnational circuits of exchange.

The concept of hybridity is of particular relevance for Mayer, as she repeatedly considered artistic models outside of the Mexican art world, developing new structures and practices in her local context. Moreover, through her efforts in developing feminist art in Mexico, she emphatically stated her interest in establishing an ongoing dialogue with feminist

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52 Ibid., xxv.
artists from the United States. In this manner, she exemplified the processes of exchange and transformation described as part of hybridity by García Canclini. In addition, the artist would employ traditional folk practices in artistic projects that also related to the efforts of contemporary feminist artists from the United States. Beginning her artistic career in the urban center of Mexico City, but aware of developments in the international art world of the time, Mayer was well positioned to navigate the various systems of artistic production developing in different regions of the world. Mayer’s access to the different artistic concepts developed in other regions of the world – through studies at the ENAP, and publications such as *Artes Visuales* – exemplified García Canclini’s view that cultural producers have the unique opportunity to engage in transcultural exchanges, taking possession of the benefits of modernity.54

Mayer’s studies during this period of transformation in the Mexican art world provided a conceptual framework for her early artistic output, as her work paralleled the collective projects of *los grupos*, and their interest in developing new artistic venues. Moreover, her work related to the theoretical concerns explored by Acha and García Canclini. Her larger body of work – which sought to incorporate elements of artistic practice developed in both Mexico and the United States – aimed to avoid the simple transplantation viewed as endemic to Latin American art by Acha in the late 1970s. Viewing her work solely through the frameworks of non-objectual art or the concept of hybridity, however, occludes the role played by other social transformations that shaped her artistic efforts. During this period, Mayer also began her long involvement in feminist activist groups in Mexico.

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54 Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, xxvii.
Mayer and Feminist Activist Groups in Mexico

Mayer has repeatedly explained that her experiences as an art student at the ENAP sparked her initial interest in feminism. A lecture on women artists at the school, for instance, prompted male students to explain that women could never be “good artists,” as motherhood exhausted their creativity.\(^{55}\) Describing a student protest at the ENAP, Mayer emphasized her dismay at the ways in which her peers considered women artists:

As I walked into the women’s bathroom, I read an enormous sign that read, ‘Women, make love, support the guys in their fight.’ With one phrase they had managed to erase our participation in the movement…The guys seemed to believe our life should be limited to keeping their beds warm and their paintbrushes clean.\(^{56}\)

Such encounters, particularly with young men who identified as leftist revolutionaries, prompted Mayer to consider forms of activism that focused attention on gender inequality. The artist navigated towards feminist organizations, self-identified activist groups that aimed to transform women’s role in contemporary Mexican society.

By participating in activist efforts of the late 1970s, Mayer contributed to a social movement later described by scholars as the *nueva ola de feminismos mexicana* (the new wave of Mexican feminism), *Neofeminismo* (Neo-feminism), or the *nuevo movimiento feminista* (new feminist movement).\(^{57}\) Academics have emphasized how journalist Marta Acevedo sparked this form of activism in the early 1970s. Acevedo had traveled to the United States, viewing the forms of feminist activity and protest developing on the West Coast; she later described these efforts in an article published in the Mexican magazine *Siempre!,* on September 30, 1970.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 48.


\(^{58}\) Lau Jaiven, *La nueva ola del feminismo en Mexico,* 76.
According to Ana Lau Jaiven, the article prompted the creation of several women’s groups and organizations in Mexico, with activists seeking legal and social equality between men and women.

But the feminist activist efforts of the 1970s were part of an earlier – and more diffuse – historical process. Indeed, the first forms of women’s activism in Mexico emerged during the Porfirio Díaz regime. As described by Anna Macías, “the appearance of feminism in the early twentieth century was an unexpected and largely unwelcome by-product of modernization in Porfirian Mexico.”\(^{59}\) Women were active participants in several protests and strikes during this period, including the famed Río Blanco strike of 1907.\(^{60}\) Women also founded organizations such as *Las Hijas de Anáhuac*, established by Mexico City seamstresses in 1907.\(^{61}\) In addition, women contributed to the journalistic and political efforts that denounced the injustices of the Díaz regime, even establishing newspaper of their own, such as *La Corregidora*.\(^{62}\)

The armed struggle that followed the end of the Porfiriato accelerated women’s participation in social movements. In particular, the *soldaderas* or female soldiers, remain as an important symbol of women’s contribution to the Mexican Revolution.\(^{63}\) This iconic figure prominently appeared in various visual representations, including the broadsheets of José Guadalupe Posada, and numerous photographs (figs. 1.4-1.6).\(^{64}\) The famed corridos or folk ballads of the revolution also solidified the image of the soldadera. Specific corridos, such as *La

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\(^{59}\) Anna Macías, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 17.


\(^{64}\) See Elena Poniatowska, *Las soldaderas* (Mexico City: CONACULTA - INAH, 1999).
Adelita, detailed the dangers of the revolution, highlighting women’s reaction to the armed struggle.65

The aftermath of the armed struggle further brought attention to women’s position in Mexican society throughout the early twentieth century. In 1916, for instance, the state of Yucatán hosted the first national feminist congress in the country, an early effort by women’s groups to change the legal and social structures in the country.66 The governor and military leader of Yucatán, Salvador Alvarado, organized the congress, hosting over seven hundred women.67 Even though the congress aimed to represent the interests of all Mexican women, the majority of the participants were urban, educated women, as primary school education was a registration requirement.68 The congress, therefore, had a distinct lack of representatives from the state’s indigenous women.69 Despite these shortcomings, the event allowed individual activists to proclaim the need to transform women’s role in the public and private realms of Mexican society. For instance, Hermila Galindo de Topete, a supporter of Venustiano Carranza, delivered an address in favor of the constitutionalist cause, viewing it as the best strategy for the protection of women’s rights. In addition, she denounced sexual double standards in Mexican society, highlighting the social value and importance of women’s sexuality.70 As a whole, the

68 See ibid.
70 As described by Olcott, the efforts of Galindo de Topete were the most memorable event at the congress. See Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 29–30.
congress allowed women activists to claim modern citizenship within the context of social transformation of the Mexican revolution.

These early efforts developed within a broader context of exchange and dialogue with women from other regions of the world. Several prominent activists from the United States, such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Jane Addams, wrote missives requesting information about the women’s congress in Yucatán. These early forms of communication between representatives of Mexico and the United States prefigured the more established communication networks Mayer would navigate throughout her activism and artistic practice in the late twentieth century.

The feminist congress of Yucatán anticipated the larger forms of feminist activism and women’s mobilizations that prevailed in the reconstruction period. In particular, women’s groups organized to establish universal suffrage in Mexico, a goal that came to dominate activist efforts. One of the most influential groups in this form of women’s activism was the Consejo Feminista Mexicano (Mexican Feminist Council, CFM). Elena Torres and Refugio García founded this organization in 1919. According to Gabriela Cano, the CFM focused on economic issues, fighting for the rights of women workers and the establishment of women’s suffrage. In addition, the CFM sought the establishment of a national, Mexican feminist movement through the convocation of feminist congresses. Over a hundred delegates attended the second feminist congress of 1923 in Mexico City. The participants in these congresses endorsed a broad agenda that focused on labor and peasant rights, as well as public education.

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71 See Smith, Gender and the Mexican Revolution, 30.
72 See Soto, Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman, 103.
73 Ibid.
While members of the CFM aimed to define the modern woman of post-revolutionary Mexico, other organizations aimed to reverse the intense changes of the period. The Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas (Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies, UDCM), formally established in 1920, sought to reaffirm women’s traditional role in Mexican society, defining women as the defenders of the family and public morality. As noted by Patience Alexandra Schell, the organization had a broad agenda, protesting for more elementary schools in Mexico City, as well as denouncing the exhibition of “immoral” films.76

These disparate efforts exemplified the difficulty in defining women’s role in Mexico in the aftermath of the revolution. According to Jocelyn Olcott, the social construction of the modern Mexican woman was a divisive process, marked by the efforts of women’s organizations, the post-revolutionary government, and ordinary citizens.77 The revolutionary rhetoric of social transformation contrasted with an idealized Mexican femininity, traditionally defined as a form of abnegación or selflessness.78 The most important attempt to resolve the tensions between different women’s groups was the creation, in 1935, of the Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer (FUPDM), during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (fig. 1.7).79 The FUPDM served as a coalition that managed to coordinate the disparate efforts of a wide variety of women’s groups. This organization, under the influence of the presidential administration, was able to recruit thousands of women across the country by focusing on a broad agenda that included demands for better wages and labor conditions.80

77 See Olcott, Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico.
78 See ibid., 15–16.
79 See ibid., 115. For a lengthier discussion of the ways in which the rhetoric of president Cárdenas related to suffragist efforts, see Gabriela Cano, “Ciudadanía y sufragio femenino: El discurso igualitario de Lázaro Cárdenas,” in Miradas feministas sobre las mexicanas del siglo XX.
80 See Cano, “Las mujeres en el México del siglo XX: Una cronología mínima,” 42.
from different sectors of post-revolutionary society, such as obreras (industrial workers), campesinas (peasants), and others could embody the ideal of modern citizenship of the post-revolutionary period. Universal suffrage, however, remained an elusive goal for women’s groups.

Scholars have emphasized how the forms of feminist activity in the post-revolutionary period and during the 1970s represent distinct movements. According to this historical model, earlier forms of feminist activity primarily focused on universal suffrage. After the 1953 establishment of this legal right, new forms of feminist activism do not emerge until the 1970s, leading to a movement that aimed to “revolutionize” daily life, leading to broader forms of equality between men and women that went beyond legal changes.\(^1\) This particular narrative echoes similar historical discussions of “second wave” feminist activism in the United States, suggesting a social movement that disappears and reemerges.\(^2\)

The metaphor of a “new” feminist wave, however, dismisses the similarities between the concerns of different generations of activists. Feminists of the 1970s echoed the concerns of post-revolutionary organizations. The debates surrounding women’s role in Mexican society initiated during the reconstruction period continued in the contemporary era. Like the earlier, twentieth-century feminist activists, feminist groups of the 1970s focused on women’s participation in Mexican political life. In addition, contemporary activists were as diverse in their opinions as the earlier women’s groups. Participants disagreed, for instance, on the ways in which the feminist movement should confront the extreme class and racial divisions in Mexican society. Activists also had differing views on whether the feminist movement should attempt to

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\(^1\) See Lau Jaiven, *La nueva ola del feminismo en Mexico*, 75–76.

work with government representatives or national political parties, particularly given the events of 1968.\textsuperscript{83} Participants also questioned whether the feminist movement should make allegiances with other social movements, such as socialist organizations or labor groups. Even around the issue of reproductive rights in Mexico, activists disagreed about the specific legal strategies that would be more successful.\textsuperscript{84}

Despite these tensions, activists of the 1970s banded together around issues considered central to women’s social position. In particular, Mayer joined the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas (Coalition of Feminist Women), composed of different groups that worked together around issues of sexual violence and reproductive rights.\textsuperscript{85} Remembering her participation in a protest organized by this coalition of feminist activists, Mayer stated: “I still remember a wonderful protest in front of the Senators Building in December of 1977, demanding the legalization of abortion.”\textsuperscript{86} In photographs of the protest, the artist appears prominently in the foreground, surrounded by other women carrying signs (fig. 1.8).

Mayer’s participation in these activist efforts coincided with an increased interest in the international nature of feminism as a whole. This perspective, which sought connections between women’s groups in different regions of the world, was best exemplified by the first World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations (UN) and hosted in Mexico City in 1975 (fig. 1.9). In a discussion of the conference, Marta Alter Chen described the creation of an official “World Plan of Action,” focused on improving the social and political status of

\textsuperscript{83} See Lau, “El nuevo movimiento feminista mexicano a fines del milenio,” 19.
\textsuperscript{84} For a discussion of the different debates surrounding Mexican feminist activism and reproductive rights, see Marta Lamas, “El feminismo mexicano y la lucha por legalizar el aborto,” Política y cultura, no. 1 (September 1992): 9–22.
\textsuperscript{85} The following groups established the Coalition of Feminist Women in the late 1970s: Mujeres en Acción Solidaria, Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres, Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer, Colectivo la Revuelta, and the Movimiento Feminista Mexicano.
\textsuperscript{86} Mayer, “On Life and Art as a Feminist,” 38.
women throughout the world. The conference aimed to represent the interests of women from different nations, representing an international effort to improve the conditions of women across the world. In the eyes of many women from the Third World, however, the agenda of the conference followed the interests of First World women. Several activists from Mexico believed the UN conference considered the social category of “woman” as a universal construct, dismissing other forms of social inequality that affected the lives of women throughout the Third World. As noted by Aili Mari Tripp, the conference manifested the extreme divisions between activists and organizers from countries such as Mexico and those of Europe and the United States:

Many of the conflicts focused on the objections by women in the South to the northern women's emphasis on the primacy of feminism and on relation between men and women. Many women from the South, for example, accused women from the North of coming to the UN women’s conference in Mexico in 1975 presuming that a specific feminist orientation would provide a common framework for action. Gloria Steinem had drawn up a feminist manifesto without any input from women in the South, which seemed to many third world women to be a subtle form of cultural imperialism. Women from the South tended to focus on how women’s problems were defined by global inequality, imperialism, and other political concerns that were not seen as gender-specific.

In this manner, the conference served as a powerful example of the ways in which “global” feminist efforts represent the interests of the First World.

The conference was also controversial because of the relationship between the Mexican government and the UN. Several activists in Mexico, such as Marta Lamas, felt conference served as a form of propaganda for the presidential administration of Luis Echeverría Álvarez, suggesting the benign nature of the Mexican government. In her view, the conference

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represented an imposition that did not consider the interests of local activists and participants, prompting the creation of a “counter-congress.” 90 However, the establishment of a counter-congress did not fully resolve the tensions that emerged among different participants of the conference, as these activists arrived to these international events with different expectations and agendas. To exemplify these disagreements, Olcott described the expectations of Domitila Barrios de Chungara, leader of a miners’ union in her home country of Bolivia. 91 Barrios de Chungara had traveled from Bolivia, hoping to learn strategies she could then employ to improve the lives of her local, mining community, ravaged by economic struggles. Instead, this particular activist felt “lost,” attending different meetings focused on topics such as the illegal sex trade, coerced prostitution, and lesbian feminism. Olcott contrasted these experiences with those of the Mexican theater director and lesbian activist Nancy Cárdenas; the latter activist was able to present an influential proposal for lesbian rights in the context of the UN conference. 92

The tensions provoked by the UN conference exemplified the difficulties in challenging the expectations of presumably “international” organizations that reproduced the interests of the First World. The different views and proposals presented in Mexico City thus echoed earlier forms of tension between activists from both Mexico and the United States. In the early twentieth century, Mexican activists made a deliberate effort to establish a space for their concerns within an international feminist movement. These forms of resistance were in evidence

90 See Lamas, “El feminismo mexicano y la lucha por legalizar el aborto,” 332. In a more recent discussion, Mårgara Millán characterized the propaganda strategies of this presidential administration in a succinct manner: “During Luis Echeverría’s six year term as president, he tried to reconfigure the political scene through a ‘democratic opening,’ which was characterized by a method that combined cooption with repression of the opposition.” Mårgara Millán, “Politics of Translation in Contemporary Mexican Feminism,” in Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas, 166.
92 For a more detailed discussion of this proposal and its significance for sexual rights movements in Mexico, see Rafael de la Dehesa, Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 150–51.
at the Pan American Conference of Women, hosted in Baltimore in 1922. The conference, organized by the National League of Women Voters, presumably aimed to foster “international friendliness” between women of the American continent. Even though the conference celebrated a vision of egalitarian collaboration, the proceedings of the events did not meet those expectations. Throughout the conference, representatives from the United States viewed themselves as the originators and leaders of international feminism, bestowing their knowledge to other activists that desperately needed it. The main organizer of the conference, suffragist Chapman Catt, exemplified this vision of inherent superiority in a speech delivered at the conference; she chastised women from Latin America, emphasizing how organizers from the United States could provide guidance. Her view that Latin American activists should replicate the efforts of suffragists from the United States revealed her disinterest in the political developments of a country such as Mexico, undergoing the intense transformations of the Mexican Revolution.

Before arriving to the conference, the CFM sent a telegram to the National League of Women Voters, detailing the ways in which the actions of the United States government and oil companies affected women in Mexico. To the conference itself, representatives brought a memo that further detailed the ways in which the United States negatively affected the Mexican population at large. In this manner, delegates from Mexico sought to establish a space for their concerns and needs within the larger networks controlled by the National League of Women Voters, anticipating later efforts in countering the influence of the First World.

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94 Ibid., 817.
95 For a more detailed examination of the planning and aftermath of the Pan-American conference, see Megan Threlkeld, Pan American Women: U.S. Internationalists and Revolutionary Mexico (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).
96 Threlkeld, “The Pan American Conference of Women, 1922,” 821.
97 Ibid.
By establishing a counter-congress, activists from the 1970s negotiated the forms of feminist activity that had emerged elsewhere in the world, adapting it to the specific local structures of Mexico. Their efforts considered the ways gender inequality affected women in different regions, shaped by specific local histories. The establishment of a feminist network of collaboration would allow Mexican activists to develop strategies informed by local structural conditions. By participating in feminist activism during this period, Mayer thus familiarized herself with a model of adaptation and resistance she would repeatedly employ in her artistic practice. Her early work of this period, therefore, serves as the artistic corollary of the larger strategies employed by Mexican feminist activists of the 1970s and earlier periods. Mayer’s artworks, developed in the aftermath of the UN conference, remained linked to a larger effort to challenge a “global” feminist movement that served the interests of the First World.

The UN conference had direct repercussions within the Mexican art world of the 1970s. In relation to the conference, the MAM organized an exhibition exploring the role of gender in the visual arts: “La mujer como creadora y tema del arte (Women as Creator and Subject in Art)” (fig. 1.10). The exhibition, however, emphasized the artistic production of male artists, featuring works by thirty-five men, and thirteen women artists. The show included examples of early twentieth-century portraiture, such as Tomasa Venegas by Ignacio Rosas, or Portrait of Mrs. Belinda Palavicini by Alfredo Ramos Martínez (figs. 1.11-1.12). These works, in fact, echoed the artistic conventions of nineteenth-century academic painting, representing women in idealized, domestic scenarios. More importantly, the show emphasized the work of the Mexican Muralists. The exhibition included pieces such as Rivera’s *La Molendera*, for instance,

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99 For a discussion of prominent examples of this idealized vision of fragile femininity in nineteenth century academic art, see Widdifield, “Art and Modernity in Porfirian Mexico.”
a peculiar choice given that the UN conference aimed to challenge the traditional, domestic roles ascribed to women throughout the world (fig. 1.13).

Moreover, the majority of the works in the exhibition conformed to the expectation that the subject matter explored by women artists would differ significantly from that of male artists. María Izquierdo’s *El alhajero (The Jewel Box)*, for instance, prominently depicts the numerous, fashionable accessories of an upper-class Mexican woman (fig. 1.14). Other works in the exhibition reveal the expectation that women artists inevitably create paintings that give visual form to the mysterious, internal world of femininity, such as *Presencia inquietante (Unsettling Presence)* by Remedios Varo (fig. 1.15). The framing of the exhibition encouraged audiences to view these works as a natural expression of femininity, rather than as a form of critique by these women artists.\(^\text{100}\)

The prominent position of Kahlo in this exhibition exemplifies the expectation that women artists create works that inevitably reflect their subjective, feminine experiences. The exhibition’s catalogue cover featured the artist’s *Self-portrait as Tehuana*, establishing Kahlo as the best example of a Mexican woman who served as both a creator and subject of art. Exhibition designers chose a self-portrait by Kahlo that also included Rivera for this catalogue cover. Other works by Kahlo in the exhibition include *Las dos fridas (Two Fridas)* and *La columna rota (Broken Column)*, paintings that respectively reference her tumultuous relationship with Rivera and the physical pain she experienced throughout her life (figs. 1.16-1.17).

Still, the exhibition also featured the artistic production of a diverse group of women artists whose work did not fit into traditional definitions of “feminine art.” The sculpture *Contoy II*, produced by Angela Gurria, consisting of geometrically abstract forms, was included in the

\(^{100}\) For an examination of the ways in which Varo deliberately countered social expectations of femininity through her representations, see Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2000).
exhibition (fig. 1.18). Other works in the show include Helen Escobedo’s sculptural installation, *Ambiente gráfico* (*Graphic Environment*), a work constructed with materials associated with industrial production (fig. 1.19).

As a visual artist and feminist activist, Mayer was in a unique position to assess this large-scale exhibition. Repeatedly, she has stressed her surprise at the endeavor: “Now that it’s been a little over a quarter century, I find it unbelievable they did not even consider organizing an exhibition of women artists alone. Moreover, I’m surprised they didn’t think about the lack of coherence in organizing an exhibition in which women were still mainly muses, if not objects.”101 Despite this critical view by the artist, however, the exhibition did showcase the emerging influence of feminist art historical scholarship. In an untitled essay for the exhibition catalogue, Fernando Gamboa, director of the MAM, produced a text that echoed Linda Nochlin’s “Why have there been no great women artists?,” a foundational text in feminist art history.102 In her text, Nochlin answered the question emphasizing the limited educational opportunities for women artists throughout different historical periods, revealing how social limitations denied women the possibility of establishing their artistic careers. Similarly, Gamboa considered the social conditions that limited the efforts of Mexican women artists. After describing the achievements of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and celebrating her literary achievements, Gamboa pointedly asked: “Why has the artistic sensibility of women in the arts developed so much later than their poetic genius, their talent to organize ideas? We cannot produce a definite answer, but it is undoubtedly due to one of the many limitations that have victimized women.”103

103 Gamboa, *La mujer como creadora y tema del arte*. 
This particular exhibition has acquired a prominent position in histories of feminist art in Mexico, given the events it precipitated. Disappointed by the exhibition, Carla Stellweg, the founder of Artes Visuales, organized a seminar with Mexican women around the idea of the women in the visual arts. The participating women included art historians and artists, as well as women in other fields; these conversations were later published in a special issue of Artes Visuales. The issue also included an interview with Chicago and Arlene Raven, two of the founders of the Woman’s Building and the FSW.

Mayer has emphasized that this particular issue of Artes Visuales was important for her early artistic development. Describing her reaction to the Chicago and Raven interview, the artist has stated that she “read it and went straight to see Carla Stellweg, the magazine’s editor, to get the address of the Woman’s Building. I had to go there.” After contacting the Woman’s Building, the artist participated in a two-week workshop with Chicago, an experience that she considered extremely important: “I decided that this was exactly what I needed for my graduate studies.”

An entry in Mayer’s personal journal, dated June 8, 1976, details her views on the Woman’s Building as a whole. She describes her first impression of the institution as

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104 The issue reproduced Stellweg’s questions in the seminar, which prompted women to reflect on women’s roles in past and present artistic production, as well as the ways in which “femininity” affected artistic production and reception. The issue included the essay responses by the following women: María Eugenia Stavenhagen (anthropologist), Eugenia Hoffs (psychologist), Sara Chazán (lawyer), Margaret Randall (poet), Ida Rodríguez Prampolini (art historian), Rita Eder de Blejer (art historian), Helen Escobedo (artist), Alaide Foppa (art critic), Myra Landau (painter and writer), Angela Gurria (sculptor), Bertha Taracena (art critic), Paulina Lavista (photographer), Fiona Alexander (painter), and Antonia Guerrero (painter). See Artes Visuales. Revista del Museo de Arte Moderno, 9 (1976).

105 See Zora, “Zora’s Interview with Judy Chicago and Arlene Raven,” Artes Visuales. Revista Del Museo de Arte Moderno 9 (1976): 62–64. In the following chapter, I more closely detail the history of the Woman’s Building and the FSW, linking it to the larger forms of feminist activism that developed in the United States throughout the 1960s.

106 Mayer in Amelia Jones and Mónica Mayer, “‘Lubricating the System’ and Other Feminist Curatorial and Art Dilemmas: Amelia Jones in Dialogue with Mónica Mayer,” in When in Doubt... Ask, 229–230.

107 Mayer, Rosa chillante, 21.
“ambiguous,” noting the staff’s lack of courtesy and friendliness. In addition, describing the resources available at the institution, she noted the lack of materials in Spanish, and found that most of the texts focused on developments in the United States and Europe; she also expressed surprise at the amount of materials focused on lesbianism. Despite these impressions, Mayer later viewed the two-week workshop as a defining moment for her artistic training. Describing the workshop in another article, she stated that the 1976 workshop was the place in which she became “addicted” to feminist art education.

Scholars such as Barbosa Sánchez, Giunta, and others have emphasized how Mayer’s later, more extensive studies at the FSW played an important role in her artistic development. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the ways Mayer’s early artistic efforts before 1978 already reveal her familiarity with the forms of feminist art developed in Los Angeles throughout the early 1970s. Even before her two-year studies at the FSW, Mayer completed a series of projects that established an artistic dialogue with feminist artists in other geographic regions, employing her artwork as a visual response that echoed the activities of Mexican activists in the UN conference. The significance of these early feminist projects lies in the local and translocal artistic models she negotiated, situating her work within different genealogies of artistic production in the late 1970s. Through her projects in these exhibitions, Mayer began to construct a network of feminist artists in both countries, an effort she would continue throughout her entire artistic career.

Mayer’s early works, however, also relate to Acha’s concerns regarding the transplantation of artistic models from the First World into the Latin American region. Mayer’s

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109 Ibid.
110 Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis,” 5.
111 See McCaughan, “Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence”; Barbosa Sánchez; Giunta, “Feminisms and Emancipation.”
work adapted and negotiated the feminist models produced on the West Coast of the United States, but the artist also engaged with the forms of representation prevalent in Mexican modern art to create her own translocal artistic practice. The artistic projects she completed in the late 1970s allowed her to reference – and critique – canonical representations of women in Mexican art. Mayer thus produced an early form of feminist art that functioned as a form of translocal translation, creating visual representations that alluded to distinct artistic traditions.

“Collage Íntimo”

After her participation in Mexican feminist activism and her brief studies with Chicago in 1976, Mayer began her efforts to develop feminist art in Mexico. Seeking to produce works of art that also questioned the role of women in contemporary society, she sought venues that would be receptive to the forms of artistic practice she was only beginning to develop. This led to the exhibition “Collage íntimo,” presented at the Casa del Lago in Mexico City in 1977. Mayer organized the show with two other artists, Rosalba Huerta and Lucila Santiago. The invitation sent out for the exhibition included a photograph with the three participating artists, as well as an extensive dialogue between these individuals (figs. 1.20-1.22). In this conversation, the artists reflected on the exhibition’s themes and goals. Santiago, for instance, described her interest in using collage to share the feelings brought about by the seashore. Mayer emphasized how the works presented in the exhibition represented their lived experience as women with a “feminist attitude.”

112 The Casa del Lago, located in the Bosques de Chapultepec neighborhood in Mexico City, was formally established as the cultural center of the UNAM in 1959. The building housing the institution, however, dated back to the pre-revolutionary era. For a detailed history of the institution, see Clementina Díaz y de Ovando, Casa del Lago: Un siglo de historia (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2001).
113 See Mayer, Rosa chillante, 23.
For the show, Mayer produced a mixed-media installation, *A veces me espantan mis fantasías (Sometimes My Fantasies Frighten Me)* (fig. 1.23). In this work, positioned at the entrance of the exhibition, the artist juxtaposed photographic representations, drawn figures, text, and cowrie shells in a canvas, hiding these elements behind a patterned curtain. Visitors actively pulled apart the curtain to reveal two close-up images of male and female genitals, prominently positioned in the upper region of the work. The artist covered these photographic reproductions with a thin layer of translucent plastic, stretching this material into an oval shape; the bottom edge of the oval appears to be weighed down by tightly woven knots of plastic that protrude from the flat surface of the canvas. In the lower region of the installation, the artist included a torn photographic representation, a face of a woman with cowrie shells that hover above her head like a crown. The arrangement of shells echoes the textured, crescent-shaped section of the canvas that radiates from the woman’s head, vaguely resembling the halos of religious art. In the lower-right corner of the canvas, Mayer included a handwritten statement: “A veces me espantan mis propios sentimientos, mis fantasías (Sometimes my own feelings and fantasies frighten me).” Mayer employed these visual elements to prominently display – and reveal – her sexual thoughts to viewers. Her installation underscores her subjective, hidden sexual desires, rendering her artistic production into a visual form of autobiography; the different materials she employs suggest the fractured and disjoined nature of her thoughts. Hiding the images and text behind a curtain, the artist also implicated audience members, forcing them to witness her exploration of female sexuality.

In this project, Mayer avoided presenting the female body as the idealized object of men’s desires. Indeed, the artist prominently positioned both male and female genitals in the piece, dismissing an understanding of women’s bodies as more naturally aesthetic. Moreover,
she presented sexual body parts in a straightforward manner, employing photographic close-ups to depict human genitals in a way that differs from traditional artistic representations. Thus, even though the installation invokes famous works of art such as Gustave Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*, Mayer deliberately transforms the artistic tradition of the female nude (fig. 1.24).

Instead of establishing the female body alone as a sexualized entity, Mayer’s installation suggests the ways in which both male and female bodies are sexed bodies, a more egalitarian understanding of sexual difference.

In a written statement, Mayer highlighted the sexual themes explored by this work:

> At the time, my work referred to sexuality, which was the subject that most interested me, without a doubt. You could find phalluses and vaginas everywhere, which scandalized a great many people, including my parents. Now I look at these works and find them endearing. They are minor compared to the works we see now, but at the moment, they were extremely hard-hitting.

The artist emphasized the shocking nature of the representations by discussing the reactions from family members. According to Mayer, both of her parents called her the night before the exhibition opening, worrying about the possibility of a scandal. In particular, the artist recalled they were worried about her brother losing his job.

In her interpretation of the work, Barbosa Sánchez also emphasized the sexually provocative nature of the representations. In her view, Mayer’s piece challenged prevailing understandings of female chastity in Mexican society. Moreover, for this scholar, the exhibition represented the first time artists in the country had produced examples of “vaginal art.”

Presumably, the inclusion of sexual subject matter positioned the work as a form of rebellion.

117 See Barbosa Sánchez, 80.
against social norms in Mexico. But Mayer’s installation was also transgressive in its relation to canonical representations of women in modern Mexican art. “Collage íntimo,” organized a few years after the MAM exhibition, represented a visual response to institutional art historical narratives. More specifically, Mayer’s work challenged the vision of femininity constructed through the images of the Mexican muralists.

The specific pieces by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the exhibition “La mujer como creadora y tema del arte,” exemplified the prominent position occupied by these three artists in twentieth-century Mexican art. As noted by Robin Adèle Greeley, art historical accounts emphasize how the model of mexicanidad developed by these artists became the dominant visual paradigm in modern Mexican art, a view reinforced by the artists themselves. In reality, the imagery deployed by the muralists was only one part of the extensive debates surrounding modernity in post-revolutionary Mexico. As noted by Adriana Zavala, the images produced by the Mexican Muralists were part of a larger attempt to define the post-revolutionary woman of Mexican society, an ideal that sought to incorporate the country’s indigenous population into the body politic through images of mestiza. In her analysis, the images of the Muralists were part

118See Robin Adèle Greeley, “Painting Mexican Identities: Nationalism and Gender in the Work of María Izquierdo,”* Oxford Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 53–71; Greeley, “Muralism and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920-1970.” In her discussion, Greeley also considered the counterargument that described the Mexican Muralists as a reactionary force in Mexico. This negative interpretation of the muralists emphasized how the three artists channeled popular demands in their artistic representations, serving the interests of the post-revolutionary regime. She exemplified these views with the writings of artist Cuevas and anthropologist Roger Bartra. In addition, art historians have repeatedly noted the differences – as well as the intense animosity – that existed between the three representatives of Mexican Muralism. As explained by Alejandro Anreus, each of these artists employed visual representations that related to their allegiance to different ideologies throughout their careers. In his view, “Orozco, from an initial identification with anarchosyndicalism, shifted to a belief in anarchist individualism whose critical reading of social conflict, his vía negativa, was grounded in his disillusionment with the failed Mexican Revolution… Rivera’s ultra-leftist Marxist period was also that of his most innovative mural work, from the late 1920s to the end of the 1930s… in Siqueiros’ work we find a disconnected between bold formal experimentation through the 1930s and a politics dependent on a Leninist-Stalinist content provided by the PCM.” Alejandro Anreus, “Los Tres Grandes: Ideologies and Styles,” in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, 52. For purposes of this study, I emphasize the larger similarities between los tres grandes, relating their work to Mayer’s artistic production.
of a more complex process in which different social subjects aimed to define the “modern” and “traditional” in post-revolutionary Mexico. ¹¹⁹

Still, even though the works produced by the Mexican Muralists were part of larger network of visual culture, these images acquired significant influence through government and institutional efforts. The representations of women in their body of work, therefore, occupied an influential position in the Mexican art world, and histories of artistic production in the country. Even in the 1970s, the imagery of the muralists represented a powerful model that artists of Mayer’s generation had to confront through their own artistic production.

The representative works of the Mexican Muralist movement included several examples of women cast as selfless, nurturing individuals for heroes of the revolution. Rivera’s massive mural cycle for the Autonomous University of Chapingo, exemplified this larger trend within the work of los tres grandes. In La muerte del campesino (Death of a Peasant Soldier), Rivera depicted the consequences of revolutionary warfare (fig. 1.2). In the image, suffering women surround the soldiers of the revolution. As described by Celeste Donovan, in this mural program, the artist “bestowed the tragic honor in sacrifice upon the active, heroic men; the subsequent pain of the country was expressed by the passive female body.”¹²⁰

Rivera further suggested the dissimilar roles men and women had played in the revolution in other mural projects. In the images he completed for the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca, he presented the military leaders of Mexico’s past, including figures such as José María Morelos (fig. 1.26). In one of the arches of the building, Rivera presented two figures, resting next to a bundle of maize emblazoned with the beginning date of the revolution: 1910. On the right, Rivera presented Emiliano Zapata, accompanied by a banner decorated with

¹¹⁹ See Zavala, Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition, 4.
flowers and spelling out his rallying cry: *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Liberty). In contrast, the artist presented an anonymous, female figure on the left, holding not a gun but a flower bouquet. Earlier representations of women in Mexico, such as José Guadalupe Posada’s broadsheets of the nineteenth century, presented *soldaderas* bearing arms. In contrast, in the celebrated images of the muralists, women contributed to the revolution by aiding the heroic, and male, military figures.

The selfless nature of Mexican women portrayed in the work of Rivera is more explicitly depicted in the murals of Orozco. In the works he completed for the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School, ENP), Orozco presented a vision of the Mexican Revolution that was deeply divided along gendered lines. The artist alluded to the horrors of war in *The Trench*, depicting a group of male bodies in the battle setting of the revolution (fig. 1.27). In other parts of his mural program, the artist presented the male *revolucionarios*, closely followed by a woman carrying a child in her *rebozo* or shawl (fig. 1.28). In *Workers*, two female figures observe the departing men; a lone, female figure on the right side of the mural literally offers her body as support for a male worker (fig. 1.29). The artist would later employ these images in later works, such as *Las soldaderas* of 1929, further establishing the selfless quality of women throughout the revolutionary war (fig. 1.30).

These images by Orozco, widely reproduced in post-revolutionary Mexico, would become the iconic representation of the revolution itself. His work illustrated the ways in which male soldiers, who perished in ever more dramatic numbers than Mexican women did during the period, fought the majority of the armed battles of the revolution. The images produced by Orozco suggest that women of the revolution stood by as silent observers, reacting to the horrors of the armed struggle from the sidelines. In *La bandera* (*The Flag*), a single female figure stands
to the side as a group of exhausted revolucionarios struggles to carry a flag, presumably heading off to battle (fig. 1.31).

These depictions of selfless women by Orozco were all the more dramatic when viewed in relation to other works produced by the artist. In Catharsis, created for the Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes, or Palace of Fine Arts, the artist produced imagery that suggests the savage nature of human society as a whole, leading to destruction and ruin. On the left side of the mural, Orozco presents a woman wearing bright, distinctive make-up, seemingly laughing at the violence that surrounds her. In the foreground, the artist presented the nude body of another woman, staring with empty eyes at the viewer, wearing nothing but gaudy rings on her fingers and a necklace that almost appears to strangle her (fig. 1.32). The necklace highlights the rest of her nude body, with the artist portraying an ample bosom and a lower body underscored with sickly shades of green. In short, Orozco’s artistic production conveys the opposing roles available for women in Mexican society: selfless, supportive martyrs or the materialistic harlots who enjoy the destruction of civilization itself.\(^{121}\)

This small sample of works by the Mexican Muralists bears witness to the ways in which the artwork of the post-revolutionary era naturalized gender roles. The imagery produced by the muralists, with their multiple references to pre-Columbian cultures of the past, celebrated the indigenous heritage of the country’s rural population, legitimizing the marginalized communities of the country. Despite these innovations, the iconography produced by the Mexican Muralists

\(^{121}\) Mary K. Coffey has discussed the way in which Orozco’s Catharsis reinforced the traditional archetypes of women present in Western culture, invoking the “Madonna/whore” dichotomy in her analysis of the mural. However, she emphasized how a more illuminating discussion of the work would also consider how the mural relates to the processes of industrialization of the post-revolutionary era, revealing the artist’s complex relationship to technology and modernization. Still, given my focus on the ways in which the imagery of the muralists aided in the establishment of an idealized femininity in Mexico, it remains important to highlight the dichotomous representation of women in Orozco’s work. See Mary K. Coffey, “Angels and Prostitutes: José Clemente Orozco’s Catharsis and the Politics of Female Allegory in 1930s Mexico,” CR: The New Centennial Review 4, no. 2 (2004): 185–217, doi:10.1353/ncr.2005.0002.
repeatedly echoed earlier, pre-revolutionary ideals of Mexican femininity, going as far back as the idealized vision of feminine virtue within academic art. Repeatedly, the representations of women in the work of the muralists celebrated the vision of *abnegación* described by Olcott.

Admittedly, not all visions of women in the work of the muralists – which consisted of a vast number of works, in a wide variety of mediums over the span of several decades – consisted of images of *abnegación*. Rivera’s frescoes for the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) of 1924, for instance, contained images of active *soldaderas* joining in the armed struggle of the revolution (fig. 1.33). In addition, the artist prominently presented one of the new social roles available to women in the post-revolutionary period: the rural teacher (fig. 1.34). As noted by David Craven, this image “was one of the first, perhaps the first, in Mexican art history to represent women in a progressive manner on the front lines of conflict.”

In this mural, Rivera presented the individual women who followed the government’s ambitious educational agenda by venturing into rural locales, despite the resistance from parents, local officials, and other members of society, including the Catholic Church. This particular image by Rivera is even more striking considering actual instances of violence faced by rural teachers in the reconstruction era, particularly women. Olcott has described the violent murders of several rural schoolteachers during the reconstruction era, including the public assassination of 19-year-old María Mora.

Moreover, the works by the muralists were not the only representations of femininity circulating in post-revolutionary Mexico. Women artists during this period, in fact, repeatedly created representations that challenged the visions of femininity prevalent in the work of the

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Mexican Muralists. Greeley, for instance, has explored how the work of María Izquierdo represented a direct challenge against the vision of *mexicanidad* produced by the Mexican Muralists.\textsuperscript{124} Similarly, Dina Comisarenc Mirkin explored the works produced by artists such as Frida Kahlo, Isabel Villaseñor, and Aurora Reyes, asserting that the iconography of these artists challenged the models of female representation established by the influential muralists.\textsuperscript{125}

Still, the works produced by women artists did not receive the financial support and institutional endorsement enjoyed by the Mexican Muralists. The artistic production of women artists was not included in official, government buildings such as the Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes, for instance. Moreover, the muralists actively stifled the efforts of women artists to participate in the mural movement. In 1945, for instance, Izquierdo received a commission to decorate a public building from the government, but Rivera and Siqueiros used their influence to block the project.\textsuperscript{126}

Through institutional and individual forms of discrimination, the images produced by women artists did not become the canonical representations of women in Mexican art history. The images of the muralists continued playing a role in discussions of the “proper” role for women in 1970s Mexico. The prominence of images of passive femininity in the MAM show reveals the transgressive nature of Mayer’s depictions of female sexuality. By giving visual form to her sexual fantasies, contemporary women artists such as Mayer resisted the still powerful vision of docile Mexican femininity that had flourished in the visual arts of the country for decades. Instead, Mayer asserted the importance of women’s desire, forcing audience members to pull back the curtain of her installation and confront images of a sexual desire that

\textsuperscript{124} See Greeley, “Painting Mexican Identities.”

\textsuperscript{125} See Dina Comisarenc Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable: Mexican Female Artists’ Iconography of the 1930s and Early 1940s,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 29, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 21–32.

\textsuperscript{126} See Greeley, “Painting Mexican Identities,” 55.
remained hidden in the celebrated works of the muralists. Her work thus directly challenged the stereotyped representations of passive femininity, thereby challenging art historical accounts that only considered women as the represented subject matter in works of art, but not as artists.

In Mayer’s work, representations of the female body are not in service of the “victorious” Mexican Revolution, or part of a larger narrative of male figures within the work. In this manner, Mayer presented an image of women’s sexuality that directly contrasted the work of the muralists. The image countered the vision of abnegación constructed by Rivera’s female figures, carrying flowers for the heroes of the Mexican Revolution. In addition, the piece challenged the negative view of female sexuality in prominent murals such as Catharsis. In this mural, Orozco juxtaposed the nude female body with images of military carnage and destruction, a combination that suggests the inherent danger of women’s sexuality and desire.

Mayer’s project thus served as the visual corollary to the forms of cultural production considered by Jean Franco in her analysis of Mexican literature. In her text, Plotting Women, she considered how women in a wide span of history – from the colonial era to the contemporary, post-Tlatelolco period – explored their social position as women through their writing, challenging social norms and expectations. According to Franco, these women engaged in “struggles for interpretative power, struggles waged not on the high plane of theory but very often at the margins of canonical genres.”127 In a similar manner, Mayer employed installations to challenge the large-scale artistic production of the Mexican Muralists. Through her work, the artist expanded the repertoire of representations in Mexican art, employing traditional craft materials and collage techniques to create representations that were markedly different from the canonical production of the muralists.

127 Franco, Plotting Women, xi.
Mayer’s installation also contested the forms of representation developed in fine art photography in Mexico. *La buena fama durmiendo* (*The Good Reputation Sleeping*), a photograph by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, exemplifies the ways in which the female body served as a means to represent *mexicanidad* (fig. 1.35). In his discussion of Mexican photography, Roberto Tejada considered how this photograph was “arguably one of the most celebrated and emblematic images” of Álvarez Bravo, viewing it as example of the “dialectic of chastity, beckoning, menace, conquest, and violation…. in perfect keeping with the canonical masculine-centered perspective of French Surrealism.” Through the insertion of cacti and an indigenous blanket, the image also alluded to the forms of *mexicanidad* depicted in the visual arts of the post-revolutionary period.

By inserting photographic images of both male and female genitals in her work, Mayer produced an image that directly countered images such as *La buena fama durmiendo*. In Álvarez Bravo’s photograph, the presentation of the nude female body positions the viewer as a *voyeur*; the title of the photograph emphasizes the slumber of the depicted woman, who remains unaware of the viewer’s gaze. Viewers therefore can revel in the visual pleasure offered by the

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130 In a foundational article originally published in 1975, Laura Mulvey presented an analysis of Hollywood cinema that illuminates our understanding of images such as *La buena fama durmiendo*. In her article, Mulvey developed a psychoanalytic reading of film representations that emphasized how male and female bodies are presented in a way that heightens sexual difference. Male bodies are presented as active agents in the world of the film, with the images from the camera representing the gaze of the viewer. In contrast, female bodies are presented in a way that connotes “to-be-looked-at-ness,” transforming female bodies into passive objects that are presented in the film for the visual pleasure – or scopophilia – of the spectator. Thus, according to Mulvey, the different decisions of the director repeatedly transform the female body in the passive object enjoyed by the “male gaze” of the spectator. Even though Mulvey focuses on the images of Hollywood cinema, the portrayal of a presumably unconscious
photograph. In contrast, Mayer’s installation includes a female face that directly looks out towards the viewer. Even though audience members pull back a curtain to reveal disembodied male and female genitals, this face looks out towards the viewer precludes any possibilities for voyeuristic pleasure. The work made viewers painfully aware of their examining gaze, a process that challenges the “woman as object” tradition in the visual arts.

Mayer’s installation, which gives visual form to sexual fantasies and dreams, directly links the artist to the larger tradition of women Surrealist artists in Mexico. Indeed, as a student at the ENAP, Mayer completed a photography course with Kati Horna, a prominent figure in the Surrealist milieu that emerged in Mexico in the 1940s. Horna developed connections with other women Surrealist artists, establishing a close relationship with Carrington and Varo in particular. As a former student of Horna, Mayer employed photography to explore the subject matter traditionally associated with Surrealism: sexual desire, dreams, and terror. Like other Surrealist artists, Mayer highlights the act of looking, and she juxtaposes different everyday objects – such as the cowrie shells and translucent plastic – to suggest the irrationality of dreams. Mayer’s inclusion of a female face that challenges the gaze of the viewer brings to mind Whitney Chadwick’s discussion of women artists within the Surrealist movement. According to Chadwick, women artists within Surrealism aimed to employ the techniques and strategies of the Surrealists for their own goals, producing images of female sexuality and desire in ways that


131 The Hungarian-born photographer is most remembered through the images she produced of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, though she settled in Mexico in 1939. In Mexico, she continued her photographic work, producing images that allude to the Surrealist movement. Several of her photographs, for instance, feature strange juxtapositions of human nudes with everyday objects, including the bodies and heads of dolls. For a detailed analysis of her artistic production see Alicia Sánchez Mejorada, “El Legado de Kati Horna,” Artes de México, no. 56 (2001): 2–9; Kati Horna (Puebla: Museo Amparo, 2013).

132 For a discussion of the relationship between these three Surrealist artists, see Stefan van Raay, Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna (London: Lund Humphries, 2010).

differed from their male colleagues. Mayer, producing an image that challenges the voyeuristic gaze encouraged by photographs such as *La buena fama durmiendo*, contributed to this tradition of women artists that negotiated the sexism of the Surrealist movement through their artwork.

In other pieces Mayer produced for the exhibition, she further adapted the conventions of Surrealist art to create images that differed from the representations of sexual desire produced by male artists. In *Pareja (Couple)*, she included numerous images of male and female genitals, also including a small image of a couple in the center of the artwork (fig. 1.36). In this work, the artist deliberately shrouded the images of disembodied genitals. The central image of an older couple is half-covered by the same translucent material that covers the photographic images of genitals. Mayer’s installation thus prompts viewers to consider the ways they cover and uncover their own bodies from the views of others, perhaps even alluding to the ways in which the older man and woman only reveal their bodies to each other. The inclusion of shrouded genitals suggests a reciprocal sexual process, allowing Mayer to avoid images of sexuality in which only the female body is fragmented, distorted, or exploited. Her repeated inclusion of male body parts, in particular, counters infamous representations such as René Magritte’s *Le Viol (The Rape)*, or the numerous photographs of dolls developed by Hans Bellmer (figs. 1.37-1.38). In this manner, Mayer’s work represents a negotiation of the artistic tropes of Surrealism, an artistic exercise that reimagines the relations between male and female bodies.

Mayer’s projects for “Collage íntimo” presented images of sexual desire that employed both images of male and female bodies, thereby countering the forms of sexual representation

134 See ibid.
repeatedly employed by Surrealist artists, both in Mexico and abroad. Nevertheless, the pieces also functioned as a form of translocal artistic dialogue with contemporary feminist artists. Producing installations that explored female sexuality, the artist paralleled the artistic experimentation encouraged by artists such as Chicago and her collaborators in California. Mayer thus employed a strategy that would become characteristic of her entire oeuvre, producing works that related to Mexican society and art history, even while establishing a visual dialogue with feminist artists of the United States. The inclusion of large-scale images of genitalia, for instance, brings to mind the works completed by Wilding in the early 1970s, including watercolors such as Peach Cunt or Womb (figs. 1.39-1.40).

Mayer’s inclusion of genitals in her work, however, does not imply that artists in Mexico City and Los Angeles explored gender difference in the same manner. In a discussion of Wilding’s work, Amelia Jones emphasized how works such as Peach Cunt and Womb “break down the conventional understanding of woman-as-image, passive and controlled by vision (a ‘male’ or masculine/patriarchal ‘gaze’),”136 an interpretation that equally applies to Mayer’s work. Jones further commented how the representations of a “fleshy” female body served as a direct challenge against the forms of art criticism and theory developed by Clement Greenberg in the United States.137 Wilding’s work thus represented an affront to the artistic styles achieving success in the art world of the United States.

In contrast, Mayer’s work functioned as a different form of protest. Even without referring to Mexican national identity, Mayer’s piece challenged an artistic tradition that repeatedly related the female nude to a pure, “authentic” form of mexicanidad. Rather than assuming a universal patriarchal system that informs the efforts of Mayer and these artists of the

137 See ibid.
United States, a translocal analysis of Mayer’s work prompts us to consider the different histories and artistic traditions that informed the resulting work of art. Mayer produced an image of sexuality that moved away from the form of *mexicanidad* produced by the muralists and photographers such as Álvarez Bravo. Reading the specific discourses activated by Mayer’s artistic efforts allows for an interpretation that avoids describing Mayer’s artwork as a simple “transplantation” of feminist art from the United States.

“Lo Normal”

After her experiences in “Collage íntimo,” Mayer further strived to develop artistic projects that related to her feminist activism and interests. The artist participated in an exhibition entitled “Lo normal,” which opened in September 11, 1978 (fig. 1.41). The exhibition’s invitation includes a list of the participating women artists, as well as “Felices los normales,” a poem by Cuban writer Roberto Fernández Retamar (fig. 1.42). Describing the show years later, Mayer emphasized how the exhibition served as an example of strong, feminist art, even if several of the artists included in the show did not participate in the Mexican feminist movement.

For this show, Mayer produced ten postcards with photographic images and text (figs. 1.43-1.44). The images were repurposed photographs of the artist herself, produced by Lerma. The two artists had photographed each other and produced photographic contact sheets for the

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139 See Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 23.
photography course Horna taught at the ENAP. In these postcards, Mayer juxtaposed the photographs of herself with a handwritten statement “Quiero hacer el amor (I want to make love).” The artist then completed the phrase with ten different scenarios, including phrases such as “con una mujer (with a woman),” “con un violador (with a rapist),” “con mi padre (with my father),” and “en un teatro lleno (in a crowded theater).” Mayer stamped these different scenarios into the postcards, employing capital letters. The cards also included detailed instructions that explained how viewers were intended to proceed: “Read the question carefully, and depending on your reaction, trace a circle around the most adequate facial expression. Add the result of the ten postcards, and then subtract your date of birth (day). If your score is less than 10 points, CONGRATULATIONS!! YOU ARE NORMAL.” With these nonsensical instructions, Mayer referenced the psychological tests included in women’s magazines; she later described the project as a deliberate form of satire.

Through this project, Mayer continued her exploration of desire and the unconscious, employing different visual elements to suggest the social forces contemporary women face as they try to define and understand their sexuality. In these postcards, the artist employed handwritten text, suggesting the forms of writing found in a personal journal; the numerous jotted lines that divide the different photographs of the artist also suggest the scribbles found in a diary. In each card, she completed the opening handwritten statement that proudly proclaims sexual desire with a blunt statement stamped on with bright red capital letters. The style of these stamped statements resembles the bureaucratic proclamations and notices found in personal identifications and other government documents, a jarring intrusion on the personal confession

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141 Mayer in Barbosa Sánchez, 84.
written by the artist. With this juxtaposition, Mayer visually represents the tension between the personal desires of women and the impositions of society. The stamped statements in each of the postcards transform her desire to have a sexual encounter into a form of pathology, the artist thereby suggesting the ways in which social institutions constantly and obsessively remind women what kinds of desires are dangerous and abnormal, a form of coercion that routinely limits women’s sexuality.

By asking viewers to select the facial expressions that best matched their own psychological reactions to the statements, Mayer also played with the notion of self-surveillance and control. Her project prompted audience members to question the social construction of “normalcy” as a whole. More specifically, Mayer’s work highlighted the processes through which audience members voluntarily employed their leisure time to surveil their own sexuality. Mayer’s critique of women’s magazine brings to mind Arjun Appadurai’s assertion that “consumption in the contemporary world is often a form of drudgery, part of the capitalist civilizing process. Nevertheless, where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency. Freedom, on the other hand, is a rather more elusive commodity.”

The artist thus pointed to the limits of freedom imposed by capitalist society through “women’s media,” presumably a mass media outlet that champions the choices of women in society.

In this exploration of the ways in which mass media outlets affect the interpretation of lived experiences, Mayer paralleled the artistic practice of los grupos. In particular, her work

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143 Mayer’s critique of contemporary 1970s women’s magazine had an additional local dimension, as the post-revolutionary period was characterized by the creation of multiple women’s journals and magazines that contributed towards feminist activity. A prominent example of these publications was the magazine *Mujer*, founded by María Ríos Cárdenas in 1926. This periodical “publicized the achievements of Mexican women in photography, journalism, the law, and economics. In addition, *Mujer* publicized the efforts of individuals and feminist organizations in Mexico in the campaign to reform the civil code, to achieve world peace through arbitration of international disputes, and to promote child welfare through day-care centers (*salas cunas*) and juvenile courts.” Macías, *Against All Odds*, 117.
related to the artistic interventions in mass media publications developed by No Grupo. This collective engaged in dark humor to highlight the ways in which audiences relied on the representations circulating in mass media outlets to understand political and social problems. In 1978, for instance, the group organized *Secuestro plástico (Artistic Kidnapping)*, a project that relied on the collaboration of Gunther Gerzso. As part of the project, No Grupo distributed a communiqué with photos of the artist, who had been “kidnapped” (fig. 1.45). The document included a message from Gerzso, describing his state of health and a sentimental message for his wife. *Secuestro plástico* alluded to the series of political disappearances in Mexico throughout the 1970s, emphasizing the ways in which viewers learned about these events from newspapers and other mass media outlets. In this manner, No Grupo engaged in an artistic exploration that resonated with the concerns of theorists such as Acha and Canclini. By staging an “aesthetic kidnapping,” No Grupo highlighted the systems that produced knowledge and information in Mexican society, prompting audience members to consider the ways in which they processed the messages contained in everyday newspaper and television programs.

Similarly, Mayer’s project also considered the messages deployed by mass media publications. Her project, however, unlike the artistic exercises of No Grupo, directly alluded to women’s experiences, as only “women’s magazines” included the psychological tests parodied by her postcards. By parodying women’s magazines in 1970s Mexico, Mayer activated historical discourses surrounding the construction of the modern woman in post-revolutionary Mexico. In a larger discussion of the development of modernity in Mexico, Gabara considered the specific role played by photography and mass media. In her view, “photo essays were an integral part of a larger process or organizing representation following the Revolution, which included vast educational reforms from the elementary to the university level and the

144 See *The Age of Discrepancies*, 229.
development of mass media from commercial magazines to cinema.145 In this period, mass media outlets presented the new, Mexican modern woman, enjoying the benefits of new technologies, such as the automobile, that transformed daily life. Through these images, the population could make sense of the concept of modern citizenship, incorporating women into the modern Mexican nation. Photo essays thus illustrated the modern Mexican woman, navigating the urban spaces of Mexico City, freely walking into an automobile and enjoying the benefits of modern technologies.146 Mass media outlets also visually represented the “dangerous” new types of modern women in Mexican society, such as the non-gender conforming marimachas who sported masculine haircuts, smoked cigars, worked outside the home, and stayed out late.147

For Gabara, these photo essays related to a collective anxiety around the proper role for women in post-revolutionary Mexico, a tension also related to the racial divisions in the country. In particular, she considered the La India Bonita contest, or the “Beautiful Indian” pageant in El Universal, a prominent Mexico City newspaper of the 1920s.148 By aiming to find examples of a beautiful Indian woman, this mass media outlet incorporated the country’s indigenous populations into the modern project of the post-revolutionary state. As described by Gabara, the view that women’s identity was more “malleable,” and domestic, positioned the female body as the site in which tensions around racial and national identity could be resolved.149 In a discussion of the same pageant, Zavala noted how these efforts to depict a traditional form of indigenous femininity were part of the reconstruction process of the early twentieth-century. In

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145 Gabara, Errant Modernism, 148.
146 See Ibid., 171-177.
147 See ibid., 157–58.
148 See ibid., 177–86.
149 The contest was originally planned in relation to other cultural celebrations for the centenary of Mexico independence. The jurors in the contest consisted of “anthropologist Manuel Gamio, indigenist artist Jorge Enciso, writer Aurelio González Carrasco, theater critic Carlos M. Ortega, and film critic Rafael Pérez Taylor. This esteemed group of men chose María Bibiania uribe from San Andrés Tenango, Puebla.” Ibid., 178.
In her view, “the contest served ultimately to re-inscribe Mexico’s long-standing patriarchal social and sexual politics.”¹⁵⁰

Mayer’s project, referencing women’s magazines of the 1970s, represented an extension of these earlier debates in Mexican visual culture. Emphasizing “normalcy” in her photography project, Mayer’s project relates to the ongoing anxieties surrounding modern women in Mexican society. The statements she included in the postcards – including examples such as wanting to make love “to a woman” – echoed the earlier fascination with “marimachas” and other women that were viewed as dangerous in the post-revolutionary period.

While the specific history of images of women in Mexico informed the possible interpretations of Mayer’s postcards, the project also paralleled forms of mass media critique prevalent in feminist art of the United States. In her exploration of the connections between the body and psychological well-being, Mayer echoed the strategies pursued by feminist artists of the West Coast. Her focus on the forms of reassurance offered by women’s magazines resembled the explorations of Lacy, Droi Atlantis, Kan Lester, and Nancy Youdelman in the show, “I tried everything” from 1972.¹⁵¹ The exhibition’s poster features typical magazine ads, featuring photographs of various female models accompanied by alluring promises for women to “increase your bosom!” with products that have “amazing results!” (fig. 1.46). For this project, Youdelman wrote a letter to one of the companies, requesting for their products designed to enlarge her breasts (fig. 1.47). Youdelman exhaustively documented her use of the product,

¹⁵¹ Laura Meyer, “A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment,” in A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment, ed. Laura Meyer (Fresno, California: Press at California State University, Fresno, 2009), 14. In her discussion of the exhibition, Meyer related the artistic activities of these artists to earlier forms of artistic practices innovated by Joseph Kosuth, Dan Graham, Dennis Huebler, and Hans Haacke. In her view, the I Tried Everything project more closely resembled Haacke’s Manhattan Real Estate Holdings of 1971.
photographing herself and writing descriptions of the bodily changes she perceived (figs. 1.48-1.50).

Like Mayer, these four artists provided a pointed critique of the ways mass media outlets promised happiness and fulfilment. Youdelman’s hand-scribbled note, suggests an overwhelming “happiness” that is just within reach. In the written statements that accompanied the documentary photographs, Youdelman noted a mixture of emotions. On the third day, for instance, she noted: “It’s working! Even though it is very slight I’m really happy.” Her statements the next day, however, contrasted with the former elation: “I’m really afraid that it really will work and I’m afraid that it won’t work.” Mayer, working in Mexico later in the same decade, invoked the same promises circulating in mass media with her postcards, engaging in a similar form of feminist critique. Working within the artistic circuits of contemporary Mexico, Mayer developed a project that resonated with a larger conglomeration of feminist artists interested in the messages of consumer culture in a wide variety of geographic settings.

“Salón 77-78 Nuevas Tendencias”

During this period, Mayer also completed her best-known project: *El tendedero (The Clothesline).* She planned the project for the exhibition “Salón 77-78 Nuevas Tendencias,” held at the MAM in 1978, which also featured the contributions of Lara and Weiss. In this piece, Mayer distributed a number of paper postcards emblazoned with the phrase, “Como mujer lo que más odio de la ciudad es (As a woman, what I most about the city is),” asking different women to complete the sentence (fig. 1.51). Most of the responses focused on street harassment,

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152 This particular piece was the one project by Mayer selected for the “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” exhibition, serving as the sole example of feminist art in Mexico.

and other forms of sexual violence. Mayer collected the different postcards, presenting them in the museum’s exhibition space in a pink-colored clothesline (figs. 1.52-1.54). In this manner, she alluded to traditional, domestic forms of labor, alluding to women’s traditional care-taking role in Mexican society. Repeatedly, the artist has noted how museum visitors took it upon themselves to take the paper postcards and include additional responses. Mayer thus gave visual form to one of the main issues emphasized by Mexican feminist organizations of the 1970s: sexual harassment and violence.\footnote{For a discussion of the central position occupied by sexual violence within the Mexican feminist movement, see Eli Bartra, “Mujeres y política en México: Aborto, violación y mujeres golpeadas,” Política y Cultura, no. 1 (September 1992): 23–34.}

In later descriptions of the piece, Mayer emphasized how the project functioned as a social intervention, a project developed within the visual arts to understand the individual experiences of women in the urban spaces of Mexico City. In her view, the installation produced for the MAM’s exhibition space was of less importance than the social relationships she had activated and explored through her efforts: “The artwork is not the clothesline itself, but the interaction that occurs when you request responses and what happens when the public gets to read them.”\footnote{Mónica Mayer, “El Tendedero de La Ibero,” De Archivos y Redes: Un Proyecto Artístico Sobre La Integración y Reactivación de Archivos, December 16, 2015, http://www.pintomiraya.com/redes/archivo-pmr/el-tendedero/item/206-el-tendedero-de-la-ibero.html.} Scholars such as Barbosa Sánchez have echoed this assessment by the artist, describing the piece as a sociological form of art.\footnote{See Barbosa Sánchez, 81.} In particular, the scholar described the reactions by Mexican art critic, Rita Eder, who viewed the work as an effective tool to understand repressive social conditions.\footnote{See ibid.} Similarly, in her interpretation of the work, Giunta emphasized the points of connection between \textit{El tendedero} and other artists interested in sociological examinations of gender. In particular, she noted how the work resembled the efforts of Teresa Burga, “who collaborated with the psychologist Marie-France Cathelat between 1980
and 1981 to create “Perfil de la mujer peruana” (Profile of the Peruvian Woman,” a sociological study about women’s condition.”¹⁵⁸

While describing *El tendedero* as a form of sociological art highlights several features of the project, other aspects of this work remain important. *El tendedero* exemplified Mayer’s ability to negotiate different artistic models, incorporating elements from both a local and translocal artistic circuit. The piece related to the forms of urban, public art developed by *los grupos* throughout the 1970s, even as Mayer also deliberately referenced artistic projects developed by feminist artists of the United States.

Echoing the strategies of Pentágono, Mayer’s installation underscored the relationship between the artist and larger social structures. Her efforts prompted women to consider the position they occupied in Mexican society, including her original respondents, and audience members at the MAM. Like Proceso Pentágono, Mayer employed institutional spaces to bombard viewers with information, giving visual form to experiences that mass media outlets failed to represent. The material objects within the installation highlighted the social conditions that allowed for violence and other forms of harassment to permeate everyday life.

Unlike the efforts of Proceso Pentágono, however, Mayer did not emphasize the role of the state, or police brutality. Instead, she focused on more ubiquitous, seemingly less threatening forms of violence. Mayer’s piece served as a visual record of the numerous forms of sexual harassment that remained unnoted in mass media outlets, as emphasized by feminist Mexican activists of the time. In addition, by alluding to the clotheslines prevalent in Mexico City’s housing projects, Mayer’s project emphasized the spaces in which the city’s women experienced

these forms of harassment. In this manner, through her project, the artist paralleled the earlier projects of the collective Tepito Arte Acá, highlighting the marginalized, frequently ignored spaces of the urban megalopolis. Mayer, however, did not produce an installation within the public spaces of the city. Instead, her work explored the ways in which women experienced violence throughout the entire city.

Mayer’s *El tendedero* was not the only work in the exhibition that explored the representations of women in the visual arts, as well as the ways in which these images related to the social construction of gender. Lara’s *Ventanas (Windows)*, for instance, presented a mixed-media collage composed of photocopies and pastels; viewers of the work confronted torn images of a woman’s profile, suggesting the fragmentary and inadequate ways in which the visual arts represent women’s identities and subjectivities. The work resembles Mayer’s *A veces me espantan mis fantasías*. Weiss presented two video pieces: *Somos mujeres (We are Women)* and *Mujer-ciudad-mujer (Woman-city-woman)*. As discussed by Giunta, these videos juxtaposed numerous representations of women from different social classes with iconic images of Mexico City’s urban landscape, such as the Torre Latinoamericana (Latin American Tower). Indeed, according to Giunta, the show as a whole “introduced alternative responses to the questions Stellweg had handled in her survey [for Artes Visuales].”

But Mayer’s *El tendedero* was not only a response to the questions proposed by Stellweg; it also served as a response to the forms of feminist art described in the same issues of *Artes Visuales*. As a young artist interested in the different strategies and approaches to feminist art,

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159 For a closer analysis of Lara’s collage, see Giunta, “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975 - 1987.”
Mayer developed an artistic project that paralleled the forms of public feminist art developed by Lacy in California. Throughout the 1970s, Lacy occupied a prominent position in the development of feminist art in the United States, eventually producing a body of work interested in public artistic projects. As a graduate student in psychology at Fresno State College, she initiated several courses and reading groups with her peers, collaborating with Faith Wildling.\textsuperscript{162} When Chicago initiated a feminist art program in Fresno, Lacy became one of the participating students, despite reservations from Chicago. Chicago felt that Lacy’s lack of art training might limit her participation in the program. As described by Susan Irish, Lacy’s previous interests in anti-war movements and other forms of protest allowed her “incorporate activism into art in ways that she might not have had she been an art student initially.”\textsuperscript{163} This effort to relate activism and artistic practice, in fact, would become a prevalent feature of Lacy’s work, establishing the characteristics that Mayer would later confront when she studied at the FSW in Los Angeles. Lacy’s projects of the early 1970s established a model of feminist art focused on issues surrounding women’s bodies and sexual assault.

In 1973, after her completing her studies at CalArts, Lacy moved to Los Angeles. The artist developed a public art project that visually represented multiple incidents of sexual violence in the urban spaces of Los Angeles (fig. 1.55). She began the project, entitled \textit{Three Weeks in May}, on Mother’s Day, employing maps to inform the public of the number of sexual assaults during this time period:

A map that revealed locations of rapes flanked a second one indicating where to find treatment centers, shelters, and organizations working for safe neighborhoods. In Lacy’s daily performance over three weeks, she used a larger stamp with the word “RAPE” and pounded the words in red ink onto the map to show the locations of reported rapes, which totaled ninety after three weeks.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162} See Sharon Irish, \textit{Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 23–24.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{164} See Ibid., 62.
In this manner, Lacy not only informed the public of the crimes occurring in the area, but also provided resources for survivors of sexual assault.

Lacy and her collaborators also emblazoned sidewalks with text and visual representations that also informed audience members of the events identified in the large maps of the project (fig. 1.56). Rather than seeking to create works of art only viewed by fellow feminist artists, she hoped to reach larger audiences: “What good did it do to decry violence inside a gallery when we still faced the same dangers once we left it?”¹⁶⁵ For the artist, the multiple components of the project all related to the desire to enact specific, legal changes in society: “Rather than focus on easily subverted personal narratives, it would focus on political solutions. The performance was made up of many different kinds of activities: installations, speeches by politicians, interviews with hotline activists, self-defense demonstrations, speak-outs, and art performances” (fig. 1.57).¹⁶⁶

Like Lacy, Mayer developed an artistic project that sought to explore the forms of sexual violence experienced by women. But Mayer presented *El tendedero* within the institutional spaces of the MAM. For Lacy, developing projects in non-artistic venues worked as an act of rebellion against an art market that favored male artists. In contrast, Mayer’s work responded to the lack of a commercial art market in Mexico, a condition repeatedly highlighted by her former instructor, Acha. In Acha’s view, the lack of support for contemporary artists in Latin America derived from the ways in which political and economic elites controlled the art world. Even as artists in the United States and Mexico explored a similar theme – sexual violence and harassment – the social structures and artistic contexts of these two different locales affected the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 102.
specific decisions made by feminist artists. Working within the gallery spaces of the MAM, the Mexican artist positioned herself within the forms of artistic experimentation developed by los grupos, developing an artistic proposal that blurred the lines between “public” and “private” venues.

*El tendedero* represents an early negotiation by Mayer, of multiple at times contradictory artistic traditions, all of which she manipulated for an early form of feminist art in late, twentieth-century Mexico. The piece reveals her familiarity and interest in multiple models of artistic activity, serving as a case study of the ways in which a contemporary artist could navigate the interconnected networks of artistic production of the late 1970s.

**Conclusion**

Mayer’s artistic production, even before her later studies at the FSW, developed within a complex network of artistic exchange and interaction. The works she produced before 1978, described as early forms of feminist art in Mexico by scholars, reveal her familiarity with the efforts of los grupos, as well as the early examples of feminist art produced in the West Coast of California. In this manner, Mayer’s work resonated with past and present examples of feminist activism in her home country. Her works highlighted the specific conditions encountered by local, Mexican women, even as she deployed artistic strategies from a transnational network of feminist artists.

Through her representations – produced for the artistic circuits of contemporary Mexico – Mayer challenged the conventions established by the canonical artists of the post-revolutionary period. Following the example of earlier women artists in Mexico, she developed a visual language that contributed to the ongoing discussions of “proper” femininity in Mexico.
Mayer’s interest in the specific model of feminist art developed in California, however, would prompt her decision to complete a longer period of study at the FSW. In the next period of her career, in which she completed graduate studies at the Woman’s Building, she would continue to explore women’s position in society, producing a series of representations that challenged the conventions established by Mexican modern art. Her feminist artistic projects, therefore, not only challenged social expectations, but also questioned the larger history of artistic practice in her home country. As she worked to establish links with other feminist artists outside of Mexico, her work repeatedly alluded to the existing social structures of her local environment, producing works of art that only become legible when considering the multiple artistic and social contexts navigated by the artist.
Chapter 2: MÓNICA MAYER IN CALIFORNIA: NAVIGATING THE ARTISTIC CIRCUITS OF LATE 1970s LOS ANGELES

Throughout her various writings, Mayer has repeatedly referred to the model of feminist art developed in the 1970s in California as a foundational component of her artistic practice. Describing the two-week workshop she completed with Chicago in 1976, for instance, the artist stated that the experience marked the moment in which she became “addicted” to feminist artistic strategies.¹ Mayer then decided to enroll in the longer program of graduate studies at the FSW. After winning a prize from the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (National School of Fine Arts, ENAP) for a work included in the exhibition “Collage íntimo,” the artist was able to begin her studies in 1978.²

During this two-year period in Los Angeles, Mayer confronted several forms of artistic practice that differed from developments in the Mexican art world. As a student at the FSW, Mayer participated in a model of collaborative art that had a specific history, linking the institution to the forms of feminist activism flourishing in the United States throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. While she focused most of her attention on the FSW, she also became familiar with other forms of activism and artistic practice in Los Angeles, learning about the efforts of contemporary Chicana artists, for instance, or taking classes at the Los Angeles Socialist Community School (LASCS). In addition, she completed a master’s thesis that documented her reactions to the FSW, a document later validated by Goddard College.³

In this chapter, I focus on the different artistic and activist contexts Mayer navigated in Los Angeles. This analysis positions Mayer’s work as an example of translocal translation, a

¹ Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis,” 5.
³ Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
form of feminist art that reveals the artist’s commitment to women’s social position in Mexico. While the artist strived to learn the model of feminist art developed by the FSW, her work still related to the forms of artistic production prevalent in her home country of Mexico. Her work during this period serves as a case study of the ways in which artistic ideals flowed between these two countries, with artist such as Mayer working as the mediator between different communities of artistic and activists. These experiences in Los Angeles led the artist to develop artistic projects that explicitly formed connections between different geopolitical contexts, establishing a network of exchange and negotiation with feminist artists and activists from Mexico City and Los Angeles. My examination of this period in Mayer’s career suggests the extent to which her participation in translocal dialogue shaped her subsequent artistic production. Indeed, her experiences during this relatively short period would continue to shape her subsequent artistic projects, particularly when she returned to Mexico City in the 1980s and established new feminist artist collectives in her home country. By examining this period of intense translocal dialogue with feminist artists of Los Angeles, I point towards the important ways in which translocal feminist dialogue facilitated and shaped the forms of artistic feminism that emerged in Mexico throughout the end of the twentieth century.

The Emergence of Feminist Art in West Coast of the United States

As a student at the FSW in the late 1970s, Mayer aligned herself with an artistic institution that endorsed a particular form of feminist art. Rather than focusing on the subject matter explored by artists, the institution emphasized the production methods employed by artists, viewing collaborative practices as essential strategies of feminist art.

The central position of collaborative practices within the FSW derived from the activist context in which this institution emerged. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, various
women’s groups in the United States aimed to transform women’s roles in society. As part of this effort, activists demanded changes in educational institutions, leading to the emergence of women’s studies programs in the United States. In 1970, San Diego State University in California created the first women’s studies program, with other institutions following their example in subsequent years.

As noted by Mari Jo Buhle, early women’s studies programs emerged in close collaboration to other forms of activism, including the Civil Rights movement and student activist efforts of the 1960s. The collective nature of these forms of activism affected the structure of academic courses in the newly emerging field of women’s studies. Sheila Tobias, an academic involved in these processes, has emphasized how courses such as “The Evolution of Female Personality” at Cornell University, “had been forged by a collective, a self-appointed group of thirty staff women, graduate students, and adjunct faculty, most of whom were, like the women whose nature and history and status was designed to explore, on the margins of academe.” The collective nature of course development described by Tobias would become a central component of other women’s studies programs across the United States. Working in the margins of academic institutions, students within women’s studies examined the larger hierarchies that shaped academic knowledge, particularly those related to gender.

These academic changes also affected art history and studio art programs. In an article from the 1970s, Barbara Ehrlrich White considered how women’s activism related to art and art history. In particular, she noted the difficulties in researching women artists, with museums and

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4 For an early history of these broad forms of women’s activism, characterized as “the women’s movement,” see Barbara Sinclair, The Women’s Movement, Political, Socioeconomic, and Psychological Issues (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
galleries collecting few works by women, and the three basic textbooks used in universities in
the United States omitting women artists entirely. In her view, the emergence of women’s
studies was slowly changing the field of art history, leading to a more egalitarian narrative that
considered women’s past contributions to the visual arts.

During this period of intense changes in the academic world, several art instructors,
particularly on the West Coast of the United States, aimed to produce a form of artistic
instruction that followed feminist principles. In 1970, Chicago, a visiting artist at California
State College, Fresno launched an art program specifically for women artists, the direct
predecessor of the FSW. As an artist in the late 1960s, she had already achieved notoriety
through her sculptures, viewed as an example of Minimalism. Despite her success, Chicago
began to reflect on the ways in which her gender had limited her development as an artist, as she
confronted both institutional and interpersonal forms of sexism. In her memoir, for instance, she
described her experiences when she began employing smoke devices for a series of works she
described as “atmospheres.” To learn more about these devices, Chicago worked in a fireworks
company, where she faced constant male harassment, and eventually, sexual assault. These
experiences led her to abandon her work in the “atmospheres” series. By launching a program
for women artists in Fresno, Chicago aimed to confront the numerous challenges faced by these
artists within the art world.

8 Ibid., 343.
11 See Judy Chicago, Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist, Anchor Books (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1977), 58.
12 See ibid., 70.
In this experimental form of artistic instruction, later consolidated as the Feminist Art Program (FAP), students met in an off-campus location, a former community theater. Chicago viewed the physical separation as an integral part of the program, viewing the presence of men in everyday life as a form of intimidation to young women. In her view, the presence of men “reminded the women of society’s tacit and all-pervasive instruction that they should not be too aggressive, so that the men’s egos would not be threatened.” This form of deliberate separation would eventually become representative of feminist artistic practice on the West Coast:

While activists in New York and other major cities focused their efforts on protesting women’s exclusion from art world institutions, Chicago, by contrast, set about creating a new kind of pedagogical institution. Convinced that the art world – and society at large – failed to provide conditions capable of preparing women to compete on an equal footing with men, Chicago determined to discover and create such conditions herself.

As the program’s founder, Chicago encouraged other features that would become representative of feminist art as a whole. Echoing the educational model favored by women’s studies professors, Chicago aimed to transform the traditional – and hierarchical – relationship between students and instructors. She thus resisted the impulse to lecture in her courses, viewing these techniques as a hindrance to the feminist goals of the program. In contrast, Chicago aimed to foster “real interaction” between the students, sparking discussions between students that could continue without her presence.

Chicago would prompt her students to explore the role played by gender and sexual difference in their everyday life. In a class session, for instance, students would share their experiences with male harassment on public streets. This technique paralleled the techniques employed by feminist activists outside the art world. By sharing personal experiences, students

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14 Chicago, Through the Flower, 72.
16 Chicago, Through the Flower, 76.
17 See ibid., 79.
were meant to realize the connections between their subjective, personal experiences and larger social structures. Activists viewed the technique, identified as “consciousness-raising,” or C-R, as a necessary first step in the creation of a broader social movement. As described by Brian Norman: “Social historians now recognize the widespread influence of CR in American society and political theory, and CR was a central tool for fostering women's collectivity during the Second Wave.”

At the FAP, C-R discussions became a component of artistic practice itself. Chicago encouraged her students to employ the insights from these sessions in their artistic production. In her description of student discussions around the issue of male harassment, for instance, Chicago prompted students to “make images of the feelings… There was no media restriction. They were free to paint, draw, write, make a film, or do a performance.” In particular, students favored performance, viewing it as the best medium to convey the feelings associated with lived, bodily experiences.

Participants would eventually identify the experimental forms of artistic production as “feminist art,” allowing for the dissemination of a particular model of artistic practice that could be emulated by other artists. In an early history produced by Faith Wilding, she acknowledged the loose, improvisational manner in which students developed artistic strategies, noting that the principles of feminist art “evolved painfully, experimentally but organically form the process of

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19 Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 79.
20 Discussing the centrality of performance art within the FAP, Meyer noted how this production strategy had a larger history within the artistic avant-garde, noting the performances at the Cabaret Voltaire associated with the Dada movement. The efforts of the FAP also echoed other experimental forms of artistic production, such as Allan Kaprow’s *happenings*. However, as noted by Mayer, “the participants in the Fresno feminist group tended to use performance as a focused experience of pain and outrage.” Meyer, “A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment,” 9.
dealing with emotions, needs and problems of the women in the Program.”

Despite the ongoing process of experimentation that characterized the Fresno, she identified that would be repeatedly invoked in not only histories of the Fresno art program, but in the majority of art historical examinations of feminist art: “1. Consciousness-raising…. 2. Building a female context and environment…3. Female role models…4. Permission to be themselves and encouragement to make art of their own experiences as women.”

In a later reflection of the program, Wilding reiterated the importance of collaboration, viewing it as a radical departure from traditional artistic instruction. In her view, collaboration emerged not only because of the non-hierarchical goals of feminism, but also because of the limited resources available to these students: “Collaboration emerged organically out of necessity from working together in the studio, and having only ourselves to fall back on when we needed to learn new techniques. Collaboration goes against the standard art pedagogy of competition and individual achievement.”

Even though Wilding viewed collaboration emerging out of necessity, she also related it to the larger challenges faced by women artists during this period, as collaboration helped individual artists mitigate fears regarding the value of their work, or even of themselves as women.

The effort to identify the specific characteristics that distinguished feminist art from other forms of artistic production became all the more important when Chicago relocated to a different institution. In 1971, Chicago relocated the program to the California Institute of the Arts.

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22 Ibid., 10–11.

23 Faith Wilding, “Gestations in a Studio of Our Own: The Feminist Art Program in Fresno, California, 1970-71,” in *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment*, ed. Laura Meyer (Fresno, California: Press at California State University, Fresno, 2009), 98.

24 See Ibid.
(CalArts). Miriam Schapiro facilitated the move to the new institution, working closely with Chicago. At CalArts, Chicago and Schapiro further emphasized the value of collaboration, leading to the large-scale installation known as Womanhouse (fig. 2.1). As described by Arlene Raven, students constructed the massive installation and environment in the short span of six weeks, opening the work to the public between January 30 and February 28, 1972. Throughout the entirety of the project, students followed collaborative artistic principles, frequently meeting to discuss the overall direction of the project, as well as to voice grievances and tensions between themselves, and with their instructors, Chicago and Schapiro.

The project was a form of liberation for many of the students, as preparing the installation rooms required the renovation of a dilapidated house, using power tools and other materials traditionally associated with men. Artists employed different rooms to explore the different roles inhabited by women in different stages of their life. Kathy Huberland, for instance, produced an installation known as Bridal Staircase, calling attention to the meanings associated with wedding rituals, and a bride’s “virginal” attire (fig. 2.2). Other artists employed traditional craft materials in their installations, such as Wilding in Embroidery Room (fig. 2.3). In this manner, Wilding exemplified the feminist goal of exploring the hierarchical relationship between traditional crafts associated with women, and “fine art” associated with male artists.

25 The move to CalArts legitimized the forms of feminist art developed by Chicago and her collaborators. In fact, as noted by Meyer, several art historians position the “origins” of feminist art within CalArts itself; as evidence, she cited the narratives in H.H. Arnason, History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography and Hal Foster, et al., Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism. For Meyer, however, establishing the origins within CalArts, rather than the Fresno art program, exemplifies the ways in which art historical analysis still seeks to explain the value of feminist art through institutional validation: “The institutional power and prestige enjoyed by CalArts appears to legitimize the feminist activities there, but, in fact, this power was initially arrayed against it.” See Meyer, “A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment,” 4.


27 See ibid., 51.

28 See ibid., 50.
Through *Womanhouse*, Chicago and fellow collaborators produced a massive, public installation that visually represented the goals and ideals of feminist artistic programs. After its completion, thousands of spectators visited the site, and the project received mass media attention. The example of *Womanhouse* would permeate feminist artistic circles of the West Coast, setting the stage for later artistic projects in California, and eventually, Mayer’s artistic production.

Despite the success of *Womanhouse*, several of the participants began to consider the limitations of developing feminist art within CalArts. Initially, Chicago sought to provide support for women artists within the mainstream artistic institution. CalArts, however, was far from welcoming. In the words of art historian Jenni Sorkin, the environment of the school was “entirely inhospitable to women,” a condition exacerbated by the young age of the students, and the fact that most of the faculty was male.29

As described by Chicago in her autobiography, the institutional forces that resulted in the marginalization of women artists at CalArts could not remedied by making superficial changes in the school’s curriculum:

> There was a constant contradiction between the values of the [feminist] program and those of Cal Arts... even if Cal Arts had been willing, someday, to equalize its staff, it would never have equalized its perception of reality... the art history classes at Cal Arts, as at all schools, focuses on the work of men, although there was a real effort to include women. But women were included in the context of men’s ideas, men’s values, and men’s past.30

These challenges, in fact, led Chicago to a new goal: the creation of an independent and self-sufficient feminist art institution. Thus, the artist reached out to two different faculty members

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29In her discussion, Sorkin emphasized the multiple instances of sexual harassment at CalArts: “Bia Lowe, a student in the School of Design, recalls being ridiculed by the dean of design, Richard Farson, who pronounced her ‘uptight’ for her reluctance to disrobe on a school-sanctioned trip to the natural hot springs of Esalen, located in Big Sur.” Jenni Sorkin, “Learning from Los Angeles: Pedagogical Predecessors at the Woman’s Building,” in *Doin’ It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building*, ed. Meg Linton and Sue Maberry (Los Angeles: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 39.

from CalArts: art historian Arlene Raven and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, a designer (fig. 2.4). Together, these three founders sought to establish a new form of educational institution, one that would acknowledge and respect the needs of emerging women artists. In the words of Chicago, this new institution “would be the first entirely independent alternate structure for women in the art-related professions.”

Initially, the FSW consisted of an informal series of classes housed in de Bretteville’s living room. Eventually, however, the three founders of the FSW were able to afford the lease for a building in downtown Los Angeles, officially establishing the Woman’s Building in 1973. The institution also housed a gallery, a bookstore, as well as offices for activist organizations such as the National Organization of Women.

A diagram from the 1970s details the curriculum that emerged within this new, independent institution (fig. 2.5). The school incorporated several courses that deviated from the traditional painting or sculpture courses in other art schools, emphasizing C-R. In addition, the FSW included courses on video, performance, and conceptual studios. Following the interdisciplinary spirit of other women’s studies programs at the time, the FSW also encouraged students to attend advanced writing and literature classes, and devote time to journal writing exercises.

The instructors affiliated with the FSW have repeatedly highlighted the egalitarian structure of the institution. Deena Metzger, who served as the director of the school’s writing program from 1973 to 1978, vividly captured the classroom environment at the school:

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31 Ibid., 192.
33 See Chicago, Through the Flower, 201–2.
The leaderless group, the circular form, the non-hierarchical structure are perhaps the most socially significant contributions of the women's movement. Classrooms, organizing meetings, work sessions are physically organized to diminish the distance between individuals. In... [a meeting] of the Feminist Studio Workshop, one cannot distinguish the leaders from the participants, professors from students. Likewise, there is a mingling of ages, both children and older people are present. A number of activities are occurring simultaneously.  

Photographs of these events confirm the descriptions of participants such as Metzger, as it is difficult to identify any of the individual women as the traditional, educational leader within the group (figs. 2.6-2.7).

These discussions, in fact, related to the centrality of C-R sessions within the FSW. As described by Sorkin, de Bretteville and Raven emphasized the importance of the technique within the new institution. Echoing the earlier feminist art programs of the early 1970s, the FSW encouraged students to consider their experiences as a vital source of artistic production, prompting them to explore themes, imagery, and methods that mainstream art institutions considered unimportant. Student artists could develop works focused on issues such as maternity, menstruation, or sexual violence, exploring subject matter that instructors at CalArts had repeatedly dismissed as unworthy of artistic examination.

**Mayer within the FSW**

When Mayer arrived to Los Angeles in 1978, she had already participated in several artistic exhibitions that paralleled the model of feminist art encouraged by the FSW. Moreover, as a graduate from the ENAP, she was familiar with the model of collective, political art associated with los grupos in Mexico. These experiences, according to the artist, made it difficult to understand the pedagogical techniques favored by the FSW. In particular, she identified the C-R sessions as a challenge:

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The FSW was a very difficult experience for me, given the whole notion of taking ‘feelings’ into consideration, examining them as an important issue... In the workshops, I would find myself thinking... ‘When are they going to stop talking about their feelings? That's enough, please talk about politics, talk about theory’.... So being there... I think I had a tearful conversation with Nancy Angelo, explaining that I was fed up with all of these feelings.36

Later in the same interview, Mayer further contrasted the FSW’s methods with her classes at the ENAP. In the artist’s view, her negative reaction was the result of her earlier training in “a different environment. With Juan Acha, I took courses that dealt with theory, with structuralism, with different issues. I came from an environment that was politicized in a very particular way.”37 Mayer’s description highlighted the different ways in which artists from Mexico and the United States defined political art. As discussed in the earlier chapter, artistic training at the ENAP focused on the social significance of art, with instructors such as Acha examining the meaning and value of artistic practice within capitalist society. In addition, Acha and the artists in his milieu developed experimental forms of artistic practice, viewing these as a strategy to counteract the cultural influence of the First World in the Latin American region. These perspectives, informed artistic projects such as Proceso Pentágono’s installation at the Paris Youth Biennial X of 1977. The form of political art favored by los grupos and other artists in Mexico denounced the coercive power and influence of the state. In contrast, the FSW advocated for a form of political art that derived from subjective, personal experiences, relating emotional reactions to larger social structures.

While Mayer emphasized the idea that her difficulties within the program were a result of her earlier, artistic training in Mexico, her perspective echoed the statements made by other student artists from the United States. Vanalyne Green, for instance, a member of the FAP,

36 Mayer, interview.
37 Ibid.
described her experiences in a way that paralleled Mayer’s memories: “In the bluntest of terms, it was: brutal, revelatory, a nightmare, an awakening, a shattering, revolutionary, sadistic, and an invitation to be a different kind of person.”\(^{38}\) Other artists, such as Wilding, considered that the students participating in these processes all carried a “secret wound.”\(^ {39}\) The difficulties discussed by Mayer were perhaps a necessary component of the form of feminist art encouraged by the FSW, as the program emphasized the transformative – and painful – processes of C-R.

Despite this initial difficulty with the pedagogical strategies of the FSW, Mayer has stated that she eventually realized the importance of the technique:

The FSW was very important for me, in order to learn about these small, group workshops, to learn about the instruction of feminist art, which, to this day, I find invaluable... I find this method of instruction fantastic, and I think we’ve lost this idea of carrying out small group discussions... Even though I find it can be a bit maudlin, I find it incredibly useful. It is truly an important practice, a way of channeling our efforts towards democracy, to be able to talk about everything, and to listen to everything.\(^ {40}\)

Indeed, her initial reluctance to the methods of instruction favored by the FSW would eventually dissipate, allowing her to incorporate these methods in her own artistic projects. Moreover, by the time she began her studies at the FSW, these pedagogical strategies had led to the creation of several art collectives, such as The Waitresses (1977), Mother Art (1978), and the Feminist Art Workers (1978).\(^ {41}\) While the themes and approaches employed by each of these collectives differed, these artists shared the view that feminist art should emerge from group discussions and collaborative practices. Mayer would later emulate these methods in Mexico City, shaping the


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Mayer, interview.

artistic projects developed in the new locale and the scope of feminist activist groups in her home country.

At the time, Mayer related these feminist groups to earlier examples of collective artistic practices, discussing the Russian constructivists, as well as the Mexican Muralists. Describing the connections between feminist collectives and the muralists, she noted how the disparate artists “share[d] a common background as oppressed groups.”

In her view, scholars had disregarded women’s participation in the arts, a process that related to the ways in which colonization had erased Mexico’s cultural heritage. According to Mayer, several of the projects produced by the muralists had strived to ameliorate this historical loss through their visual representations.

In this written discussion, she did not relate the efforts of los grupos to the feminist art collectives she encountered at the FSW. The omission may have stemmed from the ways in which feminist artists of Los Angeles emphasized gender issues, a subject matter that remained unexplored by art collectives in Mexico. As later noted repeatedly by McCaughan, this was a powerful trend within los grupos, as several Mexican artists viewed issues of gender and feminism as politically irrelevant or “bourgeois.”

Despite the differences between artists from Mexico and Los Angeles, the different collectives did explore similar themes at times. The Waitresses, for instance, highlighted the class inequality fostered by capitalism, an exploration that strongly resonated with several of los grupos: “Having faced almost two decades of unfair pay, sexual harassment, Madonna/whore, server/slave, mother/nurturer stereotyping, the artist Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin founded The

42 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
43 Ibid.
Waitresses in 1978 - in the throes of a Feminism that had not yet found itself fully. By establishing a collective around their experiences as waitresses, the collective explored the intersections of gender and class inequality in their everyday life. In this manner, the collective paralleled the activities of groups such as Tepito Arte Acá, which highlighted the experiences and challenges faced by the most marginalized members of Mexico City. In addition, like Tepito Arte Acá, members of the Waitresses sought to present artistic proposals outside traditional venues, staging performances at restaurants and diners in Los Angeles (fig. 2.8). The collective also organized large-scale public art events, including a parade that featured the artists and a full marching band (fig. 2.9).

As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the defining characteristics of los grupos had been the effort to develop artistic projects in non-traditional venues. For instance, when describing the activities of No Grupo, Mayer’s future collaborator Bustamante stated: “We saw that so many wonderful things would occur on the street that we started using them as a form of artistic support.” Still, even though collectives from both Mexico City and Los Angeles experimented with new forms of public art, the intentions behind their activities remained distinct. The projects by artists of the FSW explored the gendered dimensions of the public arena, highlighting how women navigated urban spaces. In addition, feminist artists aimed to denounce the practices of traditional, male-dominated artistic institutions. By establishing a separate space for women artists, members of the FSW underscored the ways male artists benefited from the institutional authority of museums and galleries.

46 Ibid.
In contrast, presenting works of art in non-traditional venues related to the specific challenges faced by artists in the contemporary Mexican art world. By producing projects in the streets of Mexico City, the artists of *los grupos* pointed towards the limitations of official government institutions and the lack of a commercial gallery system. As described by Acha, official art institutions such as museums represented the interests of the state, an entity controlled by the economic and political elites of the country.\textsuperscript{48} For Acha, the efforts of independent groups, such as *los grupos*, revealed the necessity of creating new artistic institutions to properly assess and represent the needs and interests of local communities, allowing for the emergence of new artistic practices.\textsuperscript{49}

Beginning her studies at the FSW after her training at the ENAP, Mayer was in a unique position. As an artist from Mexico City within Los Angeles, she was familiar with several models of collective and collaborative artistic practices that had distinct lineages and goals. As a way of navigating the artistic models favored by the FSW, Mayer sought forms of art that closely related to the forms of artistic experimentation developing in Mexico City. This pursuit led her to Lacy, one of the earliest instructors at the FSW and an active participant in the development of feminist art, activist art, and collaborative artistic practices in California throughout the 1970s. Lacy’s artistic efforts in the late 1970s, in fact, resembled the artistic strategies employed by Mexican art collectives, even though her work derived from the ongoing feminist artistic experiments of California.

As noted in the earlier chapter, Lacy had been one of the earliest participants in the experimental forms of feminist art that developed in the United States. In the late 1970s, she developed an artistic project that would become influential for Mayer, as the work exposed the

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 250.
connections between public art, activism, and feminism. In 1979, Communitas – a group from Ocean Park, Santa Monica – asked Lacy to explore the forms of violence experienced by women in the community. The artist thus developed *Making It Safe*, an extensive series of public interventions, including the distribution of informative pamphlets, personal defense workshops, and speak-outs on incest (figs. 2.10). Lacy’s collaborators also covered a pornography store window, and the project ended with a final, public dinner with over 250 women in a park at Ocean Park (figs. 2.11-2.12).

Mayer was one of the collaborators in this project. In a written discussion, she emphasized how she originally thought Lacy’s strategies were extremely strange. She decided to participate, however, believing that feminist art had to expand and transform the definition of art itself. For the project, the artist restaged *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, adapting the piece to the specific goals of Lacy’s *Making it Safe*. As described by the artist, the questions in this clothesline “revolved around the perceptions of safety and danger by women in the community of Ocean Park, including their proposals to feel safer.” After collecting responses from women in the sidewalks of Ocean Park, the artist set up an installation at a local library (figs. 2.13-2.16).

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50 See Irish, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between*, 76.
52 See ibid.
53 Ibid.
Restaging her clothesline in this new geographic environment, Mayer introduced audiences in California to the forms of collaborative, public art she had deployed in Mexico City, establishing herself as a mediator between different populations and cultural groups. In addition, the artist had an opportunity to consider the ways in which the specific, local context informed the subjective experiences of women. Rather than assuming that the responses in Ocean Park would be identical to those in Mexico City, the artist sought to reveal the particular ways in which geographic and cultural context affected the experiences of women. Through this project, the artist challenged understandings that would render women in different geographic regions as a “cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives, and goals and similar experiences.”

As a whole, the project pointed towards the possible alliances that could emerge between women in Mexico and the United States, giving visual form to the “imagined community” of women later theorized by Mohanty. The restaged clothesline visually manifested a translocal dialogue focused on the distinct, but related forms of violence faced by women in Mexico City and Los Angeles. By establishing these exchanges, Mayer expanded the scope of Lacy’s Making it Safe, developing artistic strategies that she would later employ in Mexico City to shape the trajectory of feminist art and activism in her home country.

In her memories of the project, the artist emphasized her uneasiness in “re-staging” or “repeating” a form of artistic expression originally designed for the urban environments of Mexico City. Moreover, she described her shyness in approaching strangers in Ocean Park. Ultimately, however, she found the physical structure of the clotheslines served as a useful tool to establish a dialogue around the issue of gender violence with other women. In this version of her work, Mayer was able to direct women to the specific institutions they could access if they

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55 Mohanty, Feminism without Borders, 110.
56 See ibid., 46.
suffered experiences of violence. In this manner, the artist paralleled contemporary efforts to establish resources centers for survivors of sexual abuse in Mexico City.58  

*Making It Safe* exemplified Lacy’s larger interest in developing public artistic projects in a more systematic fashion. With this goal in mind, she formally established the feminist art collective Ariadne with Leslie Labowitz in 1978. In later descriptions of the group, Lacy emphasized how this collective would explore the role played by mass media in society, seeking to create feminist artistic projects that served as a form of media critique and analysis.59 Lacy and Labowitz later discussed the artistic projects developed by Ariadne as “feminist media strategies.”60 The two collaborators emphasized that feminist artists should be mindful of the way mass media operates in capitalist society: “Mass media time is not a public service; it is a highly valuable commodity that is purchased by corporations and individuals who promote products, ideas, attitudes, and images.”61 For Lacy and Labowitz, feminist political art was effective when it managed to employ mass media systems to their advantage, disrupting audience expectations and challenging traditional understandings of gender inequality.

The considerations raised by the artists of Ariadne resonated with the form of art criticism developed by Mayer’s instructors in Mexico, including García Canclini. Discussing contemporary art in the late 1970s, he described the questions that seemed to circulate in every artist roundtable: “How can we keep works of art from being viewed as mere merchandise or distorted by mass communications media? Why does the public take little or no interest in art?”62 Like the artists described by García Canclini, the members of Ariadne focused attention on the

58 The Centro de Apoyo a Mujeres Violadas (CAMVAC) was established in 1979. See Bartra, “Mujeres y política en México: aborto, violación y mujeres golpeadas.”
61 Ibid., 125.
ways in which mass media representations could easily become entertainment, or another commodity in capitalist society. Mayer, therefore, would have recognized the similarities between the forms of art developing in both Mexico and the United States. Describing these connections several years later, she stated: “I guess I believed that Suzanne [Lacy] had more of an appreciation for the types of political art I was working on, this is why I went to work with her. I appreciated her work because it was a form of public art, because it was a form of art involved with mass media, a form of art that reflected the kind of things I was interested [in Mexico].”

Despite the similarities between the interests of Ariadne and several artists from los grupos, the specific strategies developed by these collectives remained distinct. Ariadne sought to confront specific social problems, developing practical solutions. In their view, media-oriented feminist art was only effective when provoking concrete social changes: “Simply getting people to see your work is not enough when you are working with serious and confrontational issues. What do you want to have happen as a result of your media campaign or event?” Several of the projects developed by Ariadne, for instance, sought to change legislation, prohibiting the distribution of pornographic materials. In contrast, the artists of los grupos maintained a more ambiguous position regarding the goals of their artistic production. A project such as Secuestro plástico (Artistic Kidnapping) denounced the violent mechanisms of the Mexican state, for instance, but it did not point towards a particular solution.

The interests of artists in Ariadne led them to participate in the Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media national conference, hosted in San Francisco in 1978. As described by Lacy, “[Ariadne] created Take Back the Night with artists from San Diego, Los

63 Mayer, interview.
64 Lacy and Labowitz, “Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance,” 129.
engaging in public protests and performances that focused on the sexualized representations of women circulating in media from the United States (figs. 2.17-2.18). As part of this project, the collective created a parade float, denouncing the tropes circulating in pornographic materials. Mayer was one of the students working on the float, and her recollection of these efforts reveal her complex relationship with Lacy:

I got assigned to work on the side of the Virgin. I guess they figured that being from Latin America I would know what it should look like. Viewing a photograph [taken at the event], I guess they also thought I looked like a nun. I had a horrible time making the crown, to the point of bursting out in tears of frustration. It kept getting crooked, and didn't come out the way it was supposed to. At one point, I went and complained to Suzanne, telling her that it wasn’t fair, that I thought it was discriminatory that they were all insistent that I should work on this. Very calmly, she told me that I was only there because of my own decisions, just like the other members of the group, and that the work had to be done. That was a great lesson for me, as I realized that I was only there because of my own wishes and that when one takes on a duty, the work has to be done. I realized that there’s a time to work, work, work and other times to face the cobwebs, phantoms, and the actual, real problems that emerge within group work.

Despite these challenges, the float was completed. As suggested by Mayer, the resulting figure brings to mind the devotional figures of Catholicism, serving as a powerful representation of the “Madonna/Whore” archetypes repeatedly deployed by pornography (figs. 2.19-2.20).

As a member of Ariadne, Mayer participated in a goal-oriented form of feminist art that sought specific and concrete results. In contrast, her future collaborator Bustamante, as a member of No Grupo, would explore forms of art that emphasized humor, playfulness, and parody. As a member of PGN, Mayer would explore the tensions between these two models of collective art practice, shaping the trajectory of feminist art in her home country by relying

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on her earlier experiences at the FSW. As a student in Los Angeles, however, Mayer followed the careful, methodical format encouraged by Ariadne. In her later work with PGN, she would repeatedly rely on a more humorous form of critique. Through these variations in her work, Mayer made her work legible to audiences in different artistic contexts, positioning feminist art in Mexico as part of a negotiated dialogue between activists and artists in a larger translocal network. By refusing to replicate a single artistic model, and constantly modulating the content of her work to different geographic conditions, Mayer aimed to develop a form of feminist art that would remain significant to women in Mexico.

Activist and Artistic Networks of Los Angeles outside of the FSW

As a way to negotiate the dissimilar strategies endorsed by artists in Mexico and the United States, Mayer navigated towards other institutions in Los Angeles that aligned with her interests. In the artist’s view, she confronted the challenges she faced at the FSW by seeking other sources of inspiration: “Being in California, I felt the need, along with Víctor [Lerma] to find something else, something outside the FSW. So we would go to the Los Angeles Socialist Community School to have more of a connection to leftist causes.”67

The Los Angeles Socialist Community School (LASCS) was an important institution in the history of student activism in the United States. According to historian Victor Cohen, LASCS relates to the forms of student activism that developed throughout the 1960s in the United States. The institution was an offshoot of the New American Movement (NAM), an association of activists from throughout the country. NAM, itself had been formed in the dissolution of an earlier activist association, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). As a

67 Mayer, interview.
whole, NAM positioned itself as the representative of a broad coalition of activist causes, including socialist groups, feminist activists, and others.\(^68\)

The egalitarian goals of activists within NAM led to the creation of several informal “schools” throughout the United States. The courses delivered by activists would familiarize the public on topics such as Marxist sociology and feminism. The Los Angeles school, founded in 1975, served as a forum for activists interested in social change, feminism, Marxism, and other topics. As with the C-R groups of the FSW, classes at the LASCS encouraged active participation from all of its participants. A flyer from the spring 1977 course schedule stated that the aim of the institution is “to develop teaching methods that will increase group participation. In contrast to traditional classroom situations, teachers will encourage students to criticize and evaluate courses.”\(^69\)

The majority of LASCS’s members did not focus on artistic production and instruction. Still, several artists interested in public and political art favored the institution. In an interview, Mayer noted the presence of Fred Lonidier and Nancy Buchanan in the school, describing these artists as part of the artistic community that resonated with her interests.\(^70\) In addition, several of the artists of the FSW had been directly involved with the form of student activism and mobilization efforts associated with LASCS. Wilding, for instance, credited the student activism and activity of the SDS for her own development as a feminist activist and artist.\(^71\) Lacy had also been involved with SDS throughout the early 1970s.\(^72\)


\(^{69}\) “LA Socialist Community School Schedule, Spring 1977” reproduced in ibid., 146.

\(^{70}\) Mayer, interview.

\(^{71}\) See Wilding, “Gestations in a Studio of Our Own: The Feminist Art Program in Fresno, California, 1970-71,” 81.

Moreover, several activists within LASCS aimed to produce a form of feminism that related gender inequality to other forms of oppression. Through this institution, Mayer confronted a form of feminist analysis that differed from the one developed within the FSW. A course pamphlet from the late 1970s details a form of examination that considers the ways in which corporations from the United States negatively affected the lives of women from the Third World, establishing these institutions as an extension of earlier colonial institutions. Margaret Strobel, an academic involved in LASCS, described the courses she developed for the institution:

I taught a course on women in Africa, Asia, and Latin America for NAM’s Socialist Community School in the mid-1970s, undaunted by the scope of the task…There, guest lecturers joined me in discussing such topics as population control, forced sterilization, the involvement of women in national liberation struggles, and the incorporation of women’s issues into these struggles and their ideologies (or their omission from the same).

This description by Strobel reveals the ways in which feminist discourse was changing in the activist circles of the 1970s. Rather than focusing on the creation of a “universal” community of women, academics involved with LASCS considered the ways in which geography shaped the experiences of women. Strobel later became the director of the women’s studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The courses she taught within the official academic institution reveal the influence of her earlier teaching at the LASCS: “The primary change that I made in the three years (1975-78) that I taught the introductory course at UCLA was to introduce more materials on Chicanas and on China.”

LASCS thus served as an important site of academic experimentation, leading to a form of feminist analysis that scholars would later identify as Third World feminism, or transnational

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73 Ibid., 145.
75 Ibid., 168.
feminist theory. Mayer’s participation in LASCS thus introduced her to this form of feminist analysis, which also informed her artistic production, both during her studies in Los Angeles, and after her return to Mexico.

Mayer’s description of the “need” to find other resources in Los Angeles also related to the forms of racial division within the Woman’s Building, a problem that also affected feminist activist efforts as a whole. Art historians and artists have emphasized the complex role played by racial difference in the establishment of a feminist art movement in the United States. In “Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,” Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth considered the way racism affected early feminist artistic efforts. As explained by the two writers, the goal of establishing a feminist art movement led to tensions between different communities of women:

Since women, primarily white, first came together to form the women’s art movement and to investigate women’s art history, racism and racial separatism have been major issues internally as well as externally. As women critiqued art institutions for their sexist and racist practices, racist attitudes also surfaced within feminist art circles.

As an example, they cited the experiences of Betye Saar, who experienced harsh forms of critique after organizing the exhibition “Black Mirror” in 1973. While these experiences precede Mayer’s studies at the Woman’s Building and the FSW, the two authors emphasize that the experiences of Saar would remain an “ongoing experience for many women of color in Los Angeles.”

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77 For examinations on the role played by racism in feminist activist efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, see Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, eds., This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).
79 As described by Saar, her exhibition and events were primarily attended by black men and women: “It was as if we were invisible again. The white women did not support it. I felt the separatism, even within the context of being in Womanspace.” Saar, quoted in Ibid.
80 Ibid.
More recent examinations further detail the ways in which racial divisions affected feminist artistic institutions. Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale considered the challenge of establishing a “community” of women artists at the Woman’s Building during the period in which Mayer completed her studies. In their view, the problems of racial difference were magnified within the Woman’s Building because of the claims made by particular, individual members: “One of the problems of feminism and race was the raised expectation based on feminists’ claims of inclusivity, egalitarianism and the openness and tolerance of ‘difference’ within the moral community.”

The two authors exemplified these tensions noting the events that transpired in the late 1970s after the institution started receiving funds from the Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA). According to the two authors, the founders and original members of the institution had frequent disagreements with the newly hired staff.

According to Moravec and Hale, the Woman’s Building did allow women of color to develop a sense of community within the institution. In their view, however, “the women of color who felt most at home and a part of the Woman’s Building community all shared the predominant vision of feminist art held by members of the Woman’s Building.” The two authors evaluated this statement through the experiences of different artists, including Linda Nishio and Rosalie Ortega. In their view, Nishio entered the institution with ease, participating in several exhibitions and endorsing the model of feminist art encouraged by the institution.

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81 Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, “‘At Home’ at the Woman’s Building (But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?): Women of Color and Community,” in *From Site to Vision*, 165.
82 This legal provision allowed the institution to receive funds to hire more staff; many of the new members were women of color, which made the institutional more racially diverse. In the view of these two scholars, “The CETA program transformed the issue of racism at the Woman’s Building from an abstract discussion to a concrete and more visible situation.” Ibid., 168.
83 In particular, the two authors described a series of grievances filed by Meg Henson-Flores against Sue Maberry. See ibid., 169.
84 Ibid., 179.
contrast, Ortega constantly struggled, feeling a disconnect between her experiences and the larger community of women of color within the Woman’s Building. Her lack of familiarity with Mexican culture led her to feel “disparities between her upbringing and the expectations feminists had for a ‘woman of color,’ an identity Ortega did not feel described herself.”85

Mayer’s experiences more closely resembled those of Ortega, as she found herself questioning her inclusion in categories such as “woman of color.” In particular, the artist pointed to workshops in which students were divided into different racial groups:

> When the workshop began, quite honestly I did not know which group to put myself in because my skin colour is quite light which does not in at all make me feel less Mexican or think of myself as ‘Euro-Mexican’ as a Chicano (US Citizen of Mexican descent) artist once described me, offending me greatly. I thought nonetheless that I would join the ‘white’ group so that I could analyse my own racism, because the idea of racial mixing (‘mestizaje’) as sold to us in Mexico may unite us but it also prevents us from appreciating the enormous cultural diversity of our country, and conceals a deep-rotted and unspoken racism that is experienced first and foremost by our indigenous peoples but also in relation to our strong black roots. During the workshop, one of my group colleagues began to talk about the time she had taken a bus in Mexico and had been so relieved that, despite the fact that she was with Mexicans, nothing had happened to her. At that moment I realised that I was quite definitely a ‘woman of colour’ and I went and sat with the Blacks and Chicanos, who were having their own discussions about double discrimination.86

Mayer’s hesitance to identify as either a “white woman” or a “woman of color” underscored the ways in which racial categories are historically and geographically specific. As someone who recognized the ways in which her skin color had benefitted her in Mexico, Mayer hesitated to consider herself a “woman of color.” In this manner, she questioned how the rhetoric of mestizaje occluded the role of racial discrimination in Mexican society of the late twentieth

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85 Ibid., 181.
86 Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis,” 7.
Still, after listening to the ways in which her white classmates described fellow Mexicans, she recognized and fully inhabited the racialized category of “women of color.” In this manner, Mayer navigated the ways in which her subject identity shifted depending on context, an experience later described by theorists as the feminist politics of space.

Despite these experiences, Mayer has repeatedly emphasized how the Woman’s Building made considerable efforts in confronting the larger forms of racism prevalent in the United States. In an interview, the artist denounced the ways in which academic discussions suggest that feminist activity of the 1970s dismissed the role played by race, class, and other issues:

Everyone in the academic world find themselves repeating that the 1970s were all about ‘white bourgeois women,’ almost as a mantra… that, in fact, is not true. At the Woman’s Building we spoke about class, race, lesbianism, we would talk about single mothers, money issues, we talked about many different subjects. Yes, white women were the ones that had opened the institution. But it’s not as though these white women would say, ‘no, we are only going to talk about the issues affecting white women; Black women, Chicana women, good luck to you’… That is simply not true, it was a constant struggle to understand the moments in which one was oppressed, and which moments were the ones in which we worked as oppressors. This was extremely interesting to me, that even though they could be feminists, that did not necessarily mean they would stop being racist, or classist… but these issues were talked about. This was even more interesting as someone from Mexico, as I first arrived with somewhat of an idea that everything from the United States was, on some level, a form of Yankee imperialism… In other words, that any woman from the United States could be imperialist, all of them. But no, all of these issues emerged in small group discussions, even how being of one social class within the United States was one thing, and not necessarily the same as being from the same social class in Mexico.

Mayer’s memories of the Woman’s Building and the FSW emphasize the specific institutional efforts to confront racial discrimination. The workshop she described, for instance, was a deliberate, if not entirely successful, effort to create spaces for different communities of women.

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87 For a more recent discussion of the ways in which the rhetoric of mestizaje – espoused by the post-revolutionary government in Mexico – contrasts with the experiences of colorism in Mexican society, see Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
88 See Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Women and the Politics of Space* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2005).
89 Mayer, interview.
In Mayer’s view, while academics have emphasized the limited agenda of feminist artists of the 1970s, the actual developments within the institution reveal a more nuanced process, one in which the leaders of the Woman’s Building and the FSW aimed to confront the larger problem of racism.

The goal of transforming the Woman’s Building and the FSW into an inclusive space for all women in Los Angeles, also related to the emergence of Chicano contemporary art. By the time Mayer moved to Los Angeles in 1978, the forms of activism that associated with the Chicano movement, or \textit{el movimiento}, were in full force.\textsuperscript{90} More specifically, in relation to Mayer’s studies as a visual artist, the artistic components of \textit{el movimiento} were an important part of the Los Angeles art scene. As noted by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, artists were important contributors to Chicano activism, with their efforts illustrating the larger political goals of the movement.\textsuperscript{91} By the late 1970s, several Chicano art institutions had opened in Los Angeles, including the Mechicano Art Gallery, the Goez Art Gallery, Self-Help Graphics and Art, and Plaza de la Raza.\textsuperscript{92}

In her master’s thesis, Mayer described Chicano art as an example of “effective” political art, as it served a didactic purpose within a specific community.\textsuperscript{93} In addition, the artist considered how Chicano art related to the forms of political art prevalent in Mexico. In particular, Mayer viewed the murals of the Chicano art movement as revolutionary, in contrast to

\textsuperscript{90} In his analysis of the Chicano movement, Carlos Francisco Jackson identified a series of historical events in the 1960s which led to a distinct form of activism by individuals of Mexican descent in the United States: “the labor struggles in California’s Central Valley and the creation of the National Farm Workers Association, which became the United Farm workers of America (UFW); the development of the La Raza Unida Party in Crystal City, Texas; the Land Grant Movement in New Mexico; and the Los Angeles High School Blowouts (or Walkouts).” Carlos Francisco Jackson, \textit{Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 12.


\textsuperscript{93} See Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
the murals produced in Mexico, which represented “academia and official government art.”

In this analysis, she highlighted how the meaning of a particular artistic strategy varied depending on the geographic and political context.

The projects of individual Chicana artists interacting with the FSW paralleled the adaptations and transformations Mayer would develop in her own body of work. As a Mexican artist trained in a different model of collective, political art, Mayer participated in a model of feminist art that did not entirely conform to the struggles she faced as a woman artist in Mexico, as the forms of gender inequality that existed in her home country were the result of different social structures and historical processes. In a similar manner, Chicana artists in Los Angeles aimed to create a form of feminist art that reflected their political allegiance to the Chicano movement.

Judy Baca, for instance, has discussed how she navigated different artistic and activist groups during the 1970s. As a young artist, she participated in several of the C-R sessions organized by Chicago in the Woman’s Building. The artist, however, noted how most of the participants in these events were white women, and she vividly remembers how white feminist activists did not want to create a feminist movement that considered class, or economic inequality. Baca also felt these tensions with fellow Chicano/a artists, noting how people kept asking her to prioritize different aspects of her identity: “people kept saying, You’re women first! And you are Latina second! Right? And in the movimiento it was, You’re Latino first, and you’re a woman second!” In her view, her position as a Chicana allowed her to see the limitations and contradictions within different activist movements.

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94 See Ibid.
96 Ibid.
Chicana artists thus had to produce works of art that responded to shifting needs and interests, hoping to produce visual representations that related to a social position unrepresented in the larger feminist art movement of the 1970s. As explained by Shifra M. Goldman: “In addition to questions of identity as a people, Chicanas also wished to clarify their identity as women with its special problems and concerns. It was necessary to confront the racism, classism, and sexism of society at large and the sexism within their own ranks in order to achieve full personhood.” These interests by Chicana artists led to the Woman’s Building exhibition “Las Chicanas: Venas de la Mujer” in 1976. In this show, Baca, along with artists Isabel Castro, Judith Hernández, Olga Muñiz, and Josefina Quesada had an opportunity to present an artistic vision that represented their experiences as women and Chicanas. Discussing the exhibition, Goldman highlighted the “garment factory segment which illustrated the working conditions of the many undocumented Mexican women employed at such labor in Los Angeles sweatshops with substandard wages and working conditions.” The environment produced by the artists, with its inclusion of newspaper clippings and other sources of information, resembled the efforts of los grupos, as the installation detailed particular forms of labor exploitation (figs. 2.21-2.23).

As a form of feminist and Chicana art developed within Los Angeles, “Venas de la Mujer” anticipated the strategic negotiations Mayer would later explore in her work. In her discussion of the exhibition, Mayer emphasized how artists were able to explore a feminist theme, even while pointing to the material realities of Chicano life in the United States. In this manner, the artist celebrated a form of feminist art that paralleled the public art projects of los grupos, and particularly of collectives such as Tepito Arte Acá, which also highlighted the

99 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
challenges faced by workers in modern capitalist society. While the Chicana artists of the exhibition were not aware of los grupos, Mayer’s comments on their activities suggests her continuous interest in developing a form of artist practice that resonated with audiences in both countries.

A selection of drawings Mayer completed in the late 1970s, known as the Nuestra señora (Our Lady) series, related to the forms of artistic production developed by Chicana artists (figs. 2.24-2.26). In this project, the artist completed minutely detailed compositions, depicting female figures dressed in mantles with intricate geometric designs. As the artist only employed black graphite and ink, the contours of some of the female figures blend into the patterns of their attire. Each of the drawings included short titles in English and Spanish, identifying the depicted figure with names that echoed Marian apparitions, such as “Our Shy Lady” and “Our Lady of the Opening Eyes.” Several of the titles, however, include a blunt critique of the role played by the Virgin Mary in Catholicism: “Our Lady of Submission,” “Our Patriarchal Lady,” and “Our Lady of Oppression.”

According to Catha Paquette, Mayer’s use of this imagery revealed her familiarity with the work of Chicana artists. In her analysis, she emphasized Mayer’s surprise at the ways in which the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe circulated in feminist artistic circles of the West Coast. In this manner, Paquette relates Mayer’s drawings to projects such as López’s Guadalupe Triptych, produced in the late 1970s (fig. 2.27). The latter work employed the image of Guadalupe as a means to produce family portraits. In each of the components of the triptych, López transformed the religious icon, portraying herself and the women in her family in

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100 See Catha Paquette, “(Re)Visions: Sacred Mothers and Virgins,” in MEX/LA: Mexican Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985, ed. Selene Preciado (Long Beach, California; Ostfildern: Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach; Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 55. In her discussion, Paquette identified these drawings as the Mother of Sorrow series. In this study, I follow the titles employed in “When in Doubt…Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibit.”
activities that highlighted the agency and tenacity of Chicana women. In her self-portrait, in particular, the artist presents herself as a marathon runner, carrying the mantle of the Virgin as a triumphant victory flag. López thus employed a revered image within her community, but transformed it with a specific feminist agenda of self-determination.

Mayer’s imagery in Nuestra señora explores religious themes in a similar manner. The text in these drawings humorously point out the idealized vision of passive femininity prevalent in Catholic iconography. Thus, the artist employed written statements to underscore the feminist intention of her artistic production, a strategy she had earlier used in her postcards for the “Lo normal” exhibition in Mexico City. Without the inclusion of text, audiences might fail to understand the artist’s critical approach to the revered images of Catholicism. Indeed, as noted by Cordero Reiman, the artist frequently employed text in her drawings as a form of protest against social expectations, “alluding in an ironic and subversive manner to the typical grade-school punishment in which students had to fill out a chalkboard with their reiterated declaration of conformity.”

In addition, the female figure in “Our Lady of the Voyage,” seems to be crawling out of her mantle, stretching her body in an attempt to escape her confinement; the intricate decorations of the cloth suggest the texture and weight of chain mail. Like López, Mayer transformed the female icons of Catholicism to underscore the importance of women’s self-determination. Viewers, expecting a pious and immobile Virgin, instead confront an active figure that aims to escape.

Mayer’s inclusion of titles in both English and Spanish revealed her interest in the artistic production of women artists in both Mexico and the United States. Indeed, with Nuestra señora,

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she continued an earlier exploration of religious iconography initiated by an earlier generation of Mexican women artists. The drawings resembled works by María Izquierdo, a figure later described by Mayer as her “favorite artist, because of her artistic production and because she was a total artist who produced, organized, and wrote.”¹⁰² In *Altar de Dolores*, for instance, Izquierdo juxtaposed a representation of the Virgin of Sorrows with objects from Mexican popular culture, including decorative *papel picado*, *aguas frescas*, fruits, and other objects (fig. 2.28). While the work resembled the images of *mexicanidad* associated with the muralists, Celeste Donovan has noted how these representations by Izquierdo served as a form of social critique. According to Donovan, Izquierdo’s work “asserts the woman as an active producer of culture for the first time in Mexican art history… At the same time, the altar iconography calls attention to Catholic institutional representations of the virgin Mary as a standard model for Mexican women’s behavior and identity.”¹⁰³ Unlike Izquierdo, Mayer’s artistic production does not include explicit references to *mexicanidad*, revealing the declining influence of this iconography in later twentieth-century art. Still, Mayer continued an artistic practice that employed religious icons to question women’s role in Mexican society. Even as she aimed to develop a form of visual art that responded to the interests of contemporary feminist activists, Mayer relied on earlier generations of women artists in Mexico.

The *Nuestra señora* series evidences Mayer’s familiarity with interrelated, but distinct, artistic traditions. Through these drawings, the artist negotiated between the images of religiosity produced by Mexican artists such as Izquierdo and the ongoing artistic production of Chicana artists. Mayer’s imagery relied on both local and translocal artistic models, allowing her to develop a form of feminist art in Mexico that managed to negotiate a wide breadth of

influences. Her use of religious iconography, however, does not imply that her work had the same meaning as the images of the Virgin of Guadalupe produced by artists such as López. In the work of Chicana artists, the images of Guadalupe served as a form of resistance against institutional racism and other forms of discrimination in the United States; the Virgin’s skin color serving as a celebration of cultural and racial difference. Chicana artists thus linked the spiritual and religious practices of their communities with the political agenda of the Chicano movement.  

As a middle-class and light-skinned Mexican woman, Mayer’s approach to religious images differed considerably. Indeed, as a Mexican citizen who studied and worked in both Mexico and the United States, Mayer was in a specific position of social privilege. Her approach to images of the Virgin reveals her position as one of the social subjects considered by García Canclini in his discussion of hybridity. In his view, some individuals manage to employ the social structures of modernity to their advantage, particularly social subjects that “have acquired a high level of education and enriched their traditional patrimony with aesthetic resources and knowledge from various countries.” Unlike López, Mayer did not view the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a source of strength against institutional racism, suggesting a more detached relationship between the artist and her imagery. The artist’s social position perhaps explains her willingness to imbue the Nuestra señora series with sexual undertones. Several of the works suggest phallic figures entering women’s genitals, linking Mayer to other feminist artists that underscored the material reality of women’s bodies and sexual intercourse in their

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work. The repeated allusion to sexual practices in the series, transforms the individual Virgin figures into oblique representations of sexual desire, with the crawling female figure of Our Lady of the Voyage implying the irrepressible power and nature of these emotions.

Mayer’s ambiguous relationship with other religious practices perhaps also affected her complex approach to Catholic images in her work. Indeed, in a discussion of her Jewish ancestors on her father’s side of the family, the artist emphasized how their experiences of migration had prompted dramatic transformations: “Judaism did not last [in our family]. Migrations transform us.” Her awareness of the fragile and fluid nature of religious identity may explain her willingness to pose as a Virgin figure. Still, regardless of the social position occupied by the artist, Mayer’s imagery suggests a desire to provoke discussions of the role of the Catholic Church in Mexican history and society.

Mayer continued her exploration of religious iconography in La Dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows) (figs. 2.29-2.31). In this project, the artist completed a polyptych, juxtaposing a photocopy of the Virgin of Sorrows with her own drawings and writing; each of the work’s six components bears numerous reproductions of the same religious figure. The artist repeatedly manipulated this image, presenting torn segments of the photocopy, or folding the image unto itself. Moreover, the artist underscored the presence of the icon in various ways, at times traversing the image with a prominent red cross, or covering the Virgin with red and purple bands. In other areas of the polyptych, the artist bisected the Virgin with red arrows. A few of the reproductions of the Virgin blend into a billowing mushroom cloud drawn by the artist in a

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106 One of the most famous examples of this artistic strategy was Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party, detailed later in this chapter.
107 Mayer, “La tía Anita.”
softer shade of red. Throughout the piece, Mayer included the word “rape,” presenting the word in cursive script in a variety of sizes, as well as stamping the word in red capital letters. The lettering also surrounds the image of the Virgin, at times invading the surface area of the photocopy. In one of the six sections of the polyptych, the artist included phalluses, linking these objects to the image of the Virgin with a chain. Through these visual components, the artist implied the connections between religious iconography and sexual violence, with the arrows, chains, and words suggesting a strong, causal relationship.

In *La Dolorosa*, Mayer relied on the artistic strategies associated with the pop art movement, as she repurposed a revered image from Catholicism for her artistic production. As explained by the artist, she originally found the image in a panhandling box in a church in Oaxaca, thinking the image was “particularly meaningful, as the box was in chains.”109 After taking a photograph of the panhandling box, Mayer then produced numerous photocopies, transforming the meaning of the image through her inclusion of text and drawn figures in the polyptych. The work resembles Andy Warhol’s screen prints, particularly those that explore religious subject matter, such as his *Last Supper* series, or even the images of Ingrid Bergman as a nun (figs. 2.32-2.33).110 *La Dolorosa*, however, urges the viewer to consider the underlying consequences of religious images that celebrate and naturalize women’s suffering. Mayer therefore employed the machine-reproduced images to disseminate a feminist indictment against sexual violence. In her view, “the piece proposes that forcing [women] to be good and *abnegadas* is a violation of our liberty as human beings.”111 By urging viewers to consider the underlying messages disseminated by religious piety, Mayer sought to expose the underlying

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109 Ibid.
111 Mayer, “Traducciones: Un Diálogo Internacional de Mujeres Artistas.”
messages associated with the religious images circulating in Mexico, suggesting the ambitious – and unprecedented – goal of her artistic projects: the transformation of Mexican society as a whole.

While Mayer’s polyptych echoed Warhol’s screen prints, the piece also served as a visual response to the public art projects developed by feminist artists of the West Coast of the United States. In particular, the inclusion of the word “rape” in stamped red letters invoked Lacy’s earlier project of *Three Weeks in May*, discussed in the previous chapter. Mayer, however, employed the image of the Virgin of Sorrows, referencing the work Izquierdo produced during the post-revolutionary period. *La Dolorosa* paralleled Lacy’s artistic proposals that sought to reveal the underlying cultural attitudes that allowed sexual violence against women to flourish, but Mayer adapted – or translated – the visual strategies of earlier feminist artists to make them significant for local Mexican audiences. In this manner, Mayer’s work served as a bridge between different generations of women artists in Mexico City and Los Angeles. By linking her artistic proposals to earlier artists of the FSW, Mayer underscored the ways in which sexual violence affected women in different geographic regions, pointing to the immense challenges facing feminist activists and artists.

Mayer’s deliberate use of an image revered by Mexican audiences, however, affected the exhibition of the work in her home country. Describing *Nuestra señora* and *La Dolorosa*, the artist emphasized that she had exhibited her works at the Woman’s Building, without any problems. When she exhibited these projects in Mexico City, audiences objected to the use of religious imagery, and the works were removed from the exhibition space. Mayer thus wrote a letter, dated October 29, 1980, which she displayed in lieu of her artwork (fig. 2.34). In the

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letter, she emphasized that her artistic production was not an indictment against the religious icon, but rather, a critique of society’s idealization of submissive and oppressed women. According to the artist, in conversation with the protesting audiences, she realized that their main objection was the use of a preexisting, religious icon: “The protesting woman agreed to speak with me, and when I explained my reasoning, she stated that she didn’t question my ideas, but that I should not use ‘the image.’” Thus, according to the artist, audiences had disregarded the feminist message of her artistic production, as they had been unable to accept the reproduction and alteration of an existing religious image. Paradoxically, in her attempt to produce a work legible to Mexican audiences, Mayer had provoked a reaction that limited the circulation of her artistic proposals and feminist critique.

The artist, however, wished to continue her exploration of the connections between religious imagery and women’s everyday experiences of sexual violence. In Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence), Mayer avoided the use of preexisting religious icons, while still producing a work that emulated the conventions of Catholic iconography (figs. 2.35-2.41). For this project, she posed in a rebozo, or shawl, producing several photographs that she photocopied and juxtaposed with writing and drawings. The finished piece consists of seven different sections – one for each day of the week – suggesting the pages of a diary. In the different “pages” of the piece, she included several images of herself as a Virgin, posing in a variety of ways: looking upwards in reverence, or with her hands clasped over her mouth in surprise. Mayer surrounded these photocopied figures with drawn mandorlas, further referencing images of the Virgin. The project illustrates a never-ending cycle of sorrow and despair, with the written statements revealing the visceral qualities of

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113 See “Photograph of Letter Written by Mónica Mayer in October 29, 1980 after the Removal of Her Artwork at the Instituto Anglo Mexicano de Cultura, Mexico City,” c. October 1980, Pinto Mi Raya Archive.
114 Mayer, “Las Virgenes.”
this pain. Indeed, as noted by Cordero Reiman, the series conveys a “sensation of
fragmentation… reinforced and reiterated in Mayer’s handling of materials and processes:
collage, cutting, pasting, and sometimes sewing.”\footnote{Cordero Reiman, “When in Doubt... Ask: Mónica Mayer’s Artistic Project,” 37.} In the panel for Monday, for instance, the
artist presented the statement “sufro”, or “I suffer”, in capital red letters. Similarly, in the panel
for Wednesday, she wrote out the word “sangre”, or “blood”, in cursive script. In this manner,
the project allows viewers to consider the narrative implied by images of the Virgin of Sorrows,
with the artist describing – in the form of journal entries – the idealized suffering in these
images.

On some level, the artist’s images in *Diario* are more transgressive than her earlier
projects, as she not only references images of the Virgin, but also depicts herself as the religious
figure. Indeed, in several of the images, Mayer employed a suggestive facial expression, pursing
her lips in a flirtatious manner. However, by using these staged photographs, the artist avoided
the reproduction of preexisting religious icons, a strategy she viewed as a more subtle form of
artistic critique.\footnote{Mayer, “Las Virgenes.”} In *Diario*, Mayer followed the conventions of Catholic religious imagery, but
she did not reproduce the images employed in Catholic religious practices. By considering the
ways in which her intended audience would interpret her artistic proposals, Mayer adhered to the
model of feminist art developed by her peers in the Los Angeles arts scene. As noted by Lacy
and Labowitz, feminist artists had to consider the impact of their representations, as audiences
could easily misread controversial imagery.\footnote{See Lacy and Labowitz, “Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance.”} Viewers might easily interpret a sexualized image
of the female body as a clichéd advertisement, rather than as a feminist critique of mainstream
media. Feminist artists, therefore, had to modulate their representations, developing images and
text that allowed audiences to reflect on the underlying message of the work. By employing
these staged photographs of herself as a Virgin, Mayer aimed to provoke this form of reflection, prompting viewers to question the images of female piety and suffering that circulated in Mexican visual culture.

Through *Diario*, the artist also employed visual strategies that resonated with the artistic production of Chicana artists. By portraying herself in the guise of a Virgin, and describing experiences of suffering in a “diary,” Mayer engaged in a form of self-portraiture that relates to López’s Guadalupe triptych. But Mayer’s artwork also anticipates later projects, such as Alma Lopez’s *Our Lady* (fig. 2.42). In the latter work, the artist depicted herself in the guise of Guadalupe, transforming the Catholic image with the inclusion of herself as the Virgin, as well as the presence of a female with a bared chest. According to Laura E. Pérez, the latter work alluded to the ways in which the religious icon of Guadalupe “serves as a model of abnegation and passivity with respect to patriarchy.”118 *Our Lady* evidences how the concerns and visual strategies of Chicana artists and Mayer during the late 1970s were still relevant to a younger generation of visual artists. Mayer’s continuous exploration of religious iconography revealed her interest in establishing a coalition of feminist artists exploring similar concerns and visual strategies, a goal she would explicitly explore in the last project she developed while in Los Angeles.

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*Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists)*

By the time Mayer neared the end of her studies at the FSW, she had participated in several of the projects developed by her instructors at the institution, contributing to the forms of feminist art associated with the Los Angeles art scene. According to the artist, her intention was
to learn about feminist art in the FSW to launch similar efforts in her home country. Lacy
alluded to these objectives in a written assessment of the artist completed in 1980:

Monica has matured tremendously since I first met her two years ago. She came to the
Feminist Studio Workshop with a decided direction, to find out about political art in the
states in order to return to Mexico and become more productive there as a leader in the
feminist art movement. Although she has not wavered from that direction, her growth has
encompassed much more than she would have anticipated…Monica learned about
sharing her feelings, explored international communication, began to teach, and in all
continued her drawing, painting and sculpting that formed the backbone of her early
work.

As detailed by Lacy, Mayer was intent on becoming a “leader,” aiding in the establishment of a
broad feminist artistic movement in Mexico. More importantly, Lacy emphasized how the
artist’s original goal had grown to “encompass” much more, given Mayer’s interest in a wide
variety of artistic practices and forms of activism. Moreover, Lacy also focused on the
importance of “international communication,” a component that would become central to the last
artistic project Mayer completed as a student of the FSW.

The limitations of the FSW itself sparked Mayer’s interest in establishing connections
between different communities of women. According to the artist, the institution as a whole
promoted a complete lack of interest in forms of feminist activism developing outside the United
States. In a letter to her classmates, Mayer denounced the implications of these conditions:

I’ve lived a year and a half in the United States as I study at the Feminist Studio
Workshop. From the beginning of this stay I’ve noticed a huge lack of information
regarding the rest of the world, both in the country at large and in the feminist
movement. Being from Mexico, where we were in contact with feminists from most of
the world, I was surprised at this, and I view this as a form of racism. One of the well-
known tactics to support racism itself is to erase any knowledge of colonized people
itself… the Feminist Movement, ignoring the rest of the world, promotes and perpetuates
the imperialist values of the United States…. I am shocked that few women seem to know
about feminist movements in Mexico, Peru, Spain, Japan and other countries, and that

119 Mayer, interview.
120 Suzanne Lacy, “Permanent Student Record: Monica Patricia Mayer Lucido” (Goddard College, 1980), 3, Pinto
Mi Raya Archive.
there is little curiosity to see what their fights, strategies, achievements and struggles are. More than anything, I feel sad thinking about everything you are missing out on.”

As an artist who had already contributed to feminist activist efforts in Mexico, she recognized how the FSW lacked any interest in these specific efforts, an omission she viewed as a form of racism. Her assessment echoed similar critiques by different generations of Mexican activists, who recognized that the agenda pursued by activists from the United States, did not consider the needs of other communities outside its borders. Moreover, she emphasized how this lack of knowledge served as a form of imperialism, erasing the contributions of women across the world.

Mayer’s statements aligned her with the forms of feminist critique developing in LASCS, and later theorized as transnational feminisms by subsequent scholars. Emphasizing that feminist efforts are not limited to the United States, Mayer prefigured the scholarly critique later developed by Mohanty who emphasized how feminist knowledge can function as a discursive formation that positions feminists from the First World as “liberated” women. For Mohanty, these discursive processes served as a justification for more overt forms of imperialism, including economic and military forms of intervention. In her analysis, she emphasized the need for feminist analyses that recognized the interconnected efforts of women across different geographic regions. Under this different framework, scholars would be able to recognize disparate forms of feminist activity as part of a transnational feminist movement. A necessary

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122 In particular, Mayer’s perspective echoed the views of 1975 Mexican feminist activists, who recognized the limitations of the World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations (UN) in Mexico City. In addition, Mayer’s perspective related to the experiences of women from the Consejo Feminista Mexicano (Mexican Feminist Council, CFM) in the Pan American Women’s Conference of 1922. See Threlkeld, “The Pan American Conference of Women, 1922.”
123 Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes.”
component for this form of feminist activity was the creation of a more egalitarian dialogue between women in different regions.

The last project Mayer completed as part of her studies at the FSW, directly related to these inclusive forms of dialogue later described by transnational feminist scholars. In 1980, Mayer organized *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (*Translations: an international dialogue of women artists*), an extensive artistic project that derived from the different artistic models she had encountered in Los Angeles. In this work, she deliberately challenged the notion that women from the First World should control the agenda of feminist movements. In a letter written to her mother in Mexico, in fact, Mayer described her desire to avoid this kind of hierarchical relationship:

> I got together with Jo Goodwin, Denise Yarfitz, and Florence Rosen, and they are interested in participating. We have talked about our goals and they are 1) to establish a dialogue; 2) to start the formation of a group of Mexican feminist artists in Mexico; and 3) to take information we get on our trip about Mexican women’s art and feminism to present it here in the U.S. We are concerned that we present our information without following the oppressive patterns that taking material from the U.S. to Mexico implies, to learn to translate not just the language but our culture, and to see the points that unite us as women fighting against patriarchy.\(^{124}\)

In this letter, Mayer identified the main artists of the FSW that would help her in this collaborative, feminist artistic project. These artists had close connections with the feminist art collectives that had emerged throughout the 1970s in the institution. Yarfitz, for instance, was one of the members of The Waitresses. In addition, Mayer emphasized the importance of not reproducing “oppressive patterns,” a perspective that would position artists from the United States as the possessors of an “enlightened” model of feminism.

Mayer’s project also aimed to highlight the specific material conditions faced by women in Mexico, informing her classmates about the specific economic challenges of this region of the

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\(^{124}\) Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
world. In this manner, Mayer anticipated later discussions of feminist activism developed by theorists such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. Discussing the potential challenges of transcultural exchange, the two stated:

If feminist political practices do not acknowledge transnational cultural flows, feminist movements will fail to understand the material conditions that structure women’s lives in diverse locations. If feminist movements cannot understand the dynamics of these material conditions, they will be unable to construct an effective opposition to current economic and cultural hegemonies that are taking new global forms. Without an analysis of transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations, feminist movements will remain isolated and prone to reproducing the universalizing gestures of dominant Western cultures.125

Mayer’s project, which repeatedly emphasized the specific economic conditions prevalent in Mexico, aimed to avoid the form of isolation described by Grewal and Kaplan. Deliberately avoiding the problems that had plagued earlier forms of transnational dialogue, such as the Pan American conference of 1922, or the UN conference of 1975, Mayer sought an inclusive form of dialogue that moved away from the universalist agenda of previous efforts. *Traducciones* thus aimed to shape the trajectory of feminist art and activism in Mexico through translocal dialogue, an important characteristic that defines Mayer’s oeuvre. By establishing connections between different groups of women, the artist encouraged a feminist artistic movement that relied on the contributions of women in Mexico City and Los Angeles, anticipating later forms of feminist activism that relied on the existence of interconnected networks of exchange. By establishing these exchanges as the subject matter of her artistic projects, Mayer positioned herself as a mediator between different cultural groups, literally serving as a translator between feminist groups that envisioned social change in drastically different ways.

After contacting her mother, Mayer sought out other collaborators in Mexico, eventually relying on the efforts of Ana Victoria Jiménez, Yolanda Andrade, Lara, Mónica Kubli, Yan

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María Yaoyólotl Castro, Lilia Lucido, and other women. Mayer and her FSW peers arrived to Mexico City on December 10, 1979, greeted by Mayer’s mother. As part of the project, Mayer and her collaborators delivered a lecture at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (fig. 2.43). In this presentation, the participants lectured on the forms of feminist art developed at the FSW and the West Coast of California. In her description of the lectures, for instance, Mayer noted how she displayed the Virgin of Guadalupe triptych produced by López. According to the artist, women in the audience responded positively to the images, but male audience members were much more critical.

In addition to the lecture at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, the participants visited several sites associated with feminine archetypes in Mexico. Mayer organized a visit to the Basílica de Guadalupe on the Virgin’s feast day, December 12th (fig. 2.44). In her description of the event, Goodwin emphasized her surprise at the massive amount of people engaged in the religious procession, numbering in the millions. In addition, she noted the presence of anti-abortion protestors carrying large-scale banners with statements such as “Motherhood Is A Sublime Mission” and “Abortion is Murder.”

As part of the efforts to familiarize her FSW peers with women artists from Mexico, Mayer also planned a visit to the Casa Azul, in Mexico City, Frida Kahlo’s former house and studio. Goodwin noted the various layers of Mexico’s history embedded in the house museum, including the pyramid-like structures in the garden, as well as the pre-Columbian codices in the studio. In turn, Yarfitz described the various life events that had affected

126 See Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 27.
127 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
129 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
Kahlo’s artistic production, including her tumultuous relationship with Rivera. A photograph of Mayer and her companions during this visit shows them flanked by the large-scale papier-mâché Judas figures that are meant to be exploded on Sábado de Gloria, the Saturday before Easter (fig. 2.45). Through this visit, Mayer introduced her FSW peers to the various cultural and religious practices that informed Kahlo’s artistic production, expanding their understanding of the specifically Mexican iconography in her oeuvre.

Traducciones also consisted of lectures and other workshops planned outside of Mexico City. In particular, Mayer organized a multi-day retreat in Cuernavaca, entitled Feminismo, Mujer y Arte (Feminism, Women, and Art) (fig. 2.46). Nancy Cárdenas, a prominent figure in the burgeoning lesbian feminist movement, shared her home for this component of Traducciones. The pamphlet used to promote the event details the different workshops that would take place in the event, prompting attendants to question the ways women had been portrayed in art historical narratives, as well as the value of “traditional” and “non-traditional” mediums (fig. 2.47). Through this event, Mayer reached out to Mexican feminist activists, an audience that was unfamiliar with artistic production in general. Participants were expected to learn about feminist art, in order to become artists themselves, producing works in a collaborative process. Photographs of the event show these women engaging in informal theatrical performances, as installations with documentary information stand in the background (fig. 2.48). The participants included María Eugenia Pulido, a journalist who would later collaborate with Mayer in subsequent projects (fig. 2.49). Andrade, known for her photographs

130 Ibid.
131 Herrera, Frida, 3.
and examinations of Mexico City’s urban life, also participated (fig. 2.50). Finally, Yaøyóloltl Castro, a prominent figure in the burgeoning forms of lesbian activism in Mexico City, also attended (fig. 2.51). The presence of Yaøyóloltl Castro further underscored Mayer’s interest in establishing connections between her feminist artistic practice and the extensive forms of lesbian activism developing in 1970s Mexico, as this activist founded several of the early lesbian activist groups in the country. In particular, Yaøyóloltl Castro’s activism emphasized issues of class inequality from a Marxist perspective, even though leftist and communist organizations in Mexico differed in their willingness to accept lesbians in their ranks. These participants exemplify the broad spectrum of activists Mayer hoped to attract to the event, establishing connections between feminist artists of the United States, and a wide variety of women in Mexico. In short, this retreat allowed Mayer to deploy the model of feminist art developed at the FSW in her home country, inspiring subsequent Mexican activists and artists to produce works of art informed by the earlier practices of the FSW. Moreover, Traducciones, like several of Mayer’s artistic proposals, allowed for the formation of a distinct community of women, emphasizing the importance of sharing ideas and experiences to construct a feminist program and agenda. Through her work, Mayer thus aimed to provoke concrete social changes, viewing artistic projects as powerful tools to establish a coalition between women from different geographic locales.

Throughout the entirety of the project, Mayer photographed the different workshops, lectures, and events taking place. She later exhibited these documents in a variety of art venues,

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134 For a more detailed discussion of Yaøyóloltl Castro and her activism, see Roberto Aarón Medina Salas, “Yan María Yaoyólolt y la Marcha Lésbica,” Política y cultura, no. 41 (2014): 233–37; De la Dehesa, Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil, 102. As part of her political strategies and beliefs, Yaøyóloltl Castro adapted her current indigenous name, though academic sources differ in the ways in which they identify the activist. For a discussion of the significance of her current name, see Mónica Mayer, “ARCHIVA: Obras maestras del arte feminista en México,” 2014-2013, Archivo Pinto Mi Raya.
including the Woman’s Building (fig. 2.5). In this installation, she presented manuscripts that detailed the conversations and exchanges that had taken place throughout the project, describing the ways in which women from Mexico emphasized racial and economic inequality in their feminist politics; the finished manuscripts contained text in Spanish and English (fig. 2.53). Mayer’s installation also included different forms of media, including texts written by the artist, as well as a variety of art images that alluded to the construction of gender in the history of Mexico. The installation reproduced the cover image of Mayer’s manuscript, for instance, including the relief of Coyolxauhqui, a pre-Columbian sculpture portraying a prominent female deity in Aztec culture. In addition, the artist included a reproduction of Kahlo’s My Nurse and I, juxtaposing this work with photographs from the different workshops and events linked to the Traducciones project. In this manner, Mayer’s installation functioned as an example of the forms of writing in Latin America later theorized by Norma Klahn, serving as “a site actively marked by gender, but where questions of class, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and generation have been inexorably present.” Mayer’s text relied on a variety of mediums, employing text and photography to explore the tentative – but productive – forms of dialogue she had fostered between women from different geographic regions. Indeed, the juxtaposition of different forms of media, containing texts in Spanish and English echoes the multivocal and complex dialogue fostered by the artist through this project, further suggesting the difficulties in establishing

136 Mexican authorities had only recently rediscovered and examined the particular relief of Coyolxauhqui chosen by Mayer for Traducciones in 1978. For more details on the historical role of Coyolxauhqui in Aztec culture, as well as details on the particular sculpture found in Mexico City, see Lourdes Cué, “Coyolxauhqui: La muerte de la diosa,” Artes de México, no. 96 (2009): 36–41.
137 For more details on this particular work by Kahlo, see Herrera, Frida, 218–22.
understanding between different communities of women. The different languages included in
the installation suggest the impossibility of eliminating disparate subjectivities, showing the
impossibility of constructing a universal feminist movement. In this manner, the formal and
visual qualities of the installation allowed Mayer to underscore the political messages of
resistance encouraged by different generations of Mexican feminist groups.

Describing the installation, Giunta emphasized the associations provoked by the inclusion
of photocopies. In her view, “the difficulty of the image, its precariousness, all indices of its
urgency, were taken up as resources with which to erase the parameters of canonical art.”139 In
addition, the visual components of the installation challenged simplistic understandings of a
“global sisterhood,” as the photographs detailed the specific cultural practices that affected the
daily life of women in Mexico. In this manner, the installation functioned as a “detailed,
historicized maps of the circuits of power,”140 a visual installation that illustrated the social
structures that affect women in an interconnected world. The booklet in the installation, which
detailed the controversies and disagreements that emerged between the participants, informed
viewers of the ways in which Mexican feminists repeatedly denounced the detrimental
intervention of the United States in Mexico, serving as an artistic and historical record of the
resilience of women in Mexico.

While Traducciones emerged out of the specific challenges faced by Mayer within the
FSW, the project echoed earlier forms of international exchange initiated by feminist artists. In
particular, an artistic project developed by Lacy anticipated the forms of translocal dialogue
Mayer developed in Traducciones. In 1979, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
organized an exhibition for Chicago’s The Dinner Party. This installation, produced through the

139 Giunta, “Feminisms and Emancipation,” 95.
140 Caren Kaplan, “The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice,” in Scattered Hegemonies:
collaborative artistic practices characteristic of feminist art, served as an attempt to represent women’s contributions to the overall history of art. For this opening, Lacy organized *The International Dinner Party*, a project that relied on the connections between women’s groups and activists around the world. For the project, Lacy contacted thousands of women, asking them to arrange dinners in their home countries honoring local women. Women in each of these local celebrations sent telegrams and other messages, and Lacy collected these, producing an installation at the San Francisco museum (fig. 2.54). In the case of Mexico, participants hosted a dinner honoring the efforts of Concha Michel, Adelina Zendejas, Amalia Caballero de Castillo Ledón and Elvira Trueba (figs. 2.55-2.56). Other activists, such as Victoria Jiménez, also attended the celebration.

Mayer’s *Traducciones* illustrates the artist’s ability to employ different artistic models to her advantage. While her project expands the reach of Lacy’s *The International Dinner Party*, Mayer also considered other forms of activist art that she had encountered in the Los Angeles art world. Through *Traducciones*, Mayer reimagined the artistic production of Fred Lonidier, one of the artists associated with LASCS. Throughout the 1970s, Lonidier developed a project that prefigured the strategies Mayer later employed in Mexico. In *The Health and Safety Game*, the artist explored the experiences of industrial workers who had suffered some form of workplace injury, exposing the safety hazards of their labor. Lonidier’s work derived from the interviews he carried out with these workers, as well as the artist’s in-depth research of the various

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143 Ibid.

144 See Eli Bartra, Anna M. Fernández Poncela, and Ana Lau, *Feminismo en México, ayer y hoy*.

145 Ibid.
industries involved in these accidents (fig. 2.5). As he completed interviews with workers, the artist corresponded with representatives of different industries; archival materials collected by Lonidier revealed the official responses received from institutions such as the United States General Administration Services of California (fig. 2.58). After learning about different accidents experienced by workers in a variety of industries and perusing government reports, Lonidier created large-scale installations for display in museums. The artist juxtaposed text with close-up photographs of the injuries experienced by the worker, forcing the viewer of the installation to consider the dire effects of the experience (fig. 2.59). In smaller type, Lonidier included the testimony of the worker herself who experienced this accident: “I can’t do my housework, I can’t do anything. Ever since I was fifteen years old I worked.” As noted by scholars, “Fred Lonidier’s Health and Safety Game is about the ‘handling’ of industrial injury and disease by corporate capitalism, pointing to the systemic character of everyday violence in the workplace.” In her writing, Mayer discussed this particular project, viewing the strategies employed by Lonidier as an effective way of making sense of larger social structures. In the installations she later produced for venues such as the Woman’s Building, Mayer echoed Lonidier’s project, using photographs and explanatory labels to describe social structures that shaped everyday experiences. Unlike Lonidier, who pointed towards the labor practices of the United States, Mayer employed her installation to describe the forms of dialogue that might forge connections between women in two different geographic regions, establishing a new form of feminist practice.

Like Lonidier, Mayer positioned herself as a documentarian of social structures, giving visual form to the interactions between feminist artists and activists from Mexico and the United

147 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
States. By recording and displaying the dialogue between these women, the artist employed *Traducciones* to provide a space for the voicing of disagreements and tension. Unlike the celebratory tone of *The International Dinner Party*, Mayer’s project aimed to work through the dissonant perspectives developed by women from different countries. Indeed, the artist has emphasized how the expectations of participants led to intense disagreement, with political activists from Mexico viewing the discussions of feminist art as irrelevant.\(^{148}\) Discussing the project several years after its completion, she also recalled the class tensions that emerged between feminists from Mexico and those of the United States, as the Mexican delegates felt that the workshops encouraged by their American counterparts were similar to the self-help workshops of capitalist entrepreneurs:

> one sector of Mexican feminists was highly perturbed by the workshop because they wanted solid information and they felt that our exercises were too similar to those used in the motivational courses championed by capitalism to increase worker productivity and further exploit them. To their mind, it was just one more trick on the part of Yankee imperialism. This triggered a major row… Suffice to say, passions became enflamed and two of the women came to blows!\(^{149}\)

Rather than suggesting a monolithic community of women with a clearly defined agenda, *Traducciones* emphasized the challenges of establishing coalitions between women from different geographic locales. These tensions, in fact, illustrate how the project allowed for difficult – but productive – forms of dialogue. Mayer fondly remembers the creation of connections between feminist activists and artists from both countries. In particular, the artist emphasized the seemingly endless potential that seemed to mark these exchanges: “What I remember are the several, fun moments we had; at home, with friends. I remember the warmth

\(^{148}\) Ibid.
\(^{149}\) Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis,” 8.
and enthusiasm of it all. I remember that we felt as though we could change the world. Nowadays, I just hope we can survive it.”

*Traducciones* also exemplified the interest in establishing networks of exchange in the Mexican art world of the 1970s. As such, the project resembled the artistic exchanges established between Mexican artists and other member of the international art world. In 1970, for instance, Ehrenberg established the Beau Geste Press, in Devon, England with Martha Hellion, David Mayor, Chris Welch, and Madeline Gallard. Through this independent press, Ehrenberg and his collaborators familiarized Western European audiences with the artistic production of Eastern European and Latin American artists. In addition, the Beau Geste Press founded the periodical *Schmuck*, which would focus individual issues on different geographic regions. In a larger discussion of the Beau Geste Press and the *Schmuck* periodical, Zanna Gilbert emphasized how the efforts of Ehrenberg, served as an early effort at establishing networks of collaboration and exchange between artists, regardless of the geographic context they occupied.

Unlike these earlier networks that connected Mexico City to other artistic circuits, *Traducciones* focused on gender inequality, aiming to establish a network of feminist artists and activists. Mayer strategically employed the model of exchange emerging in the international art circuits of the 1970s for a feminist pedagogical project. In doing so, the artist aligned her practice with larger questions of the ways in which feminist dialogue can develop between different communities of women. According to Mohanty, women’s studies programs of the First World have mostly encouraged limited – and politically suspect – forms of dialogue with Third

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152 Ibid., 186.
153 See Gilbert, “‘Something Unnameable in Common.’”
World women. In a form of dialogue Mohanty identified as “feminist-as-tourist,” scholars employed the experiences of Third World women to advance the notion of an “evolved U.S./Euro feminist,” a discursive formation that justified Western interventionism. In another form of feminist pedagogy she identified as “feminist-as-explorer,” Third World women were given more serious consideration, with entire courses built around topics such as “women in Latin America” or “third World women’s literature.”

This latter model, however, suggested that the experiences of women in the third world were ahistorical, aiming to represent a passive Third World women that was a victim of her primitive culture. This model also presented the efforts of Third World women as disconnected from the First World, dismissing the connections between different geographic regions.

Mayer’s project, aiming to establish a continuous dialogue between women of the First and Third world, conformed to Mohanty’s more expansive vision of feminist solidarity:

This curricular strategy is based on the premise that the local and the global are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory but exist simultaneously and constitute each other. It is then the links, the relationships, between the local and the global that are foregrounded, and these links are conceptual, material, temporal, contextual, and so on. This framework assumes a comparative focus and analysis of the directionality of power.

_Traducciones_, which highlighted the dissonance and tension that emerged between her classmates and local feminist activists, prefigured this particular form of feminist dialogue. The project served as an effort to establish a specific, temporal link between different groups, and move away from the simplistic notion of a “global sisterhood” that had operated in the UN conference of 1975. Mayer’s strategies functioned as a form of decolonization, a process that involved a “profound transformation of self, community, and governance structures. It can only

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154 See Mohanty, _Feminism without Borders_, 240.
155 See ibid., 241.
156 Ibid., 242.
be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination.”\(^{157}\)

By engaging in this form of exchange – which emphasized the specific and subjective experiences of Mexican women – Mayer was able to counter simplistic claims of a “universal” feminist movement. Indeed, *Traducciones* sought to introduce Mexican artists and activists to a particular model of feminist art, emphasizing the importance of developing projects that exposed the social structures that shaped the experiences of local women. Mayer therefore resisted the impulse to suggest that her peers acted as the more “enlightened,” liberated women from Los Angeles that would “save” women from Mexico City. In this manner, she anticipated later critiques developed by feminist art historians. Indeed, as noted by Meskimmon, art historical narratives have frequently positioned feminist art as a creative process originating in the United States and Europe, emanating from the First World. In this simplistic narrative, feminist artists from the Third World only mimic and emulate the artistic proposals of the originators of feminist art.\(^{158}\) In contrast, Mayer’s *Traducciones* emphasized the histories of local Mexican feminist groups, highlighting how women’s activism in the country preceded any intervention from the United States. By establishing networks of exchange, Mayer sidestepped the distinction between “Mexican” and “American” art prevalent in histories of artistic production. The project referred to the artistic practices developed in both Mexico and the United States, but worked outside the parameters of these different artistic contexts, allowing Mayer to experiment in her efforts to develop a new form of artistic practice. The circulatory practices developed by the artist thus challenged the ways in which scholars might construct a history of feminist art.

\(^{157}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{158}\) See Meskimmon, “Chronology through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally.”
Conclusion

Mayer’s experiences in Los Angeles – and the artistic projects she developed throughout this period – marked a turning point in her career. As a graduate of the ENAP, she sought out various artistic strategies as a means to aid her in her artistic and feminist goals. In the short period of time she spent outside of Mexico, she navigated a dense network of artists and activists, producing forms of art that reveal her familiarity with a broad range of artistic traditions. Her work, a hybrid of the expectations placed on contemporary artists by figures such as Acha, Lacy, and others, emerged in the connections and interstices between translocal networks of exchange.

Her last major project associated with the FSW, Traducciones, established connections between feminist artists and activists in different regions of the world, an artistic project that positioned translocal exchange and negotiation as a form of art itself. Returning to Mexico in the early 1980s, Mayer would continue this effort to forge connections between different women in different regions of the world. The forms of feminist art she would develop throughout the rest of her career – deployed in a Mexican context – remain linked to the years she lived, studied, and worked in Los Angeles. Her artistic production repeatedly considered multiple artistic traditions, mediating the differences between the art world of the United States and Mexico. Through her artistic projects, she participated in larger process of exchange and negotiation, becoming an important figure in the transmission of feminist discourses across different geographic regions.

By introducing her peers to the forms of feminist activity and artistic practice developing in Mexico City in the late 1970s, Mayer challenged the underlying assumptions about feminist art fostered by the FSW. By ignoring developments outside of the United States, members of the Woman’s Building and the FSW constructed a narrative that positioned the First World as the
originator of the feminist movement, and feminist art itself. Indeed, Mayer’s studies in Los Angeles prompted her to develop an artistic project that questioned the central position occupied by artists and activists in historical narratives of the feminist movement. The translocal dialogue fostered in Traducciones prompted all participants to recognize the disparate forms of feminist activity that had developed in Mexico and the United States, revealing how women in these different locales responded to different histories and social structures. In addition, Mayer encouraged her collaborators to recognize the ways in which different women, working and challenging different social structures, could contribute to a larger feminist movement. In this manner, Mayer shifted the perspectives of other artists and activists, inspiring future scholars to consider the translocal and polyvocal nature of feminist artistic networks. Indeed, Mayer’s artistic project did not only aim to challenge the existing sexism of Mexico and the United States, but aimed to challenge the forms of occlusion that could emerge within feminists themselves.
Chapter 3: MAYER’S RETURN TO MEXICO: TRANSLATING THE FSW MODEL OF FEMINIST ART TO LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN AUDIENCES

After completing her studies at the FSW, Mónica Mayer returned to Mexico City in 1980. Even before she left California, however, the artist considered the larger goals of her career, hoping to employ in her home country the model of feminist artistic instruction she learned in California. In a letter written to her instructors at the FSW, she detailed the various challenges she anticipated facing upon her return, noting for instance, that she would probably have to teach in an existing artistic institution, where more of the faculty and staff would be male. Describing her experiences in California, she noted: “In Los Angeles I have found different models for women working together. I don't know how we will adapt this information in Mexico.”

This chapter explores this specific period in Mayer’s career, a moment in which she employed the model of feminist artistic instruction developed by the FSW in her local, Mexican context. In her projects of this period, Mayer developed a form of artistic practice that distinguished her from other Mexican artists of the time. In this reading of Mayer’s work, I position her feminist art collectives as an extension of her project Traducciones. Her artistic production served as a form of translocal artistic dialogue, allowing her to consider the specific conditions in the Mexican artistic circuits of the 1980s, even while establishing links with earlier feminist artists of the United States.

In particular, I analyze the artistic projects produced by the feminist art collectives Mayer founded in this period, TyR and PGN. These groups developed new forms of gender representation, challenging the expectations of Mexican society as a whole, as well as the

1 Mayer, “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool.”
conventions established by the Mexican art world. Through these collectives, Mayer questioned and challenged the representations of femininity and maternity prevalent in modern Mexican art. In this manner, she continued her earlier critiques of the art historical canon, employing specific strategies that linked to the model of feminist art developed by the FSW. Through her artistic efforts in this period, the artist adapted – or translated – the model of feminist pedagogy and artistic practice of the West Coast of California, creating a form of feminist art legible to local Mexican audiences. Focusing attention on Mayer’s creative process, I highlight the strategic decisions made by the artist as she fostered the emergence of feminist art in Mexico City. In this analysis, I emphasize how translocal translation shaped the emergence of a feminist art movement in Mexico, providing an understanding that remains absent in available art historical narratives. The transmission and exchanges between feminist activists in different locales informed Mayer’s artistic activity, shaping the emergence of an artistic movement in Mexico City that aimed to transform women’s social roles.

**Early Efforts in Feminist Pedagogy: Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Female Scribes and Portraitists, TyR)**

After completing her studies at the FSW, Mayer returned to Mexico with Lerma. In the early 1980s, the two artists engaged in a series of international lectures, which I detail in the following chapter. Mayer, however, soon began a deliberate effort to employ the strategies she had learned in California within the contemporary Mexican art world. Describing her goal of building a feminist art movement in her home country, she stated:

In 1982, I presented myself to José de Santiago, who at that moment was the director of graduate studies at San Carlos. I proposed a course in feminist art to practice what I had learned in Los Angeles. To my surprise, he immediately accepted, and that is how I
carried out a workshop entitled *La Mujer en el Arte (Women in Art)*, which was made up of artists, historians, and feminists of different professions.\(^2\)

Through this workshop, Mayer continued earlier efforts to familiarize Mexican audiences with the model of feminist art that had developed in the United States. In 1976, after completing her two-week workshop with Chicago, she participated in a roundtable discussion with Juana Gutiérrez and Armando Torres Michúa at the ENAP, focusing on feminist art (fig. 3.1).

The *La Mujer en el Arte* workshop, however, was much more ambitious. Mayer’s group aimed to find past examples of women artists working in Mexico, a group of artists that earlier generations of art historians had disregarded. These efforts echoed the activities of the Feminist Art Program (FAP) at Fresno, as well as the Cal Arts Feminist Art Program of the 1970s. Like Chicago and other artists in the United States, Mayer and her collaborators experienced not only disinterest from the institution, but also outright hostility. Mayer described how several instructors and workers at the institution would lock the group’s classroom as a form of protest.\(^3\)

Despite the similarities with earlier feminist programs of the United States, Mayer faced other challenges that related to the specific conditions of the Mexican art world. As discussed in previous chapters, when Chicago proposed the creation of a feminist art program in Fresno, several academic institutions in the United States were in the process of establishing women’s studies programs. In contrast, Mayer launched her workshop at a moment in which universities and other institutions in Mexico had yet to consider the relationship between gender and the production of academic knowledge. According to Eli Bartra, these institutional conditions were partly the result of the perspective espoused by feminist activists of the 1970s; working within institutions, in their view, would compromise the critical perspective of feminism itself, leading

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\(^3\) See Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis.”
to a “perversion” of the movement. The broader institutional changes that would establish academic centers focused on gender issues would not take place until the 1990s.

The tense relationship between artists and activists in Mexico also affected Mayer’s workshop. Scholars of feminist art in the United States, in fact, have emphasized the reciprocal relationship that developed between feminist activists and artists, as organizers viewed the artistic projects of the latter group as powerful tools that could transform cultural attitudes and social expectations. In contrast, Mexican feminist activists viewed the arts with suspicion. As described by Mayer, “if in the Left it was considered bourgeois to discuss feminism, within the feminist movement it was considered bourgeois to discuss art.” Mayer’s later collaborator, Bustamante, emphasized the lack of interest from activists to learn about art: “I would complain, as a feminist artist, that feminists in general also had this sickness of sort, a visual illiteracy; several times we realized that our work did not echo among feminists, because they did not understand it or they did not care. Feminists were not approaching women artists or artists in general.”

Despite these challenges, Mayer persisted in her efforts. In her workshop, she encouraged participants to read texts considered as foundational in feminist art history, including the work of Chicago, Nochlin, Lippard, and Germaine Greer. Participants in Mayer’s workshop were able to familiarize themselves with a model of feminist artistic practice that questioned existing art historical narratives. In this manner, members of the workshop engaged in practices later theorized by Griselda Pollock as the “virtual feminist museum,” establishing the workshop

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6 Terry Wolverton, for instance, described the foundation of the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles in 1973 as the culmination of several years of activity by women artists who were energized by the feminist movement of the United States.” See Terry Wolverton, “Introduction,” in From Site to Vision, 19.
7 McCaughan, “Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence,” 55.
8 Carlos Arias and Magali Lara, “¿Arte feminista?,” Debate Feminista, April 2001, 279.
9 Barbosa Sánchez, 100.
as a site for critical “re-visions” which would allow for the creation of new art historical narratives. According to Pollock, the goal of these feminist strategies was not to produce a new, alternative canon, but rather to establish the potential for new readings and interpretations of the visual arts, countering the influence of museums and other artistic institutions.

The workshop led Mayer to the creation of a formalized feminist art collective: TyR. As noted by the artist, the group was composed of a wide variety of participants from distinct fields:

_Tlacuilas y Retrateras_ was made up of Ana Victoria Jiménez (photographer and editor, who already had a long history as a militant and organizer of feminist art projects), Karen Cordero and Nicola Coleby, both historians, and artists Patricia Torres, Elizabeth Valenzuela, Lorena Loaiza, Ruth Albores, and Consuelo Almeida, as well as the cultural promoter Marcela Ramírez.

The name chosen for the collective had a special significance, as the group alluded to the _tlacuilos_ of the pre-Columbian era, the scribes responsible for the production of codex pictograms. The demise of _tlacuilos_ in the Americas, in fact, related to the forms of historical omission prompted by colonialism. As discussed by Angel Rama, the establishment of the Spanish Empire in the 1500s resulted in a dramatic transformation of the ways in which social subjects recorded their history in the region: “the exclusive place of writing in Latin American societies seemed not to spring from social life but rather be imposed upon it and to force it into a mold not all made to measure.” With the establishment of the Spanish empire, the forms of pictographic writing developed by _tlacuilos_ gave way to the official, authoritative reports of the Spanish Empire. These reports, favoring the triumphant narratives of the conquerors, disregarded the experiences of the continent’s indigenous populations, prompting the erasure –

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11 Ibid.
13 See Barbosa Sánchez, 101.
and outright destruction – of countless cultural groups. Alluding to these earlier historical events, the feminist collective would encourage the creation of new art historical narratives that considered the contributions of women artists. In this manner, Mayer directly fostered the creation of new scholarly texts in Spanish focused on the intersections between feminist theory, artistic practice, and women artists in Mexico.

TyR thus blurred the lines between activism, scholarly research, and artistic practice. Members of the collective launched an in-depth research project focused on nearly 400 women artists; the project also encompassed interviews with art students, curators, critics, and other members of Mexico’s arts scene. The collective presented the results of this research in a special issue of the feminist journal *Fem*, published in 1984. The issue also included a detailed “plan of action,” explaining how the collective sought to confront the specific challenges faced by contemporary women artists in Mexico. Like several members of the FSW, TyR underscored the importance of resources such as day-care centers for women artists; the collective also emphasized the ways in which artistic projects could disseminate a feminist political consciousness among the public. TyR also participated in the large-scale protest against sexual violence organized by the Red Nacional de Mujeres, taking place at the Juárez monument on October 7, 1983.

15 Barbosa Sánchez, 101.
16 “Tlacuilas y Retrateras,” *Fem* IX, no. 33 (April-May 1984): 41–44. This entire issue of *Fem* explored women’s participation in the visual arts, echoing the earlier special issue of the journal *Artes Visuales* discussed in chapter 1; the cover featured an illustration by Lara. *Fem* was founded by Guatemalan art and literary critic Alaide Foppa, and Margarita García Flores. For more on this publication, and how it related to translocal feminist efforts, see Millán, “Politics of Translation in Contemporary Mexican Feminism,” 152.
Despite this wide breadth of interests and activities, scholars frequently associate TyR to a large-scale event organized in the summer of 1984: *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*. According to Mayer, this consisted of a *proyecto visual* (visual project) at the Academy of San Carlos.\(^{19}\) The event referred to the lavish birthday celebrations for *quinceañeras* (fifteen-year-old girls) that were prevalent in Mexico, a tradition that resembled debutante balls of the United States.\(^{20}\) In this version of the *quinceañera*, TyR organized a number of public artistic actions that explored the gendered rituals associated with these celebrations.

The invitation produced for the event suggested the critical perspective of the collective’s members (figs. 3.2-3.3). An image of a *quinceañera*, dressed in a glamorous dress, was juxtaposed with splashes of blue ink and crossed out with prominent red stripes. The imagery in the invitation thus suggests the refusal to accept the idealized images of *quinceañeras* in the society pages of newspapers. In addition, the invitation reproduced the questions that had guided the examinations of TyR, and would serve as the inspiration for the artistic events at the party, such as “Why does the *fiesta de quince años* exist?” or “Is this a feminine initiation rite derived from pre-Hispanic culture, or a tradition imported from developed countries?” These questions relate to the anxiety that surrounded femininity in 1980s Mexico. In particular, the interest in determining the origins of the celebration echoed earlier anxieties around the corrupting influence of foreign “*flapperistas*” in the post-revolutionary period.\(^{21}\) The invitation for the

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event, therefore, illustrated the authority given to pre-Hispanic (and therefore, “authentic”) traditions, and the suspicion surrounding “imported” rituals in Mexican society.

Archival photographs reveal the amount of careful planning that went into the *proyecto visual*. Victoria Jiménez – a participant in Mayer’s earlier *Traducciones* project – photographed Mayer and several collaborators rehearsing the procession of the *quinceañera party*. Mayer is accompanied by Lerma, and the photograph also shows Bustamante (fig. 3.4). As part of the proceedings, members of the collective draped the academy’s copy of the *Victory of Samothrace* statue with a massive *quinceañera* gown, ensuring the statue conformed to the standards of *quinceañera* parties (fig. 3.5).

The night of the event, each of the women artists participating in the procession walked around with their *chambelanes*, or male escorts, wearing an elaborate outfit produced for the occasion. A photograph of the event, for instance, shows Bustamante wearing a makeshift *quinceañera* gown, with gauzy layers of fabric that failed to conceal the trousers she was wearing underneath; the artist also sported a decorated hat and a small basket she carried with her gloved hands (figs. 3.6). Other members of the procession also wore imaginative outfits (fig. 3.7). According to Mayer, “those who were not wearing a chastity belt were wearing their crinoline inside out, or had a dress covered in hand-prints.”

These dresses emphasized how traditional *quinceañeras* symbolically transformed young women into objects of consumption, with party guests examining and evaluating their bodies.

Throughout the night, members of the TyR group worked together to ensure the “festive” nature of the event. Jiménez, for instance, detailed how she spent most of her time checking different dry ice containers throughout the venue, as the clouds of smoke were central to any

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quinceañera party. In addition, the artists brought out a massive cake in the shape of a slipper. Other members of Mexico’s art world were incorporated into the event, with the art critic Raquel Tibol serving as a godmother for the quinceañera and painter José Luis Cuevas as a godfather.

In her discussion of La fiesta, Barbosa Sánchez emphasized the ways in which it represented an exploration of gender norms in contemporary Mexican art, thereby establishing the project as an important example of feminist art of the period. Indeed, through this project, Mayer and the other participants of TyR parodied the specific practices associated with this Mexican tradition. In this manner, the collective explored religious practices and festivities that promoted innocent, feminine virtue, a rite of a passage in which fathers presented their young daughters to society. The proyecto visual of the collective showcased the ways in which traditional expectations of virginal, chaste femininity – an expectation challenged repeatedly by women’s groups and feminist activists throughout the twentieth-century – remained intact in the contemporary Mexico of the 1980s. In addition, the project emphasized the ways in which the construction of femininity intersected with other stark social division in Mexican society, as the economic and cultural elites of the country proclaim their social position through lavish quinceañera parties.

However, the full significance of the project – and its position as a form of feminist art – derived from the ways the members of TyR challenged prevailing systems of gender representation in Mexican art. Through La fiesta, TyR critiqued not only the social event of quinceañeras, but also the systems of representations that upheld gender hierarchies in the visual arts. The members of the collective adapted contemporary forms of artistic production in

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23 Ana Victoria Jiménez, in Liz Misterio, La Mítica Fiesta de Quince Años, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICeWU2ihk7Y. This documentary video, consisting of interviews and reconstructed drawings of La fiesta de quince años, was displayed in the “When in Doubt…Ask” exhibition.  
24 See Mayer, Rosa chillante, 30.  
25 See Barbosa Sánchez, 111.
Mexico and the United States, positioning TyR within a network of influences and experimentation that they employed to their advantage. By alluding and transforming the strategies of the FSW, Mayer and her colleagues fostered the emergence of an art movement that aimed to transform gender roles and existing social structures. Through these processes, members of TyR aimed to transform the role of gender in the visual arts of Mexico, an ambitious goal that would affect their contemporary peers and later generations of women artists in the country.

By the time in which TyR developed *La fiesta*, critics and scholars of the Mexican art world were familiar with the model of collective artistic practice established by *los grupos*. Inviting the general public to a “party,” and asking them to participate in a celebration, Mayer and the other TyR members echoed the public celebrations organized by Tepito Arte Acá.²⁶ Moreover, Acha’s views on non-objectual art were also flourishing throughout the Latin American region, providing contemporary artist with a model of public, participatory art. In this manner, *La fiesta* served as an extension of these earlier public interventions by contemporary artists in Mexico.

By focusing specific attention on *quinceañeras*, TyR employed the strategies of *los grupos* and non-objectual art to explore gender in contemporary Mexican society. Staging an over-the-top procession of women with their *chambelanes* in the Academy of San Carlos, Mayer and her collaborators developed an extensive project that also echoed the artistic strategies of earlier women artists in Mexico. María Izquierdo, for instance, produced paintings and images that allowed her to construct an alternative form of *mexicanidad* and femininity in the post-revolutionary period.²⁷ Through her paintings, Izquierdo challenged the model of representation

²⁶ See *The Age of Discrepancies*, 236.
²⁷ See Greeley, “Painting Mexican Identities.”
developed by the contemporary Mexican muralists. Similarly, TyR employed humor and femininity in contemporary art, echoing the efforts of los grupos, but exploring topics and issues that viewed as apolitical or unimportant by these earlier collectives. In this manner, *La fiesta* critiqued contemporary artistic practices that disregarded explorations around gender and femininity. The belabored production of images of femininity within *La fiesta* thus challenged the seemingly “more serious” and “political” forms of art developed by los grupos. Despite the visual qualities of the project, *La fiesta* represented a pointed critique to the ways in which the social and cultural elites devote immense resources to the social construction of passive, virginal femininity.

While the project distinguished itself from the efforts of contemporary Mexican artists, Mayer and her collaborators also established a dialogue with feminist artists of the United States. Previous scholars have noted, for instance, how the activities of TyR paralleled the activities the Guerrilla Girls collective, a feminist art group interested in public protests and other actions that denounce the sexism of art institutions, such as museums and galleries. In addition, Mayer stated that the project echoed earlier works developed by Lacy:

*[La fiesta] was conceptualized as a months-long social intervention similar to the project *Making it Safe*, where I worked with Suzanne Lacy. She described these projects as ‘Non-audience oriented performance’ and in Mexico, we began to describe these as *proyectos visuales*.*

The artist aligned *La fiesta* to a specific project of the late 1970s that dealt with the problem of sexual violence and assault in California. In my view, however, the *proyecto visual* by TyR more closely paralleled the model of public feminist art developed by Lacy and Labowitz during

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28 See McCaughan, “Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence,” 55.
29 See ibid., 57.
30 Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis.”
The project by TyR functioned as a provocative media statement, one that would result in compelling visual images that mass media outlets could reproduce and distribute. Through the seemingly frivolous celebration of a party, members of TyR aimed to employ mass media outlets to their advantage.

In addition, several of the art objects presented at La fiesta established a visual dialogue with the forms of artistic production developed at the FAP and the FSW. Julia de la Fuente, for instance presented an installation with different objects that related to the quinceañera. In her work, she juxtaposed a small figurine in a virginal dress with multiple photographs of women in bridal gowns, accompanied by men in formal attire (fig. 3.8). The installation also included other small objects, such as a slipper and an airmail envelope. Through this work, de la Fuente employed the “low art” techniques that feminist artists of the United States had reevaluated throughout the 1970s. Her installation, however, also included a prominent photographic image of Pedro Infante, a prominent icon in Mexico’s Golden Age of cinema. The work thus pointed towards the powerful representations of masculinity and femininity in Mexican film, particularly those developed in the post-revolutionary period. Like the larger visual project of La fiesta, the installation questioned the representational systems that had naturalized particular gender roles in Mexico.

More specifically, the goals of this public party echoed the large-scale installation of Womanhouse from 1972. The procession of women artists with chambelanes, the presentation of a massive, quinceañera cake in San Carlos, bring to mind specific rooms and installations

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31 See Lacy and Labowitz, “Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance.”
32 For a discussion of this iconic figure in Mexican cinema, see Gustavo García, No Me Parezco a Nadie: La Vida de Pedro Infante (Mexico City: Clio, 1994).
33 For a detailed examination of the connections between film representations and gender roles in Mexico, see Julia Tuñón, Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano: La construcción de una imagen, 1939-1952 (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1998).
from Womanhouse, such as the *Bridal Staircase* by Kathy Huberland. Like Womanhouse, *La fiesta* challenged gender expectations by developing an artistic project that reveled in excessive femininity; the project also aimed to introduce mainstream audiences to a particular model of feminist art. Instead of recreating the installations at *Womanhouse*, however, Mayer and her collaborators considered the specific local traditions that shaped the construction of modern Mexican femininity. In this manner, the members of TyR established a translocal dialogue with earlier feminist art while still focusing their attention on the specific social structures of Mexico. Exploring similar themes – but considering the geographically specific social rituals related to femininity – women from both countries aided in the establishment of feminist coalitions. In this manner, both groups of women artists explored the ways in which society naturalizes particular forms of femininity through celebrations such as weddings or *quinceañeras*. As artists, both groups of women emphasized the visual representations associated with these events.

When describing *Womanhouse*, Chicago emphasized how the construction of the installation was a painful, visceral exercise, emphasizing the seriousness of the endeavor. In contrast, *La fiesta* was a more haphazard affair, one punctuated by humor and irreverence in multiple ways. In a written discussion, Mayer described the art installations of *La fiesta* in a less somber tone, even describing the sculpture at the Academy of San Carlos as a proud *quinceañera*: “The day of the event, at the entrance of the Academy, the *Victoria de Samotracia* received the public dressed as a *quinceañera* in clouds of dry ice.” The humorous nature of *La fiesta* is also evident in the title of a theatrical performance presented by Carmen Boullosa at the event: *Cocinar hombres* (*To Cook Men*). The use of humor throughout the visual project linked the

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34 See Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 104.
event to the strategies employed by Mexican art collectives, particularly No Grupo. The use of humor would remain an ongoing point of contention with local feminist activists. As explained by Bustamante, feminist activists were “very solemn,” an attitude that made them dismissive of the production of feminist artists.

Even though *La fiesta* functioned as a form of dialogue with earlier feminist artistic projects, the reception of these projects differed significantly. The participants of *Womanhouse* emphasized the massive “success” or the project, as thousands of visitors were able to view the different installations; mainstream publications such as *Time* magazine described the installation and the views of the artists. In contrast, Mayer and her collaborators faced a public that was confused by the project as a whole. Reflecting on the event several years later, the artist noted how the public viewed the performances in *La fiesta* as examples of “bad acting.” In fact, the negative reaction from Tibol, one of the art critics present at the event, prompted Mayer and Bustamante to write a letter to a newspaper, describing her negative reaction as an artistic performance, perfectly embodying the role of the “scolding and disrespectful” mother of the quinceañera. Aware that the art critic would contact Mayer to demand an apology, Bustamante “trained” the artist, rehearsing the ways in which she would defend herself against the art critic.

These reactions from the public may be viewed as the result of the deeply ingrained misogyny that dismisses explorations of feminine subject matter such as *La fiesta*. These reactions also relate to the considerations raised by Acha in his discussions of contemporary Latin American artists. In his view, local audiences were either uninterested or unprepared for

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36 For a larger analysis of the political significance of irreverent humor in No Grupo, see Costantino, “Lo erotic, lo exotico y el taco.”
38 See Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 32; Mayer, “Feminism and Art Education: From Loving Education to Education through Osmosis,” 10.
particular forms of artistic production, given the deficiencies in artistic instruction in schools and other institutions in the region. Audiences in Mexico City with little familiarity with the forms of artistic production deployed by TyR, were perhaps dismissive not because of the goals of the collective, but because of the specific strategies employed by the artists.

Nonetheless, the different events organized as part of La fiesta challenged the image of passive, selfless quinceañeras, resulting in a new form of gender representation in the visual arts of Mexico. Echoing the early exhibition efforts of Mayer, TyR developed an image of femininity that differed from the representations of abnegación, or selflessness of the Mexican Muralists. In this manner, the action of walking in a risqué dress literally made out of meat, served as a pointed critique of the sexualization of the female body in canon of modern Mexican art. As an artistic intervention, La fiesta challenged the expectations of Mexican society, but the forms of art that had created authoritative representations of mexicanidad, modernity, and femininity.

Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder, PGN)

In 1983, before the events of La fiesta and the dissolution of TyR, Mayer founded PGN with two other artists from Mexico, Bustamante and Herminia Dosal. Describing the goals of the group to journalist Eduardo Camacho at the time, the group emphasized the potential for artistic practice to expose social problems, focusing attention on sexual violence against women. In her own reflections on the emergence of the collective, Mayer echoed this perspective, describing the main goals of the group:

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40 See Acha, El arte y su distribución, 199.
Mayer also explained the significance of the collective’s name. Black hen powder was believed to be a useful remedy against the *mal de ojo*, or evil eye in Mexican folk traditions; as women artists in Mexico, and feminist artists in particular, they felt the need for as much protection as possible. In this allusion to magical powers, PGN resembled earlier forms of feminist activist in the United States, such as W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), a political organization active in the late 1960s in the United States, particularly around New York. By seeking to analyze representations of women in both the visual arts and mass media systems, PGN positioned itself within the same artistic practices developed by Lacy, Labowitz and their collaborators in the late 1970s. PGN thus aimed to produce novel, intriguing forms of public art that would attract the attention of media outlets.

By confronting mass media systems, Mayer and her collaborators in PGN revealed the ambitious scope of their feminist artistic project. The artists of this collective were not content to produce works that would only be visible in museums and galleries. Recognizing the limited reach of these traditional art venues, PGN sought to present their feminist art proposals to millions of Mexican women, altering the perceptions and attitudes of the public. By seeking to produce images and representations that would circulate in newspapers and television, PGN sought to shape the direction of artistic practice and feminist activism in the nation.

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43 See ibid.
44 For a larger discussion of W.I.T.C.H. and its relation to other feminist groups of the period, such as the Redstockings, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
One of the largest efforts initiated by the collective was the 1983 project, *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz* (*Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies*); this artistic intervention coincided with the aforementioned public protest against sexual violence organized by the Red Nacional de Mujeres. The title of the piece invokes President Benito Juárez’s proclamation that “*el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz* (peace is respecting the rights of others),” a ubiquitous phrase in contemporary Mexico. PGN’s transformation of the phrase, however, emphasized how bodily violence – and particularly sexual violence – was prevalent in the country. In this project, PGN led a protest march to the Juárez monument in Mexico City. The artists of the collective distributed bags of *polvos* among the public, and they read out a list of ingredients needed to give the evil eye to rapists (figs. 3.9-3.10). The list, later published in *Fem*, included ingredients such as “20 kgs. of the shouts and fits of women rising in anger” and “1 dash of legislators interested in the social changes demanded by women” (fig. 3.11).

This public art project resembled earlier efforts by Mexican art collectives to stage unexpected events in Mexico City’s urban spaces. In 1973, for example, Proceso Pentágono presented *El secuestro* (*Kidnapping*) near the Institutional Nacional de Bellas Artes, which hosted the exhibition “A nivel informativo” (fig. 3.12). In this public action, one of the members of the collective mingled with bystanders in the crowd, until the moment when the other members of the collective threw a sack over him, and then carried him away. In this manner, Proceso Pentágono alluded to the forms of political repression and state violence they later denounced in the *Pentágono* installation of 1977.

*El respeto*, however, focused attention on gendered forms of violence, distinguishing the project from the artistic exercises of *los grupos*. As a public action denouncing sexual violence,

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45 Ibid.
the PGN project related to the numerous marches and protests organized by women’s organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1976, for instance, feminist activist Indra Olavarrieta carried out a theatrical performance with effigies representing “patriarchal characters” in front of the Monumento a la Madre (Mothers’ Monument) in Mexico City (fig. 3.13). Other protests of the time included a march protesting violence against women in 1987 (fig. 3.14). In addition, the project related to the growing number of organizations that provided resources for survivors of sexual violence, including the Centro de Apoyo a Mujeres Violadas (CAMVAD), founded in 1979, as well as the Colectivo de Lucha contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres (COVAC), founded in 1984.49

But PGN served as an art collective, distinguishing the group from other Mexican activist organizations. By casting a “spell” at the Juárez monument, PGN sought to produce appealing images that would counteract the sexualized images in mass media outlets. A prominent ingredient included in the magic spell was “3 dozen messages of responsible reporters that will stop producing images that promote rape.” The project counteracted the numerous sexualized images included in the city’s nota roja, or tabloid journalism, which had also been the subject of earlier artistic projects in Mexico. In the late 1970s, Alejandro Jodorowsky worked as a guest editor for the magazine Sucesos para todos, directing the production of numerous issues that reveled in sexual images (figs. 3.15-3.16). While Jodorowsky’s efforts parodied the conventions of tabloid journalism, PGN denounced the social and political structures that glamorized sexual violence against women. Mayer and her collaborators thus denounced the circulation of these images in mass media, as well as the public that avidly consumed these

47 This site was particularly popular for feminist protests; I detail the specific relationship between the monument and Mayer’s artistic production later in this chapter.
representations. As visual artists, the members of PGN sought the production and distribution of different images, encouraging their audiences to develop a new understanding of gender roles in Mexican society. In this manner, the artists sought to transform society itself through their artistic production, aiding the larger forms of feminist activism developing in the country.

PGN’s public art project adapted earlier examples of public feminist art developed in the United States to a local, Mexican urban setting. In particular, the project echoed the strategies developed in the project *In Mourning and In Rage* from 1977. In this work, Lacy and Labowitz had sought to denounce the forms of media coverage that surrounded a series of murders, viewing the images presented in publications such as the *Los Angeles Times* as exploitative and sensationalistic. In the span of a few weeks, the two artists gathered together supporters and other participants to stage an elaborate event in the city of Los Angeles (figs. 3.17-3.18). On December 13, 1977, a procession of cars drove from the Woman’s Building to the Los Angeles City Hall:

Upon arriving at City Hall, nine figures cloaked in black and one woman dressed in scarlet emerged from the caravan. Representing the strangler’s ten victims up to that time, the woman in black wore headdresses that made them seven feet tall and were shaped like the tops of coffin.53

Describing the project, Lacy emphasized the ways in which the event at City Hall received mass media coverage, including “all local television news and many statewide channels. Some coverage reached as far as France.” The extensive forms of media coverage, in fact, were central to the project. The organizers of the event planned the public action in minute detail,

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 71.
54 Lacy, *Leaving Art*, 103.
ensuring that newspaper photographers could record the event with ease; the banner carried by participants, for instance, was designed to fit the horizontal frame of a camera.55

In a similar manner, the artists of PGN aimed to produce appealing, visual images of their public actions, dramatically casting a spell within the urban spaces of Mexico City. Moreover, in their allusion to polvos, the artists specifically referred to religious practices and traditions relevant to Mexican audiences. Positioning themselves as curanderas, the artists of PGN followed the directives of feminist artists from the United States. As described by Lacy and Labowitz, reimagining earlier, feminine archetypes remained one of the most effective ways of combating the images in mass media systems: “If you need a push, look at mythological images; in the case of women, for example, many images reflect positive expressions of power, even though they have accrued negative connotations in this culture. These images need to be reclaimed.”56 Deploying the polvos, the artists of PGN reclaimed the image of curanderas in Mexican society, positioning the casting of spells as a feminist action in contemporary Mexico. Through their public artistic action, PGN engaged in a translocal dialogue that relied on the efforts of feminist artists in both Mexico City and Los Angeles.

In Mourning and In Rage had ended with a petition delivered to members of City Hall, with the artists demanding specific actions from government authorities and the police. In contrast, the artists of PGN only humorously alluded to legislators and the government, positioning the collective as a group within Mexican feminist activism that resisted collaboration with the state. The artists of PGN, like some feminist activists of the post-Tlatelolco period, were hesitant to rely on the institutions of the Mexican state. As described by María Luisa Tarrés, the brutal forms of repression deployed in the Tlatelolco massacre evidenced the

55 See Irish, Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between, 71.
56 Lacy and Labowitz, “Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance,” 129.
contempt of the government, prompting several activists to resist any connections with the Mexican government. Similarly, PGN was wary of police action, resulting in an artistic project that rejected any formal connections with the state.

While the archival photographs of *El respeto* provide a basic understanding of the visual strategies employed by Mayer and her collaborators, an important component of the artistic project remains missing in these images; the project allowed for the creation of a community of women publically denouncing sexual violence. Indeed, by casting a spell, PGN encouraged other women to voice their frustrations against a social order that minimized and disregarded the experiences of sexual assault survivors. While Mayer emphasized how the project challenged the imagery in mass media outlets and served as an artistic project, *El respeto* also allowed participants to consider their own individual experiences of sexual violence as part of a larger social problem. In this manner, the spell by PGN resembled other collective efforts to denounce sexual violence. Indeed, the public and vocal components of the project echoed the original *Take Back the Night* protests that originally emerged in the context of the San Francisco anti-pornography conference of 1978, where Mayer had worked in close collaboration with Lacy. Moreover, *El respeto* coincided with the numerous *Take Back the Night* protests organized in the later twentieth century. As other women in different communities, the artists and participants of *El respeto* employed an ephemeral public event as a way to shift discussions around sexual violence.

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57 See María Luisa Tarrés, “Discurso y acción política feminista,” in *Miradas feministas sobre las mexicanas del siglo XX*.
¡MADRES!

After the public art events focused on the issue of sexual violence, PGN initiated another extensive project that further explored women’s roles in society: ¡MADRES! (Mothers!). As humorously described by Mayer, ¡MADRES! examined the ways in which motherhood affected artistic production, serving as an intervention that explored the seemingly separate roles of “artist” and “mother” in contemporary Mexican society: “We established ¡MADRES! as a way to integrate life and art; the first step, therefore, was to get pregnant, to fully understand the subject. Naturally, we had the support from our husbands, who, as artists, completely understood our intentions.”

While Mayer’s description suggests a light-hearted approach, ¡MADRES! consisted of numerous – and extensive – artistic projects that developed throughout the 1980s.

As part of this project, Mayer and Bustamante began sending out envíos, or mail art missives, to artistic institutions, feminist groups, and mass media outlets (figs. 3.19-3.20). These examples of mail art echoed Mayer’s earlier artistic production, such as the postcards from the “Lo normal” exhibition, as each envío consisted of a dense collage with photocopies, drawings, and statements in a variety of lettering, including typewritten words and handwritten scribbles. The artists arranged these components in a haphazard manner, with the lettering going in different directions. The envíos resemble the stereotypical conventions of ransom notes, as though the artists had composed their messages in a furtive, clandestine manner. These mail art missives focused on the relationship between maternity and artistic practice. Envío Número 4, El misterio de la concepción o cómo hacerle para remover los asientos… del difunto, referenced

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59 Mayer, Rosa chillante, 39.
60 See ibid.
scientific fertilization diagrams; the work included a large circle in the document, containing numerous typewritten messages and hand-drawn sperm cells. The typewritten messages consisted of different vignettes, including a description of a hypothetical performance “to be carried out one day if our obligations as mothers, workers, artists, and housewives allow us to.” This particular performative action, detailed in the envío, would have featured Mayer and Bustamante, slowly lifting their aprons to reveal an amalgamation of disparate objects, including chickens, lizards, pots, as well as government parties and organizations such as the Coalición Obrera, Campesina, Estudiantil del Istmo. The description of this performance, ended with the question: “No, but seriously, what would be the adequate image to emerge out of the apron of two pregnant feminist artists?” In this manner, PGN highlighted the difficulties in identifying as artists once they were pregnant, as society viewed maternity as an all-encompassing process that precluded any other activities in women.

The envíos echoed earlier efforts by Mexican artists to produce alternative networks of distribution for artist publications and mail art. In particular, these works resembled the efforts of artists such as Felipe Ehrenberg and the Beau Geste Press in England. This independent press prominently featured the work of Ulises Carrión, an important figure in the mail art movement of the 1970s. In projects such as Erratic Mail Art System from 1977, Carrión developed a form of artistic practice that highlighted the distribution networks of the mail system, as well as the possibilities of exchange between artists (fig. 3.2). His artistic production and publications throughout the 1970s represented an important example of mail art

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64 Ibid., 186.
that artists such as Mayer and Bustamante would have been aware of, and strategically adapted
to disseminate feminist imagery and rhetoric in Mexico. PGN specifically employed the envíos
to explore the relationship between maternity and artistic practice, developing a critical
perspective on these issues that remained absent in museums, galleries, and other artistic
institutions in Mexico. Mayer and Bustamante also sought to establish a network of exchange
and communication, but one that specifically focused on the agenda of feminist activists of the
1980s. Through their envíos, they developed an artistic network that allowed for discussions
around issues of gender, maternity, reproductive rights, and other concepts dismissed as
irrelevant by other individuals in the Mexican art world.

Through the envíos, Mayer and Bustamante also alluded to a popular example of
Mexico’s visual culture: historietas, or comic books. As noted by historians Juan Manuel
Aurrecoechea and Armando Bartra, the relative stability of the 1920s allowed for the emergence
of comic books, as well as “a new consumer public with new attitudes with regard to recreation
and entertainment possibilities.” In their view, Mexican comics were characterized by the
“insistent combination of two divergent compulsions: the imitation of North American models
and extreme Mexicanism; the new comic arose from the tension between irresistible mimetic
will and deeply felt national vocation.” Throughout the twentieth century, Mexican publishers
distributed a wide array of comic books in different genres, such as action, romance, and
biography, while also popularizing different super heroes, such as El Santo (figs. 3.22-3.25).

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67 Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea and Armando Bartra, Puros cuentos: historia de la historieta en México (Mexico City:
Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1988), 182.
68 Ibid.
69 In 2015, Christopher B. Conway organized the exhibition “¡Viva México! A Comic Book History of Mexico” at
the University of Texas at Arlington, featuring more than 75 comic books from the 1940s to the 1960s. For an
online version of the exhibition see, “¡Viva México! A Comic Book History of Mexico,” Online Exhibition
Catalogue, (March 16, 2015), http://library.uta.edu/vivamexico/.
While comic books were popular among different demographics, these publications frequently aimed to attract the interest of male viewers with sexualized representations of women (figs. 3.26-3.27). Mexican comic books rarely portrayed women in the triumphant guise of a super hero, prompting Mayer and Bustamante to challenge the visual conventions of these publications. In Envío Número 5, Mayer and Bustamante presented two heroines, “Moni-ka” and “Mar-is,” the fictional, future descendants of the two artists. PGN portrayed these characters with the photocopied faces of Mayer and Bustamante, drawing their bodies with simple, clean lines that emulate the representations of children’s comics. The figures feature prominent pregnant bellies, an image that differs from the typical sexualized women of the historietas. Following the example of other Mexican comic books, PGN emulates comic books from the United States, including a prominent title of “El triunfo de Mother War (The Triumph of Mother War),” a description that employs both Spanish and English text. The text in the envío also explains the significance of the portrayed battle:

Moni-ka and Mar-is, descendants of Monica I and Maris I (the heroic artists from the patriarchal era and the initiators of the ‘Pubic Wars’), fight the great, final battle of the year 5,364, in the era of the Hijarcado, as the proper granddaughters of those courageous warriors.\(^70\)

In this manner, the envío prompted audiences to consider an imaginary, utopic future in which the socially prescribed nature of motherhood has radically changed, particularly because of the efforts of feminist individuals such as Mayer and Bustamante. Through this project, PGN employed a form of mass media traditionally associated with male producers and consumers, parodying the conventions of Mexican comic books to disseminate their feminist message.

Through these efforts, PGN closely followed the example of artists such as Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe. In the 1970s, the two artists created Las Aventuras de Maga-Lee.

\(^70\) The envíos frequently include playful language that cannot be easily translated from Spanish into English. The term hijarcado plays on the term patriarcado, or patriarchy, as well as the Spanish word for daughter, hija.
a work that preceded the envíos of ¡MADRES! (figs. 3.28-3.29). In this work, Rodríguez and Felipe detail the exploits of “Maga-Lee,” describing how she fought against horrible dangers such as exploitation, devaluation, and pretension. In a similar manner, the envíos portrayed characters facing contemporary problems, such as sexism, describing these issues with the melodramatic bravado of comic books. In this manner, PGN employed the visual and textual conventions of historietas to explore a wide variety of social issues, developing a form of artistic practice that would grow in importance throughout the end of the twentieth century.\footnote{In the later twentieth century, Mexican comic book artists have employed the medium to explore the social and economic consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement and other globalization processes. For an examination of these comics, and how they relate to earlier examples of Mexican comic books, see Bruce Campbell, ¡Viva La Historieta!: Mexican Comics, NAFTA, and the Politics of Globalization (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).}

While the envíos were an important component of the ¡MADRES! project, PGN also engaged in numerous public artistic actions. Throughout the 1980s, the two artists completed a series of performances in a wide variety of settings: Madres I at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura y Escultura La Esmeralda; Madres II in the television show Nuestro mundo; Madres III at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil; and Madres IV at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.\footnote{See Barbosa Sánchez, 120.} As a prominent feature of these performances, the two artists employed prosthetic pregnant bellies and other props to reveal the physical – and visually legible – consequences of maternity (fig. 3.30). Moreover, in these performances, the two artists prominently employed humor, at times coaxing male collaborators to don the prosthetic bellies and describe their physical and emotional reactions. In the television program Nuestro mundo, the two artists developed an extended artistic performance they later identified as Madre por un día (Mother for a Day). In this performance, after helping television host Guillermo Ochoa transform into a mother with a prosthetic belly, Bustamante asked him to ignore the jeers and whistles from his television crew,
explaining that these reactions were nothing more than “pure envy” (fig. 3.31). The host, in a bantering tone, began clamoring for potato chips, describing the pregnancy craving he was experiencing.

Barbosa Sánchez related ¡MADRES! to larger debates of the social meaning of maternity in Mexican society in different historical periods. In particular, she referenced the writings of Octavio Paz, noting how his analysis of Mexican national identity related to mythical conceptions of maternity. In The Labyrinth of Solitude, Paz analyzed modern Mexican society through the historical figure of La Malinche, the companion who served as a translator for Hernán Cortés. The figure of Malinche – denounced collectively as la Chingada – symbolically served as the originator of mestizaje and the modern Mexican nation:

Who is the Chingada? Above all, she is the Mother. Not a Mother of flesh and blood but a mythical figure. The Chingada is one of the Mexican representations of Maternity, like La Llorona or the ‘long-suffering Mexican mother’ we celebrate on the tenth of May. The Chingada is the mother who has suffered – metaphorically or actually – the corrosive and defaming action implicit in the verb that gives her her name.

By referring to Paz, Barbosa Sánchez positioned the efforts of PGN as a feminist artistic project, one that denounced the historical and patriarchal condemnation of La Malinche. In her view, ¡MADRES! served as a feminist critique of the myths and expectations surrounding Mexican motherhood, expectations that emerged as far back as the colonial project of the Spanish Empire.

Similarly, in her discussion of PGN, Blanco-Cano viewed ¡MADRES! as an effort to critique the archetypes of femininity prevalent in Mexican society, particularly the figures of La

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73 Madre por un día, performance in Nuestro Mundo television show, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, Mexico City, 1987.
74 Ibid.
75 See Barbosa Sánchez, 124.
77 See Barbosa Sánchez, 124.
*Malinche* and the Virgin of Guadalupe.\(^{78}\) In her view, artistic projects such as *¡MADRES!* served to destabilize the position of motherhood in hegemonic narratives of the Mexican nation. Blanco-Cano considered how the efforts of PGN counteracted social structures that positioned women as the literal progenitors of the post-revolutionary Mexican state.\(^{79}\) In her view, the inclusion of phrases such as “VIVA MEXICO!” in *Envío Número 5* represented a discursive formation that countered prevailing notions of the connections between the feminine maternal body and national identity.\(^{80}\) In addition, Blanco-Cano related the visual strategies of PGN to other forms of rhetoric during the contemporary period, linking *¡MADRES!* to the literary output of Rosario Castellanos, María Luisa Puga, Margo Glatnz, Alma López, and other authors.\(^{81}\) In her view, the images of PGN – like the literature produced by these contemporary writers – aimed to denaturalize the links between maternal bodies and the rhetoric of a triumphant mestizo nation.

While Blanco-Cano’s analysis revealed several salient features of the *¡MADRES!* project, PGN specifically sought to challenge the influential visual representations of maternity circulating in the Mexican art world. In particular, Mayer and Bustamante countered the ways in which the works produced by the Mexican Muralists had aided in the construction of an idealized vision of nurturing, selfless maternity. In this manner, PGN engaged in strategies viewed as characteristic of feminist art by Griselda Pollock: “The point is to mount a sustained and far reaching political critique of contemporary representational systems which have an overdetermined effect in the social production of sexual difference and its related gender

\(^{78}\) Blanco-Cano, *Cuerpos disidentes del México imaginado*, 34.
\(^{79}\) See ibid., 33.
\(^{80}\) See ibid., 57.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 33–34.
hierarchy.” Working in late twentieth-century Mexico, PGN thus confronted an art world that still positioned the imagery of the muralists as the authentic – and natural – representation of Mexican maternity.

Several of the representations of maternity produced by the Mexican Muralists directly related to the larger goal of depicting post-revolutionary mexicanidad and mestizaje. The artists repeatedly employed the conventions of European religious art, modernizing the Madonna and child in their attempt to reinvent Christian iconography for the masses. In his massive mural program at the Chapingo Chapel, for instance, Diego Rivera specifically presented an idealized vision of maternity, an image that paralleled his representations of selfless femininity. At the apse of the chapel, the artist depicted The Liberated Earth and Natural Forces Controlled by Humanity, presenting a massive female figure that blends with the natural landscape (fig. 3.32). In this manner, the artist suggested that the female figure gives birth to civilization itself. The maternal body thus serves the needs of the triumphant, revolutionary mestizo nation, ushering a new period in Mexican history.

While the mural program at the Chapingo Chapel served as an allegorical representation of maternity and mestizaje, other images produced by the Mexican Muralists were more direct. For the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School, ENP), José Clemente Orozco completed a fresco entitled Cortés y Malinche, giving visual form to the foundational narrative later examined by Paz (fig. 3.33). As described by art historian David Craven, the

83 In her discussion of Rivera’s artistic production, Anna Indych-López emphasized how the artist repeatedly employed allusions to Italian Renaissance art “as part of a politicized strategy to engage and inform viewers… who could understand such imagery and who shared the artist’s sense of tradition.” Anna Indych-López, “Plates,” in Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art, by Leah Dickerman and Anna Indych-López (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 72. She also emphasized how Orozco viewed this reliance on religious imagery with amusement. See José Clemente Orozco, “Notes Concerning the Technique of Mural Painting in Mexico during the Last Twenty-Five Years,” in Orozco! 1883-1949 (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 116.
resulting image of these historical figures managed to convey both the unequal process of colonialism, even as the artist conveys the dignity of *La Malinche*:

> the humanity of each person is not denied and they are both shown in almost heroic scale with Michelangelo-like bodies. The icy blue eyes of the ‘rubio’ Cortés and his more forceful gestures look domineering, but not harsh. Conversely, the downward looking gaze of Malinche ever so sensitively intimates her subordinate position without showing her either as inferior or as unduly compliant. Somehow, Orozco manages to convey the signal inequities of this male/female and European/Indo-american relationships without denying the dignity of the victim. 

In Craven’s view, this representation of *La Malinche* revealed the artist’s skepticism towards simplistic visions of racial harmony in post-revolutionary Mexico. By producing an ambiguous representation that fails to denounce the union between Cortés and *La Malinche*, Orozco resists the facile interpretation that makes an individual indigenous woman responsible for the downfall of Aztec civilization. Orozco’s representation of *La Malinche* illustrates how artistic representations of motherhood could subtly challenge the historical narratives endorsed by the post-revolutionary state, a strategy that Mayer later emulated in her own artistic projects related to motherhood.

In other works, Orozco did not explicitly refer to the processes of *mestizaje*, even as he celebrated a vision of selfless, giving maternity. In *Soldier’s Wife*, a lithograph from the end of the 1920s that repurposed the imagery of the ENP murals, Orozco depicted the sacrificial role women played in the Mexican Revolution (fig. 3.34). A lone, female figure dominates the entirety of the composition. The artist’s framing of the figure emphasizes her pregnant condition. She turns her face downward, pressing one hand against her body, presumably worrying about the future of her unborn child, someone who will reap the benefits of the revolution. The work reveals how the revolutionary struggle depends on the sacrifices of selfless

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mothers. The image thus celebrated a vision of selfless motherhood that would remain influential throughout the rest of the twentieth century, a representation that Mexican society positioned as an expression of women’s essential caretaking nature.

Siqueiros also produced images of maternity that circulated widely in the post-revolutionary era and remained influential in the late twentieth century. In the early 1930s, during his sojourn in the Mexican city of Taxco, the artist completed two works that suggested the stark emotional and material cost of motherhood: Madre campesina (Peasant Mother) and Madre proletaria (Proletarian Mother) (figs. 3.35-3.36). In the former work, Siqueiros presented a female figure framed by Mexican cacti, emphasizing the setting as rural Mexico. More specifically, as explained by Olivier Debroise, Madre campesina was exhibited in Los Angeles in the early 1930s with the alternate title of Deported Mexican, transforming the work into an illustration of the mass migration of deported, rural workers across northern Mexico in the aftermath of the Depression. In addition, in his reading of Madre proletaria, the scholar emphasized how Siqueiros challenged the conventional – and excessively masculine – representations of the proletariat in political art. In tandem, these paintings reveal how Siqueiros employed the maternal figure as a means to highlight larger social problems, depicting the struggles of the rural and urban Mexican populace. Still, regardless of the political overtones in both of these works, the artist presented a vision of maternity in which the female body interlocks with infant figures, suggesting the “natural” bond that emerges between a mother and her child. Even in his vision of proletarian maternity, the artist presented a female figure that lacks the political agency to change the exploitative social structures of capitalism, as the responsibility of motherhood weighs her down. As noted by Debroise, Manuel and Lola Álvarez

86 Ibid.
Bravo photographed *Madre campesina* in the 1930s, ensuring the mass dissemination – and popularity – of the image.\(^{87}\) Similarly, in his view, *Madre proletaria* found “an enduring niche in the Mexican iconographic repertoire.”\(^{88}\) These images therefore represented a model that shaped public understandings of maternity in post-revolutionary Mexico.

In contrast, several women artists in the post-revolutionary period produced images of maternity that were markedly different from the representations produced by the Mexican Muralists. Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, for instance, has examined the work of artists such as Kahlo, Isabel Villaseñor, and Aurora Reyes.\(^{89}\) In her view, the challenges faced by these women artists in the patriarchal society of 1930s and early 1940s Mexico led them to develop stark representations of maternity, including images of extreme anguish.\(^{90}\) A work by Villaseñor, for instance, portrayed the desolate pain that followed the death of a child (fig. 3.37). More famously, Kahlo produced a harrowing image of her own birth, described by Herrera as “one of the most awesome images of childbirth ever made”\(^{91}\) (fig. 3.38). The representations produced by these women artists, however, did not occupy the prominent position of the works produced by the Mexican Muralists. The art institutions of the twentieth century established the images produced by male artists as the official – and unequivocal – representation of *mexicanidad*, and by extension, modern Mexican maternity.

The construction of a public monument for mothers in Mexico City best exemplifies the idealization of a specific form of maternity in the visual arts. In the 1940s, during a period of intense women’s activism to establish universal suffrage in the country, the presidential administration of Manuel Ávila Camacho focused on the creation of a public memorial for

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\(^{87}\) Ibid.  
\(^{88}\) Ibid.  
\(^{89}\) See Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable.”  
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 21.  
\(^{91}\) Herrera, *Frida*, 157.
Mexican mothers. The Monumento a la Madre, inaugurated on May 10, 1949 (fig. 3.39), featured a sculptural program by Luis Ortiz Monasterio. In the center of the monument, Ortiz Monasterio presented a large-scale maternal figure, carrying a small child in her arms. Following the example of artists such as Rivera, Ortiz Monasterio referenced both pre-Columbian and Catholic visual culture in this work. While the hand gestures of the infant figure deliberately reference Catholic sculptures, the posing and detailing of the sculpted figures resemble the conventions of Aztec sculpture (fig. 3.40). The figures bear stoic facial expressions, depicted with a bold simplicity, and their hair feature the simple geometric patterns of pre-Columbian sculpture. Ortiz Monasterio included two other sculptured figures in the monument: a male figure in the right that bears writing utensil, and a female figure in the left that carries a maize stalk, a symbol of fertility and nurturance in pre-Columbian culture.

The monument celebrated the loving nature of Mexican mothers, with a commemorative plaque stating: “A la que nos amó antes de conocernos (To the One Who Loved Us Before Even Knowing Us).” The emphasis on women’s nurturing qualities served as a sharp contrast to the public monuments that celebrated men’s military exploits. The Monumento a la Madre thus revealed how women’s contributions to society were firmly ensconced in the domestic, private sphere, as opposed to men’s public achievements.

Through the ¡MADRES! project, Mayer and Bustamante critiqued these representations of maternity in Mexican visual culture. PGN challenged the celebratory post-revolutionary narratives that associated maternity with the formation of the Mexican nation or mestizaje. Instead, Mayer and Bustamante repeatedly employed humor and irreverence to destroy the idealized vision of selfless, devoted Mexican motherhood, described by Paz in the Labyrinth of

92 For a larger examination of the works produced by this sculptor, see Guadalupe Tolosa, “Remembranza: El Legado Escultórico de Luis Ortiz Monasterio,” Revista Discurso Visual, no. 7 (December 2006), http://discursovisual.net/dvweb07/remembranza/remtolosa.htm.
Solitude and depicted in the visual arts of Mexico. The numerous aprons and props they employed in their lectures and in Madre por un día, further demystified maternity, challenging the “natural” link between the female body and maternity. Prompting television host Ochoa to wear a prosthetic pregnant belly, and carry other items associated with maternity, PGN prompted viewers to consider the ways in which cultural practices irrevocably transform the female body into a maternal, selfless entity. Indeed, during the program, Mayer emphasized the ways in which the visual arts constructed an understanding of maternity:

In painting, up until now, maternity has been depicted by men. The majority of Works focused on maternity, for instance, show a mother and son, painted by a man…. Maybe that’s why there are so few works, for instance, of a mother and daughter.  

Appearing in the television program of Nuestro mundo, Mayer and Bustamante employed humor, to produce a new form of representation that countered and dismissed the prevailing images of motherhood present in monuments, murals, and other artistic venues in Mexico.

In Madre por un día, the two artists alluded to the representations in the most powerful mass media system of contemporary Mexican society: television. As part of the performance, the two artists presented Maruca, a ventriloquist doll with a dramatic eye patch. According to Mayer, the doll referenced the “bad mother” archetype, a powerful figure in the social imaginary. The doll also alluded to the female lead in the popular 1980s telenovela Cuna de Lobos, who also sported an eye patch over her face. Through this prop, Mayer and Bustamante adapted an image of maternity circulating in contemporary representational systems. Moreover, by referencing a character from a telenovela, they chose to engage with a form of cultural

93 Madre por un día, performance in Nuestro Mundo television show, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, Mexico City, 1987.
production of particular power in Mexico. Scholars such as Guillermo Orozco have noted the prominent position occupied by telenovelas in Mexican society. In his view, telenovelas in the twentieth century allowed for the emergence of a distinctly Mexican cultural identity, with viewers recognizing themselves in the representations of modern life of the medium. In Madre por un día, PGN explored the archetypes prevalent in contemporary visual culture, considering how they might relate to other representations of maternity prevalent in public monuments or the visual arts. At the beginning of the performance, Bustamante emphasized that PGN was interested in presenting their work in Nuestra Mundo, as “television is now the modern art museum.”

In her broader discussion of feminist artistic production in Mexico, Giunta views PGN as an example of the transformations developing in feminist artistic production. In her view, feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s produced a body of images and artistic representations that focused attention on the female body and therefore generated a specific model for “feminist art.” In her view, in performances such as Madre por un día, PGN employed humor as a way of extending the reach of feminist art: “Popular culture became a strategy for critical interventions presented in the form of parody. This allowed them to introduce ambiguity in the very codes that give order to feminism’s repertoire… In the Madre por un día (Mother for a day) performance… they intervened the masculine body, and queerized maternity.”

While the notion of queering and the emphasis on humor reveals several features of PGN’s project, I would emphasize the project still contained several features that firmly positioned it within the model of feminist art developed in the late 1970s. Lacy and Labowitz emphasized the strategies artists should employ to subvert the power of mass media outlets: “It

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doesn’t matter what you think the media should cover, the object of the game (and it is a game) is to get them to play it your way. Mass media time is not a public service; it is a highly valuable commodity that is purchased by corporations and individuals who promote products, ideas, attitudes, and images.” In Madre por un día, Mayer and Bustamante employed mass media outlets to their advantage. Engaging in friendly banter with television host Ochoa, Mayer and Bustamante were able to ensure that the program played the game their way. While the exchanges between the two artists and the television host appears to be entirely humorous, PGN aimed to provoke television audiences, prompting viewers to question the “natural” role of maternity in Mexican society. Through their bantering, Mayer and Bustamante thus challenged the unquestioned assumptions that encouraged Mexican women to sacrifice their well-being and individuality in their pursuit of self-less, beatific maternity. Through humor, PGN aimed to transform society itself, a goal that positioned the two artists within multiple generations of women activists in Mexico.

In addition, the themes explored within ¡MADRES! linked PGN to the art collectives that flourished in the FSW throughout the 1970s. In particular, the work related to the Mother Art collective, founded in 1973, and active until 1986. The original founding members of the collective were Jan Cook, Christie Kruse, Suzanne Siegel, Helen Million, and Laura Silagi. According to Jeanne S.M. Willette, “[t]he mothers of Mother Art bonded when the Feminist Studio Workshop… a place where women's art was nurtured, allowed dogs but not children on the premises… the denial of the real lives of real women was also a denial of feminist principles of opportunity.” To counter this discrimination, the collective sought to explore the ways in

97 Lacy and Labowitz, “Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance,” 125.
which maternal roles were seemingly irreconcilable with artistic activity. The members of Mother Art highlighted the ways in which their experiences as mothers informed their artistic projects in the documents they produced in a collective manner (fig. 3.41).

To highlight the private, domestic activities traditionally associated with maternity, Mother Art cleaned up the Los Angeles City Hall in 1978; photographs of these artistic actions feature the artists wearing aprons that resemble the outfits Mayer and Bustamante would later employ in the ¡MADRES! project (figs. 3.42). Other projects created by ¡MADRES! included Rainbow Playground, a playground accessible to the children of the students of the FSW (fig. 3.43). As noted by Moravec, “members of Mother Art faced intertwining myths about motherhood and art that made it seem almost impossible to combine the roles….Mother Art challenged the notion that the roles of mother and artist were mutually exclusive.”

In a similar manner, with ¡MADRES!, Mayer and Bustamante initiated discussions about the ways maternity affected their position as contemporary artists. Organizing multiple lectures in venues such as the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, or in television programs such as Nuestro mundo, the two artists emphatically positioned their pregnancies as a form of artistic practice. Through these two initiatives, the two artists challenged the vision of selfless motherhood viewed as central to Mexican national identity by writers such as Paz, a form of maternity that reduces feminine identity to reproduction. Their humorous performances expanded the repertoire of representations in Mexican art, directly countering the celebrated images produced by earlier generations of male artists. While these activities linked them to the Mother Art collective, Mayer and Bustamante still engaged in artistic actions that specifically related to the structures and expectations within the Mexican art world.

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¡MADRES! and Feminist Activist Efforts in Mexico

¡MADRES! primarily related to the artistic and cultural representations of maternity in Mexico. Still, the project also represented an incursion into larger debates surrounding the social significance of maternity throughout the twentieth century. During the post-revolutionary era, several activists and women’s groups challenged the processes that established maternity as the only meaningful role for Mexican society. In the feminist congress of Yucatán, for instance, Hermila Galindo de Topete, had denounced the customs and traditions that denounced women’s sexuality and political participation.¹⁰⁰ More broadly, the Consejo Feminista Mexicano (CFM), encouraged women’s participation in public life, through the creation of schools, women’s labor groups, and daycare centers.¹⁰¹ But the post-revolutionary Mexican state specifically related citizenship to motherhood. As discussed by Temma Kaplan, “Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho both held big Mother’s Day rituals as a way to highlight mother’s connection to the state.”¹⁰² Through these celebrations, the government linked maternity to the reconstruction efforts of the early twentieth century.

The social changes brought about by the Mexican Revolution prompted other organizations to celebrate an idealized view of maternity. In particular, the Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas (UDCM), emphatically defended the traditional role in Mexico, viewing it as singularly important.¹⁰³ In a document from the organization, entitled “Of the High and

¹⁰⁰ See Olcott, Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 30–32.
¹⁰¹ See Macías, Against All Odds; Soto, Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman.
Sublime Mission of Mothers of Families,” the group revealed its views of this important and “natural” role for women in Mexico:

Mother! How sweetly this beautiful word should resonate in the ears of those who truly are [mothers]. How their joyful hearts will beat upon hearing themselves called by such an honorable name. Some women, shamefully [however], feel guilty for not knowing how to live up [to this] high mission that the Creator and Lord of all creation has demanded of them… With complete tranquility we said, “The times have changed and in the environment in which we live it is no longer possible for the youth of today to be like the [youth] of yesterday.” But the truth is that we [mothers] are those who, in the name of modernity, want to change the law of God, [a law] which is unchanging… What can a mother do, if her heart is not trained in virtue? What can we teach our children if we lack a Christian education, that is, that life of the soul? How do we confront such a difficult situation?104

The text reveals how different women’s groups could have differing perspectives on the changes brought about by the post-revolutionary government. For activists within the CFM, the creation of public schools theoretically ensured women’s participation in the country’s public, economic sphere, ensuring their eventual, legal equality. In contrast, the UDCM believed public education should encourage Mexican mothers to instruct their children through traditional Catholic values.

The document exemplifies the fear within the organization that masses of uneducated women would be unable to educate the next generation of Mexican citizens. This text by the organization also reveals how different groups interpreted the rhetoric of modernity and transformation of the revolution. The UDCM invokes “modernity” as the cause of a multitude of social problems, an attempt to change the “law of God.” The solution, in their view, is the return of proper, Catholic education for Mexican women, which would ensure the survival of civilized, Mexican family life.

Through ¡MADRES!, PGN actively intervened in an ongoing debate that surrounded maternity in Mexican society. Through their irreverent artistic projects, the two artists

challenged the idealized vision of selfless motherhood that continued to reverberate in Mexican society. Working in the later twentieth century, PGN also paralleled the efforts of contemporary Mexican feminist groups. In a poster from the 1970s, for instance, Mexican feminists denounced the idealization of women’s maternal duties; activist groups thus employed the national holiday as a way of raising awareness of this issue (fig. 3.44). The poster called for activists to congregate at the Monumento a la Madre, challenging the vision of selfless maternity of the public site. Indeed, as noted by Acevedo, the celebration of Mother’s Day was part of a broader effort to quell women’s activism and political participation in the country, a process that originally emerged in the post-revolutionary period but continued in the 1970s.105 Activist organizations thus encouraged public protests that PGN later echoed in their artistic projects.

¡MADRES! also related to deliberate efforts by the Mexican state to regulate maternity in the contemporary era. In 1973, the Mexican government established a new, national law dealing with women’s reproductive health: Ley General de Población, or General Population Law. With this legislation, the Mexican government established that it was now the right of every individual to have access to family planning services.106 As noted by María de la Paz López, the Ley General de Población was created among other broad, legislative changes: “article number 4 of the constitution was changed, establishing the equality of men and women before the law… in 1975, several reforms were integrated into the Civil Code, which regulated, since 1932, family

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105 See Marta Acevedo, El diez de mayo (Mexico City: Martín Casillas Editores, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1982). In this text, Acevedo also considers the role played by lavish, public celebrations, such as the events organized by the prominent Mexican newspaper Excélsior.

relations and the rights and duties associated with marriage. These changes sought to establish more equality between couples in the domestic sphere.”

The establishment of the Ley General de Población exemplifies the insistent efforts of the twentieth-century Mexican government to transform the country into a modern nation. As noted by Zavala de Cosío, the Mexican state attempted to control the fertility rate as part of an overall effort to develop the country economically. The efforts of the government to regulate the population aimed to insert the country into an increasingly globalized economy. As discussed by scholars such as Joan Acker, these seemingly neutral processes of economic development affect men and women in distinct ways; “globalization is about class, race/ethnic, and gender relations: it is political and cultural, as well as economic.”

The Ley General de Población represents an attempt to modernize the country through the regulation and control of women’s bodies. The new vision of Mexican maternity now depended on individual mothers regulating their body through birth control, as the Mexican government launched national campaigns encouraging family planning.

The artistic production of PGN thus paralleled the renewed interest in advocating for women’s reproductive freedom within Mexican feminist activist circles. As noted by Lamas, during this period, feminist groups promoted the concept of “voluntary maternity”:

With the phrase, “voluntary maternity”, taken from our Italian comrades, we established four requirements: first, that extensive sexual education should be available at all levels, reaching children, women in rural and indigenous areas, and young men and women. The second requirement was that birth control should be widely available, as well as ensuring that it would be low in cost and safe. Third was the right to have an

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107 María de la Paz López, “Las mujeres en el umbral del siglo XX,” in Miradas feministas sobre las mexicanas del siglo XX.
108 Zavala de Cosío, “Políticas de población en México.”
abortion, even though it was considered an exception, as the last possible resource. The fourth was the demand that women would not be sterilized without their consent.\textsuperscript{110}

The humorous use of “pregnancy suits” and exploration of “motherhood” in ¡MADRES! should be interpreted in relation to these developments and considerations. Mayer and Bustamante directly employed the ¡MADRES! project to endorse the notion of voluntary maternity. As described by Mayer, the two artists participated in a protest march in 1991, making sure to include the Maruca doll in their efforts (fig. 3.45).\textsuperscript{111} Through these protest marches, PGN and the larger groups of activists hoped to transform the idealized vision of madres abnegadas that permeated Mexican society. In 1991, in fact, the inscription at the Monumento a la Madre was changed, with viewers now confronting a statement that now read: “A la que nos amó antes de conocernos, porque su maternidad fue voluntaria (To the One Who Loved Us Before Even Knowing Us, Because her Maternity was Voluntary).” The change in the inscription, prompted by the activities of feminist activists and artists, exemplifies the ambitious goals of artists such as Mayer. The ¡MADRES! project aimed to transform quotidian representations of maternity in Mexican culture, challenging the naturalizing processes that established women’s value in terms of their reproductive capability. Through her artistic projects, Mayer thus attempted to transform women’s social role in her home country, prompting concrete changes in the visual monuments that specified the characteristics of Mexican maternity. Her artistic production served as the visual and artistic component of a larger campaign to transform understandings of maternity in contemporary Mexico.

\textsuperscript{110} Marta Lamas, Política y reproducción. Aborto: La frontera del derecho a decidir (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 2001), 120.

Conclusion

After her studies at the FSW in the late 1970s, Mayer strategically employed the model of feminist art of this institution in her home country. Establishing feminist art collectives enabled her to forge connections between feminist artists and activists in both countries. Her efforts, however, avoided the forms of transplantation critiqued by Acha. Through TyR and PGN, Mayer employed the strategies and techniques of the FSW, but adapted these efforts to the specific artistic and social structures of late twentieth-century Mexico. Rather than assuming that femininity, or maternity, was constructed in the same manner in the United States and Mexico, Mayer encouraged artistic projects that countered specific archetypes and canonical works from the post-revolutionary period. Keeping in mind the ways male artists had portrayed passive, fragile women, or the ways in which the state had idealized a suffering, madre abnegada, the artist developed unprecedented representations of femininity and maternity in modern Mexican art.

To challenge social definitions of what it meant to be a woman artist in Mexico, Mayer employed distinct artistic methods that allowed for the mass dissemination of feminist rhetoric. Encouraging artistic collaboration, public art interventions, and incursions into mass media outlets, Mayer employed several of the strategies encouraged by the FSW in the 1970s. In this manner, Mayer and her collaborators worked within established artistic institutions such as the Academy of San Carlos, or the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, transforming these institutional spaces into sites of feminist critique. Through TyR and PGN, Mayer encouraged a form of historical critique that considered the ways in which the visual arts naturalized gender roles, stifling efforts by women artists in general, and more specifically, women artists that were also mothers.
Through her feminist art collectives, Mayer repeatedly encouraged a critical view of art history and the institutional structures that affected the artistic production and reception of women artists. By transforming the Mexican art world, Mayer and her collaborators exemplified the ambitious agenda of feminist artists in the distinct, but interconnected art scenes of Mexico City and Los Angeles. PGN and TyR hoped to transform society, and the everyday lives of women, by focusing attention on the numerous images and messages circulating in visual culture. Transforming the art world and art historical understandings of women artists was therefore only the first step in transforming other social structures that continued to limit women’s participation in the social sphere of the country.

Towards the end of the 1980s, this interest in art history and the archive would lead Mayer towards a more extensive project that she initiated with her partner Lerma. With this new project, she would continue her efforts to activate connections between feminist artists and activists from both Mexico and the United States.
In 1989, nine years after her studies at the FSW, Mayer began an extensive collaboration with fellow artist and husband Lerma: PMR. Initially, Mayer and Lerma focused on the creation of an independent artistic space in Mexico City, a venue they identified as the galería de autor Pinto mi Raya (PMR gallery). The two artists hosted several exhibitions that relied on collaborative practices, establishing an ongoing relationship between the artists and the attending public. The two artists also began collecting an extensive array of photographs, pamphlets, posters, and other materials related to artistic production in Mexico. In particular, they sought records related to public art projects and collaborative artistic practices, including materials produced by feminist art collectives in Mexico. These practices led to the official establishment of the PMR archive, a collection that continues to grow to this day (fig. 4.1). Mayer and Lerma publicized the contents of their archive through newsletters, radio shows, public lectures, and workshops with other artists and activists from Mexico.

In this chapter, I position the PMR project as an extension of Mayer’s earlier artistic output, interpreting it as an example of feminist art in contemporary Mexico. According to the artist, the project does not explicitly explore feminist themes, yet the structure of the collaboration still relates to feminism.¹ This study builds upon the assertion of the artist, analyzing the aspects of the project that related to earlier examples of feminist art, both in Mexico City and Los Angeles. My reading of the PMR project underscores the connections between Mayer and the feminist artistic and archival practices developed by members of the

¹ Mayer, Rosa chillante, 44.
FSW in the 1970s. Mayer and Lerma adapted this particular model of feminist archival practice to their local context, engaging in a process I establish as a form of translocal translation. This analysis reveals how the debates surrounding archival practice – initiated by feminist artists and activists of the 1970s – affected Mexico’s contemporary art scene of the late 1980s and beyond. In this interpretation, I emphasize the ways in which Mayer’s artistic strategies have positioned her as the mentor and inspiration of a younger generation of artists and scholars that rely on the numerous documents accumulated in the PMR archive. Throughout this chapter, I analyze the PMR project as a powerful example of the ways in which feminist artists have constructed critical art systems that question the hierarchies and structures within the visual arts and society as a whole.

To historicize the collaborative efforts of Mayer and Lerma, I also consider larger trends in the Mexican art world of the late twentieth century, emphasizing the rise of commercial art galleries in Mexico City, as well as the emergence of artist-run venues throughout the 1990s. While the emergence of the PMR gallery coincided with these changes in Mexico’s artistic scene, Mayer and Lerma remained committed to Acha’s views on the social significance of contemporary art. The PMR gallery thus aimed to provide a space for the collaborative artistic projects that commercial galleries or government institutions such as the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) disregarded.

Through the PMR archive, the two artists engaged in an unprecedented effort to preserve materials related to women artists, feminist art collectives, and feminist activism. The two artists thus developed an archival practice that remains distinct from their peers, contributing to a larger feminist project that aims to transform art historical narratives that disregard the contributions of women artists.
Origins of the PMR Collaboration and Early Curatorial Efforts

The official establishment of PMR in the late 1980s followed a longer history of collaboration between the two artists. Mayer and Lerma had first shared ideas and concerns regarding contemporary artistic practice as students in the theory-based courses Acha delivered at the ENAP. ² During this early period, which preceded their relocation to Los Angeles in the late 1970s, the two artists worked together in a number of artistic projects. Lerma, for instance, served as the documentarian of several sculptural objects produced by Mayer in the early 1970s (fig. 4.2). ³ In addition, the two artists served as models for each other in the photographic assignments they completed for instructor Kati Horna at the ENAP (figs. 4.3-4.4). Mayer later used these images in her project for the exhibition “Lo normal.”

These forms of artistic collaboration receded into the background once Mayer and Lerma traveled to Los Angeles. Still, in an interview, Mayer revealed how Lerma’s presence in California was important for her artistic development. ⁴ In particular, she stressed how they shared an interest in political activism and art, a concern that led them to the Los Angeles Socialist Community School (LASCS). Lerma’s presence in the United States also aided Mayer’s growing familiarity with Chicano cultural production. In 1978, Mayer and Lerma both attended the premiere performance of Zoot Suit, a play written and directed by Luis Valdez. ⁵ In her memories of the event, Mayer emphasized how important it was for both of them to attend,

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⁴ Mayer, interview.
given Lerma’s earlier studies in Los Angeles and his strong interest in Chicano culture.  

Similarly, Lerma has pointed out the ways in which Mayer’s feminist art projects have also shaped his individual artistic development, as he finds the egalitarian and transformative ideals of feminism relevant to both male and female artists.

After Mayer’s studies at the FSW, the two artists relocated to Mexico City. During this period, their initiatives evidenced their interest in the exchange of ideas and information with international audiences and artists. The two artists planned a series of conferences in Europe in the early 1980s. These lectures focused on Mexican art and photography, as well as feminist art, including projects such as Mayer’s Traducciones. This activity allowed Mayer and Lerma to solidify their position in the growing networks of artistic exchange of the contemporary period, particularly those associated with the international mail art movement. To carry out these conferences, the two artists relied on their connections with artists such as Robin Crozier, an active figure in mail art from the 1970s onward. Initially, the two artists hoped to continue these instructional endeavors in Mexico, planning a series of conferences and instructional

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7 Lerma detailed his role as a male artist in feminist artistic projects in a video piece presented at the “Mónica Mayer and Victor Lerma: Pinto mi Raya” show at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, California in 2015. The video was part of a larger project in which Mayer and Lerma engaged in an extensive conversation with three other couples: Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry, Joey Forsyte and Alex Kritselis, and Dino Dinco and Rafa Esparza. For a discussion of this video piece, see Mayer, “The LA Project #4. The Performance,” De archivos y redes: Un proyecto artístico sobre la integración y reactivación de archivos, September 8, 2015, http://www.pintomiraya.com/redes/archivo-pmr/proyecto-la/item/186-the-la-project-3-the-performance.html.


9 For a larger discussion of the artistic networks established by the mail art movement, see Chuck Welch, Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995).

10 See Mayer, “De Archivos y Redes,” August 19, 2013. For a closer examination of Crozier’s mail art projects, see Welch, 48, 196, 268, 280.
projects that would familiarize local audiences with contemporary art.\textsuperscript{11} This latter project, however, did not take place.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite these collaborations between Mayer and Lerma in the early 1980s, the available literature emphasizes the projects she developed in close collaboration with Bustamante in PGN. However, this particular feminist art collective officially dissolved in 1994. In an interview, Mayer described the various reasons that led to the end of PGN:

Maris [Bustamante] and I ended our collaboration for many reasons… On the one hand, I was surprised that Maris decided to go and teach classes with [José Luis Cuevas], teaching painting and other things to a group of women… This was the idea of feminist art that we had been fighting against, that feminism was something that women could do just because they were bored… That she would agree to teach those classes was a surprise to me… As a whole, the collaboration had run its course, I suppose.\textsuperscript{13}

According to Mayer, Bustamante’s decision to focus on more traditional forms of art, such as painting, was one of the reasons that prompted the dissolution of PGN. Interestingly, the style of painting pursued by Bustamante was not a problem; Mayer’s remarks on painting did not follow the debates around figuration and abstraction that developed in Latin America throughout the post-war period.\textsuperscript{14} Instead, Mayer’s assessment suggested her continuous interest in forms of art that reimagined the relations between artists and the public. In other words, Mayer’s comments implied her continued interest in the experimental forms of artistic practice exemplified by los grupos and theorized as non-objectual art by Acha.

As emphasized by Robin Adèle Greeley, Acha’s model of contemporary artistic practice fell out of favor by the late 1980s, as “its strict division of nations and regions into center versus

\textsuperscript{13} Mayer, interview.
\textsuperscript{14} Juan Acha, “¿Está aún vigente la pintura figurativa?,” \textit{Eco: Revista de la cultura de occidente} (Bogotá, Colombia), vol. 2 (February 1961): 340–58.
periphery seemed outdated.”¹⁵ Indeed, the activities of Mayer and Lerma exemplified the difficulty in maintaining strict divisions between “local” and “international” forms of art, with the artists aiming to forge connections between Mexican artists and international audiences.

Located in Mexico City – but relying on the example of artists in a wide variety of geographic contexts – the project did not conform to the strict divisions of “center” and “periphery” associated with Acha’s scholarship. As part of the PMR project, Mayer and Lerma incorporated strategies from multiple artistic contexts, adapting the archival strategies of feminist artists in the United States in the early 1970s.

Still, despite the declining influence of Acha’s views on the contemporary Mexican art world, Mayer and Lerma relied on some aspects of his scholarship to conceptualize their artistic projects. In particular, the two artists emphasized the social significance of contemporary art, harkening back to the model of collective artistic practice celebrated by los grupos. Describing the independent artist gallery, the two artists emphasized these aspects of the endeavor:

This project has been in the works for about three years. It emerged once we realized the need to have a venue in which work flowed more freely, without bureaucratic or commercial pressure. Aside from presenting the kind of exhibitions we find interesting, we want to experiment with more productive forms of distribution for artists, dealing, for instance, with collective exhibitions from cooperatives.¹⁶

Repeatedly, Mayer underscored how the artist gallery would allow for experimental, collaborative projects, allowing for “exhibitions that didn’t fit in museums or commercial galleries.”¹⁷

Through this gallery, Mayer and Lerma aimed to establish a network of artists and institutions, establishing a “cultural circuit,” a term derived from Acha’s writings on

¹⁷ Mayer, Rosa chillante, 43.
contemporary art. The PMR gallery was only one node within a larger network of artistic institutions in Mexico City. During this time period, Mayer and Lerma collaborated with El Foco, El Unicornio Blanco, Los Caprichos, three other galleries in Mexico City. In addition, the two artists worked with the Escuela Decroly, where their two children completed their studies. These five institutions formed the “Circuito Cultural Condesa (Condesa Cultural Circuit).” An archival photograph shows the founding members carrying a banner with the name of this new artistic network (fig. 4.5).

In an interview, Mayer stressed the connections between the PMR project and Acha’s sociological perspective on the arts:

Thinking about art in this way, thinking about systems is very important. Throughout my artistic development, I kept thinking about art as something that only existed in relation to distribution. How did art get represented? How did art reach the public? This is something that was always important to me.

Through PMR, Mayer and Lerma aimed to reach sectors of the population that mainstream artistic institutions failed to reach. By linking the PMR gallery to a children’s school, for instance, the artists hoped to establish an ongoing dialogue with parents in the institution and their children, ensuring a regular public for the planned exhibitions. In this manner, the two artists echoed Acha’s views that Latin American artists faced particular challenges when attempting to reach the public, as the legacy of colonialism had resulted in extreme social inequalities within the region. According to Acha, the multiple social and economic problems plaguing Latin America made the establishment of an informed audience for artistic endeavors

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18 See Acha, *El arte y su distribución*.
19 See Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 43.
20 Mayer, interview.
extremely difficult. The “Circuito Cultural Condesa,” thus aimed to confront these challenges, aiming to foster connections between artists and the public, reaching broader audiences.

A flyer from this time period details one of the first exhibitions organized by the Circuito Cultural Condesa: “Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar (Neocursi: artists who truly know how to love)” (fig. 4.6). Printed in the garish hues associated with Valentine’s Day cards and other decorations deemed cursí, or sappy, the flyer stated:

Dear neighbor from the Colonia Condesa: An Art invasion is coming…. Four artist galleries, (that is, galleries owned by the artists themselves) and the Escuela Decroly will inaugurate the exhibition: ‘Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar.’ In this exhibition, the only participants will be artistic couples in love… Spend a lovely afternoon cuddling up, holding the hand of your loved one, strolling through these spaces… Your cultural spaces of the Condesa.22

Throughout the flyer, PMR employed humor, particularly in the description of the participating artists. The adjectives employed include terms such as melocochones, a word that implies a melodramatic, romantic infatuation.

The specific artistic context surrounding the “Neocursi” exhibition reveals the significance of these humorous descriptions. Art historical examinations of Mexican art of the 1980s have emphasized the emergence of a distinct, commercial art market, one that enabled the rise and success of a small group of figurative painters, both in their home country and abroad. Discussing the emergence of a new, distinct artistic trend in the mid-1980s, Teresa Eckmann describes a number of exhibitions within government-sponsored institutions, such as the MAM, and private venues such as Galería OMR.23 These exhibitions prominently showcased the work of artists such as Julio Galán, Rocío Maldonado, and Nahum Zenil. As a whole, these artists

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23 See Teresa Eckmann, Neo-Mexicanism: Mexican Figurative Painting and Patronage in the 1980s (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 5. In particular, Eckmann highlights the importance of “17 artistas de hoy (Seventeen Artists of Today)” at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Internacional Rufino Tamayo and “De su album… inciertas confesiones (From Their Scrapbook… False Confessions)” at the Museo de Arte Moderno.
would later be identified as representatives of Neo-Mexicanism. In her analysis of this artistic trend, Eckmann stated that

*Neo-Mexicanism* can be defined as a style, a current, and a tendency – albeit diverse – within Mexican figurative painting that incorporates, recycles, or reinterprets iconographic content specifically referential to Mexican culture for the purpose of questioning fixed points of view and illuminating aspects of a syncretic, contemporary reality. Stylistically, neo-Mexicanist painting is generally large-scale, aggressive, painterly, and often incorporates mixed-media materials to give texture and dimension to the work. Figures within a frequently crowded composition are often placed centrally on the canvas and confront the viewer in a frontal manner. Text may be included as a compositional element.24

A painting by Julio Galán, *Tehuana en el istmo de Tehuantepec (Tehuana in the Tehuantepec Isthmus)*, exemplifies the visual style associated with Neo-Mexicanism, as the work features garish colors, decorative patterns, and a deliberately flattened representation of the human figure. Moreover, Galán portrays a *tehuana*, employing the traditional indigenous costume that Kahlo had employed in her self-portraits and everyday life (fig. 4.7). Scholars such as Debroise have related this artistic style – with its overt representation of nationalistic, Mexican symbols – as a form of critique against the established social order of the country. Indeed, describing the visual style of Neo-Mexicanism, Debroise emphasized how he had once viewed its stylistic components as an expression of “a general malaise caused by the nation’s economic, moral, and political decomposition.”25 The emergence of Neo-Mexicanism was thus linked to specific social and political problems affecting Mexico throughout the 1980s, including the devaluation of the peso in 1982 or the failures in the government response to the massive Mexico City earthquake of 1985.26

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24 Ibid., 8.
26 Scholars have also examined the connections between the sexualized representations of Neo-Mexicanism and the gay and lesbian activism in Mexico throughout the 1980s. In particular, scholars have considered how the portrayal of the human body in the work of artists such as Galán relates to the exclusion of gay male bodies and identities in the Mexican state. See Osvaldo Sánchez, “El cuerpo de la nación. El neomexicanismo: la pulsión homosexual y la desnacionalización,” no. 17 (January-June 2001): 137–46.
The success of Neo-Mexicanism was also the result of the efforts of private and corporate art collectors. In particular, large business conglomerates, such as Televisa and Grupo Alfa, favored large-scale figurative painting throughout the decade. This period thus represented a short-lived and unique moment in Mexico’s artistic scene. Throughout the late 1980s, commercial galleries and corporate sponsorship proliferated, allowing for the small, select group of Neo-Mexicanists to become the most successful representatives of contemporary Mexican art. These developments also affected the decisions of government-sponsored museums in Mexico, as the directors and board members of these institutions were from the same corporate elites.

In addition, the presidential administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari also played a role in the rising power of the commercial gallery circuit. The establishment of PMR, in fact, coincided with the emergence of a new government entity in Mexico that promoted the artistic production of young artists in the commercial gallery circuits at the local and international level: the Conaculta (the National Council on Culture and the Arts). These government efforts, which echoed the interests of private investors and collectors, allowed for the success of a new model of mexicanidad throughout the 1980s.

In a series of columns written for El Universal, Mayer denounced the exhibitions favored by government museums and commercial galleries:

Within the great variety of political art in our country, one can find few examples in which the political proposal is actually carried out by art promoters or distributors. In general, it is the artist or group of artists that attempt, through the medium of their work, to express a political stance… There is a lack of art distributors willing to participate politically. Commercial galleries rarely propose an exhibition on a current political topic.

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27 See Eckmann, Neo-Mexicanism, 29–30. For an examination of the role played by businessmen from the northern Mexican city of Monterrey, see Eduardo Ramírez, El triunfo de la cultura: uso político y económico de la cultura en Monterrey (Monterrey, Nuevo León: Fondo Editorial de Nuevo León, 2009).
29 See Ramírez, El triunfo de la cultura: Uso político y económico de la cultura en Monterrey, 119.
because of the possible loss of revenue, and the State does the same either because of fear or criticism.\(^\text{30}\)

Mayer described Mexico’s contemporary art scene as one that dismissed the political and social problems facing the country. In her view, commercial galleries primarily focused on profits, and the government-sponsored museums favored “safe” exhibitions that prompted little discussions of social problems and politics. Her analysis thus considered how Neo-Mexicanist exhibitions allowed for a form of artistic interpretation that ignored the social problems facing the country. The artist also expressed her dissatisfaction with the ways in which the rise of commercial galleries, as these institutions favored particular artists, those who created “easel works, which feature excellent craftsmanship, pleasing subject matter, and end up being highly profitable.”\(^\text{31}\)

These assessments by Mayer resemble other academic examinations of the rising power of commercial galleries in a Latin American context. As described by García Canclini, in the late twentieth-century, “museums, critics, biennial exhibitions, and even international art fairs lost importance in the eighties as universal authorities of artistic innovations and became followers of the leading galleries in the United States, Germany, Japan, and France.”\(^\text{32}\) In the case of Mexico, these developments favored the Neo-Mexicanists. Instead of promoting public, participatory forms of art, galleries displayed works of “excellent craftsmanship” that could be bought and sold in the emerging international art market. Moreover, these trends dismissed the earlier efforts of los grupos, as well as the feminist art collectives Mayer had established throughout the 1980s in Mexico.


\(^{32}\) Canclini, \textit{Hybrid Cultures}, 36.
Through exhibitions such as “Neocursi,” Mayer and Lerma critiqued the effusive language of Neo-Mexicanist exhibitions. By focusing on *artistas melocochones*, or cuddly, sappy artists, Mayer and Lerma pointed towards the gallery shows that romanticized the artistic personas of Neo-Mexicanism. As noted by Mayer, the title of the show was a way of drawing attention to the melodramatic exhibitions proliferating in Mexico City:

We set out to ridicule the kind of exhibitions that were popping up all over the place in Mexico City… Some of these exhibitions were horrific…. By using a title such as ‘Neocursi,’ we hoped to poke fun at the way in which so-called expert curators were coming up with ridiculous notions about art.\(^{33}\)

As such, “Neocursi” represented a pointed critique of the commercial gallery circuits that surrounded the Neo-Mexicanists. Art historians and critics repeatedly related the dramatic iconography in Neo-Mexicanist paintings to the subjective, psychological experiences of its creators. The interest in the psyches of individual artists is evidenced by the titles given to exhibitions of Neo-Mexicanism, such as “De su álbum… inciertas confesiones (From their scrapbook…uncertain confessions)” or “Espacio violento: Nueva expresión en México (Violent space: New Expressions in Mexico), titles that romanticized the individual emotions of the participating artists.\(^{34}\)

“Neocursi” featured more than sixty artists. Critics of the time noted that not all the artists followed the exhibition’s goals: “not every participant captured the notion of *cursi*, giving the work the necessary and deliberate twist so that, on the one hand, this element was preserved its original essence, and moreover, would result in a work of quality aesthetics loaded with a

\(^{33}\) Mayer, interview.

\(^{34}\) See Rubén Bautista, *Espacio violento: nueva expresión en México*. (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1985); Olivier Debroise, ed., *De su álbum...inciertas confesiones* (Mexico City: Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986).
healthy dose of humor.” Still, several artists playfully echoed Neo-Mexicanist tropes, creating representations of excessive sentimentality. A photograph from the show displays works by one of the participating artist couples: Diana Guzmán’s Polvo en los ojos (Dust in the Eyes) and Jorge Morquecho’s Llévate la historia (Take the Story with You) (fig. 4.8). Guzmán juxtaposed portraits of a man and a woman, presenting these representations over an idyllic seashore (fig. 4.9). In the foreground of the painting, the artist presented a set of footprints, suggesting a romantic walk on the beach. The title of the piece, Polvo en los ojos, also referenced sentimentality and romance, as it evoked tearful individuals who try to explain away the tears welling up in their eyes.

These works parody the melodrama and excess associated with Neo-Mexicanism. Guzmán and Morquecho, however, did not explicitly include Mexican iconography. Other artists within the exhibition, such as Arturo Guerrero and Marisa Lara, also avoided using nationalistic symbols. In Sueños pecaminosos (Sinful Dreams), Guerrero presented imagers resembling medieval manuscript illustrations (fig. 4.10). In this work, he included a human figure enraptured in flames on the left, as well as a knight in shining armor on the right side of the painting; dividing the two human figures one found an amorphous, beastly creature in darkened colors. Similarly, in Mejor te lo platico (It’s Better If I Tell You About It), Lara portrayed a couple locked in a passionate embrace without including explicit references to mexicanidad (fig. 4.11).  

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36 Several of the artists involved in “Neocursi,” such as Guerrero and Lara, would continue to engage in collaborative practices. See The Age of Discrepancies, 278.
The show also featured works by artists commonly grouped with the Neo-Mexicanists, such as Zenil. This particular artist often employed traditional Mexican iconography, juxtaposing his self-portrait, for instance, with a representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a bleeding heart (fig. 4.12). The piece he produced for “Neocursi,” however, differs from many of his earlier paintings and graphic works that linked him to Neo-Mexicanism. In the PMR show, Zenil presented a cabinet of curiosities: Vitrina (Cabinet) (fig. 4.13). Following the instructions of the exhibition, Zenil did not produce the work by himself. Instead, he collaborated with his frequently portrayed lover, Gerardo Vihil. Thus, this PMR exhibition prompted individual artists such as Zenil to produce a work of art that distinguished itself from the objects he produced for commercial galleries. Vitrina relied on the collaboration between the artist and his partner, following the collective forms of artistic production favored by Mayer in her feminist art collectives.

As described in the exhibition flyer, “Neocursi” established the Circuito Cultural Condesa, attracting members of the local neighborhood to the exhibition. The text in the flyer even stated that the cultural spaces of the neighborhood were the property of audience members, as it included references to “your cultural spaces of the Condesa.” PMR sought to engage audiences that had traditionally avoided gallery shows and museum exhibitions. Critics of the exhibition, such as Luis Carlos Emerich, noted these efforts in their reviews:

Kids from the Escuela Decroly, a cheerful addition to the proceedings, opened up a parade-performance, the kind of artistic celebration that seeks to prove that painting, sculpture, photography and objects are the privilege of life itself and not that of the elites, the kind of celebration that can spark the interest of the ‘general public.’

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Through these events, the artists associated with “Neocursi” engaged in the forms of artistic practice celebrated by Acha in his scholarship, echoing the earlier efforts of los grupos. Through this exhibition, Mayer and Lerma highlighted the connections between the artists and the public, seeking to establish an on-going relationship with the inhabitants of the Condesa neighborhood. Another show, entitled “Contaminación No,” for instance, displayed drawings produced by children from the Escuela Decroly; the school would later use the funds from these sales to implement environmental programs (figs. 4.14-4.15).39 Through these curatorial efforts, Mayer and Lerma positioned the PMR gallery as an art venue that responded to the specific interests and needs of the community in the Condesa neighborhood, disregarding the profit motive of commercial galleries.

The early exhibition efforts of the PMR gallery also linked Mayer and Lerma to larger developments in the contemporary arts scene of the 1990s. Throughout this decade, several artists aimed to circumvent official government institutions, establishing alternative art spaces. As noted by Vania Macías, these independent venues allowed artists to engage in a form of institutional critique, rejecting government institutions they viewed as “inefficient and unable to generate new discourses, for failing to comprehend the cultural transformations and hybridizations that the nation was experiencing.”40 In these alternative venues, artists could engage in experimental practices that did not rely on the patronage of the state or private collectors, allowing artists to engage in experimental practices that differed from the representations of mexicanidad favored by other institutions.41

In her discussion of these alternative spaces, Macías emphasized the difficulty of producing an exhaustive list of the institutions founded throughout the period, while still noting several examples, such as La Quiñonera, Salón des Aztecas, Curare: Espacio Crítico para las Artes, La Panadería, and the PMR gallery. Her description of the events taking place at La Panadería, the independent venue established by artists Yoshua Okón and Miguel Calderón at the Condesa neighborhood, suggests the similarities between these independent venues and the PMR gallery:

La Panadería fostered audience participation, in the space and with the artists, either through its usually packed openings or raucous parties, or through works where spectators were invited to become directly involved, as in Yoshua Okón’s show, “Lo mejor de lo mejor” (The Best of the Best), were [sic.] visitors were given costumes and invited to dance, or Artemio’s performance, La mejor manera de pedir perdón (The Best Way to Say I’m Sorry), where the artist himself sang and danced for his audience.42

The other alternative venues founded throughout this period also hosted events that relied on participation and interaction from the audience.

Mayer and Lerma, however, organized shows that distinguished the PMR gallery from the activities of other alternative venues. The two artists organized exhibitions that focused attention on the role played by gender in artistic production and reception, a strategy that linked their independent venue to Mayer’s earlier efforts in feminist art collectives. In 1991, PMR organized “Madrecitas (Little Mothers).” For this exhibition, Mayer and Lerma requested artists to contribute works of art that were no larger than 20 cubic centimeters; over ninety different artists contributed works of art. Marcos Kurtyz, for instance, produced a small, human figure composed of jigsaw puzzle pieces. The sculptural object humorously referenced traditional representations of maternity, transforming the birthing process into a puzzle (fig. 4.16).

According to critic Alberto Hijar, Lerma’s contribution to this exhibition was the work Cubo de

*madrecitas para amar* (Small cube of little mothers to love), an installation which “unfolds from the corner of the ceiling with photocopied imagery.” 43 Mayer participated in the exhibition by showing photographs. 44

In an interview, Lerma explained the exhibition’s goals: “We are trying to play with the concept, the theme, and with everything that Mother’s Day implies.” 45 As with the earlier exhibition of “Neocursi,” Mayer and Lerma sought to parody the exhibitions favored by government-sponsored museums and commercial galleries. Specifically, “Madrecitas” humorously referenced the celebratory exhibitions organized by government museums, mimicking exhibitions organized around Mexican Independence day, for instance. 46 In addition, this exploration of maternity in contemporary Mexico linked the PMR gallery to the critique of maternity developed by PGN.

During this period, Mayer and Lerma also employed their independent exhibition venue to explore the possibilities of new artistic mediums. In 1991, the two artists collaborated with Fernando Gallo and María Antonieta Marbán in *Mímesis*, a digital printing project that employed a newly available color laser photocopier. 47 As part of the project, Mayer and Lerma invited twenty-five different artists to employ the laser photocopier in any way they saw fit. As described by Mayer, some of the artists, like Vicente Rojo, employed the technology in a straightforward manner, producing works that resembled the images they produced in other mediums, like painting. Others artists, like Bustamante, employed the laser photocopier as a

44 See ibid.
46 Ibid.
prop within an art performance. In this manner, Mayer coincided with other Mexican artists that reconsidered the social significance and value of prints, and other mechanical mediums. Indeed, shortly before the execution of the Mímesis project, art historian Tibol coined the term neográfica, or neo-printing, to describe the broad forms of artistic experimentation that proliferated in post-1968 Mexico.

In the works Mayer produced for the Mímesis project, she continued her earlier explorations of psychological turmoil, employing visual repetition to suggest the instability of dreams and memories (figs. 4.17-4.18). In Tormenta (Storm), she included numerous representations of a small child, an image she obtained from her family album. Two nearly identical images of a child stand in the foreground, while the same image lies in the background in reverse, framed within a window-like, blue expanse. Similarly, Naufragio (Shipwreck) contained numerous photographs of the artist. Mayer presented these images of herself with torn, haphazard edges, hovering over “scraps” of blue paper. The artist thus combined personal photographs with representations of natural forces, such as ocean waves or floods. In this manner, she playfully referenced the mechanical qualities of photocopying, employing repetition to create images that resembled earlier collages such as A veces me espantan mis fantasías.

Through Mímesis, a project considered part of the PMR collaboration, Mayer employed imagery she had developed in her individual artistic production. In the series Algo como el agua (Something Like Water), the artist employed watercolors and photocopies to present herself surrounded by bodies of water. In Tres (Three), she depicted herself in a bathing suit, her arms

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48 See ibid.
49 Raquel Tibol, Gráficas y neográficas en México (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1987). According to Tibol, contemporary Mexican artists echoed the earlier collective forms of printmaking associated with the post-revolutionary period, such as the Taller de Gráfica Popular. Artists from the later twentieth century, however, questioned the role of prints in contemporary society, employing innovative techniques that transformed traditional printmaking. Mayer’s reliance on photocopying technology further positioned her work as an example of neográfica.
stretching upwards, as though preparing to lunge into the water; the work also depicts her in a crouched position (fig. 4.19). The water waves cross over her body, juxtaposed with shark fins. In another work from the series, *Cuatro (Four)*, the artist presents the fragmentation of the human figure in a more extreme manner; she depicts her body with sharply sliced segments, at times rearranging her limbs in a way that echoes Bellmer’s dolls (fig. 4.20). Altogether, these images suggest a natural world that overwhelms the fragile body of the artist. Indeed, describing these works, Cordero Reiman emphasized how the images prompted a visceral reaction from viewers: “*Los naufragios del cuerpo*... and *Algo como el agua*... dislocate our compositional expectations. Losing one’s footing, instability: these are the bodily sensations that emerge with undeniable, overwhelming force. These works are full of things: lines, textures, objects, images, and nevertheless they remit us inexorably to the void, to insecurity and to desire.”

Mayer’s images of drowning also referenced earlier visual representations produced by artists in Mexico. In particular, the images of the *Mimesis* project echoed the photographic collages produced by Lola Álvarez Bravo, such as *El sueño del ahogado* (Dream of the Drowned) (fig. 4.21). The photomontages produced by Álvarez Bravo, however, frequently alluded to social problems, such as poverty. In works such as *El sueño de los pobres* (The Dream of the Poor) and *El capital hambriento de sobre trabajo* (Capital, Hungry from Overwork), she employed photographic collage to denounce the inequality prevalent in post-

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50 Cordero Reiman, “When in Doubt... Ask: Mónica Mayer’s Artistic Project,” 38.
51 Lola Álvarez Bravo worked as a photography instructor at the Academy of San Carlos from 1945 to 1960; she was also an active figure in the circle of Surrealist émigré artists that included Leonora Carrington, and Mayer’s future instructor of photography at the ENAP, Kati Horna. For more on the artistic contributions of Lola Álvarez Bravo to photography in Mexico, see James Oles, ed., *Lola Álvarez Bravo and the Photography of an Era* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, Editorial RM, 2012).
revolutionary Mexico (figs. 4.22-4.23). In contrast, Mayer’s collages repeatedly employ her own likeness, transforming her collages into a form of self-reflection.

In a separate discussion on her use of photocopying technology, Mayer stressed how the medium allowed her to work through personal, subjective experiences. Mímesis thus linked the artist to the forms of photographic collage developed by artists of the FSW, and the feminist artistic circles of the 1970s, functioning as a form of reflexive autobiography. Even though she employed new technologies such as laser photocopiers, Mayer developed images that invoked traditional crafts, echoing a larger feminist artistic effort to reevaluate these “low-art” mediums. Like other feminist artists, Mayer employed collage and repetition to suggest personal memories and experiences, a form of representation that established women’s subjectivity and experiences as a valid subject matter to explore in the fine arts.

From Curatorial Practice to the Archive

Even while the PMR gallery remained open, Mayer and Lerma began accumulating archival materials associated with artistic production, an effort that would eventually become the main component of their artistic collaboration. Describing these collection efforts at the time, Mayer stressed the importance of preserving archival documents related to artists of her generation. In a column written for El Universal titled “La triste historia de la historia del arte

52 Álvarez Bravo produced these photomontages when living with María Izquierdo, when both artists were members of the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios. Both photomontages were presented in an exhibition of propaganda posters in Guadalajara in 1935, and were later reproduced in the El Maestro Rural publication. See Johanna Spanke, “The Photomontages of Lola Álvarez Bravo,” in Lola Álvarez Bravo and the Photography of an Era.

53 In particular, Mayer’s collages resembled the works produced by Miriam Schapiro in the 1970s. For a discussion of these collages, later identified as “femmages” by Schapiro and art historians, see Thalia Gouma-Peterson, “Miriam Schapiro: An Art of Becoming,” American Art 11, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 11–45.

54 Mayer, interview.
(The Sad History of Art History),” the artist emphasized the specific challenges facing artists of her generation, as Mexican artistic institutions had little interest in the experimental forms of art making associated with los grupos and non-objectual artists.⁵⁵ For Mayer, the accumulation of materials associated with non-objectual art might allow for a more inclusive form of art historical scholarship. In what follows, I detail the specific components of the PMR archive, revealing its significance in Mexico City’s artistic scene of the late twentieth century.

Mayer and Lerma collected the art criticism found in ten different Mexican newspapers, hoping to preserve a record of contemporary art in Mexico.⁵⁶ In addition, the two artists produced a newsletter of artistic events that they distributed among art critics, other artists, and feminist activists.⁵⁷ As the PMR archive grew, however, the two artists began to consider the ways in which their archival efforts related to artistic production itself. These considerations linked Mayer and Lerma to other artists in Mexico interested in the artistic potential of archives, such as Ehrenberg. Throughout his career, this particular artist amassed an impressive number of archival materials that he later employed in his artistic production. In 1990, for instance, he produced Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis, a book-object that relied on images and various materials from his collection (fig. 4.24). As described by D. Vanessa Kam, this particular work incorporated a wide variety of media:

The first side of the book incorporates many of Ehrenberg’s best-loved stencils – devices used in earlier publications… The images captured by the stencils were derived from the artist’s ‘Visual Information Bank’ – a collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, found objects, brochures, erotica, popular magazines, and Mexican and folk art, assembled over a period of twenty years.⁵⁸

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⁵⁶ Mayer, interview.
⁵⁷ See ibid.
Like Mayer and Lerma, Ehrenberg amassed a vast collection of artistic ephemera. In addition, he focused attention on the ways in which representations systems functioned in contemporary Mexico, including magazines, newspaper clippings, and other forms of mass media publications in his archive.

Ehrenberg’s project, however, still distinguished between the archive, or the “Visual Information Bank,” and the final work of art produced by the artist. As Mayer and Lerma continued in their archival efforts, eventually they came to view the archive as a work of art itself. In this manner, they echoed the artistic practice of Carrión, particularly with his Other books and So project. This earlier project originally functioned as an independent artist press in Amsterdam. In the late 1970s, however, Carrión closed the independent press, and began viewing the archive itself as the product of his artistic activity. Describing the archive, he stated:

Traditional art involves a great number of specialists: the artist, the gallery owner, the art critics, etcetera, whereas here, the artist is responsible for all these elements. For me, an archive is the attempt to make that reality possible, which is why I consider an archive to be a work of art, but a work of art that implies space, a public institution. It implies the work of other people, my social function. There are no time limits for an archive. It survives indefinitely. There are no limits, it is constantly growing, it is still alive.”

Other artists from Mexico would later emulate this vision of the archive developed by Carrión. In 1984, for instance, Armando Sáenz, Yani Pecanins, and Gabriel Macotela opened El Archivero. As described by Lourdes Morales, “this space served as gallery, bookstore, and, of course, as a link between national and foreign artistic and literary circuits.” El Archivero, which remained open until 1991, was part of an effort in establishing independent artistic circuits, as well as the growing interest in artistic archives.

The materials accumulated by Mayer and Lerma, however, distinguished the PMR archive from other artistic exercises in Mexico City and abroad. The two artists collected documents related to the efforts of women artists, feminist art collectives, and Mexican feminist activism, a broad array of materials that mainstream art institutions did not view as artistic. The project thus represented an extension of a particular model of archival practice that emerged in the feminist artistic circles of the 1970s, a model Mayer directly encountered during her studies at the FSW. Through the PMR project, Mayer and Lerma employed these feminist archival practices in a new geographic context, positioning their work as a form of translocal dialogue with feminist artists and activists of the contemporary era.

As a member of the FSW in the late 1970s, Mayer navigated an institution focused on the construction, maintenance, and distribution of archives, participating in intense debates that would frame the subsequent PMR project. The centrality of archives within the FSW was part of the effort to understand the contributions of women artists to the fine arts. As part of this effort to understand the creative achievements of the past, several scholars curated exhibitions focused on the achievements of women artists from earlier generations.62 A prominent example of these curatorial efforts was the massive exhibition “Women Artists: 1550-1950.”63

However, as emphasized by Nochlin, these efforts at “proving” the value of women artists by finding “forgotten” women artists of the past did not challenge the structure of the artistic institutions that had limited women’s achievements.64 Therefore, Nochlin stressed the need for an institutional or sociological approach to transform art historical research through feminism. Echoing these concerns, individuals associated with the Woman’s Building and the

63 See ibid.
FSW hoped to transform the ways in which art historical scholarship dealt with gender.

Members of these institutions sought to disrupt the narrative of art history itself. For example, some women became interested in recuperating traditionally female art forms and having them aesthetically reappraised… members of the Woman’s Building took on the fixed subject positions implied by the traditional narrative of art history – woman as muse, model, and handmaiden to male genius, but never as artist – by regenerating the figure of the artist to include women.\(^65\)

Moravec has described these varied approaches to the history of art as the “historicity of the Woman’s Building,” linking these research efforts to the form of artistic practice encouraged by this institution and the FSW. These expansive efforts represent the forms of feminist art history endorsed by Nochlin.\(^66\)

The interest in historical preservation directly led members of the Woman’s Building and the FSW to create new archives focused on feminist artistic practices. In 1973, Ruth Iskin and Arlene Raven helped establish the Center for Art Historical Studies. As described in the late 1970s by Filding, “The Center’s interests include serious art historical research and criticism of women’s artwork, the development of a feminist perspective with which to view this research and the history of art in general; and advancing women’s capacities to verbalize and write about their own and other’s art.”\(^67\) From its inception, the center complemented the strategies of the FSW, as the two founders of this scholarly institution sought to involve student artists in the construction and maintenance of an archive:

Initially Raven and Iskin hoped to involve FSW students in the Center for Art Historical Research… according to Iskin, a ‘sense of the importance of history, that what we were doing was something that was history’ pervaded the Woman’s Building. Therefore, while making art and running an organization, members did their best to document their

\(^{65}\) Moravec, “Fictive Families of History Makers: Historicity at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building,” 69–70.
\(^{67}\) Wilding, By Our Own Hands, 93.
historical contributions. These efforts led the members to keep as much ephemera as possible in a now mythical closet at the Woman’s Building.\textsuperscript{68}

Thus, this scholarly center was part of a broad strategy that aimed to preserve the memory of the forms of art developed by members of these feminist institutions. In fact, the FSW included journal writing and video production as part of its official curriculum during the years Mayer was a student at this institution, encouraging documentary efforts.\textsuperscript{69}

By encouraging students to participate in the creation of archives, faculty members transformed their students into archivists. As noted by Alexandra Juhasz, “Women at the building knew that if their important work was going to enter and stay in history, then they would need to ‘get shown and be known’….by and for themselves, because no one would do it for them.”\textsuperscript{70} The creation of an archive was an inherently political act. For members of the Woman’s Building and the FSW, the archive came to represent a possibility of properly representing the efforts of women in the history of art.

The critical approach around art historical scholarship that emerged in the Woman’s Building and the FSW, served as an early artistic intervention in the larger discussion of archives in the academic world. The efforts of these feminist artists thus followed earlier discussions by Michel Foucault on the ways in which historical narratives relate to material archives, a critical perspective that subsequent generations of contemporary artists would employ. In \textit{Archaeology of Knowledge}, Foucault discussed how the archive – a physical collection of different materials – allows for particular narratives and legitimate histories to emerge. Foucault, however, also

\textsuperscript{68} Moravec, “Fictive Families of History Makers: Historicity at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building,” 71.
\textsuperscript{69} Curriculum for the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building, between 1976 and 1980. Woman's Building records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
discussed the archive from a metaphorical perspective. In his view, an ever-changing set of relations between researchers and social institutions constituted the archive:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance as unique events… The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as an escapee; it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the system of its enunciability.\(^{71}\)

For Foucault, the archive consisted not only of physical materials, but also of the social practices that allow for the existence, expression, and validation of particular forms of knowledge. This metaphorical archive encouraged subjects to produce historical knowledge along delineated ways. As such, the archive allows for certain forms of knowledge to become “legitimate” or “relevant” in examinations of the past. In these systems of knowledge, only particular questions and concerns would fall under the standards of historical knowledge. In this manner, “[the archive] is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us.”\(^{72}\)

By constructing new archives, members of the Woman’s Building and the FSW aimed to alter the “law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.” By documenting and chronicling the collective forms of art developed within these institutions, students expanded the possibilities of artistic production, establishing the projects developed by feminist artists as important – and groundbreaking – examples of contemporary art. The C-R sessions, the various autobiographical projects of women artists, and the collaborative projects of these institutions transformed the traditional definitions of artistic practice, providing women artists with the opportunity to contribute to the art world.


\(^{72}\) Ibid., 130.
In a recent reflection on the Woman’s Building, Mayer acknowledged the central position occupied by archival practice in feminist artistic efforts:

One of the things I became more aware of at the Woman’s Building was the importance of rewriting and conserving history. Judy Chicago was finishing *The Dinner Party* and at the Woman’s Building there were shows like GALAS (*The Great American Lesbian Art Show*) that were sending slides of the works they were showing to many libraries. The archive was a battleground. This made perfect sense to me as a Mexican, because our only artists known abroad were the muralists. Everything else was invisible.”

Through the ongoing PMR project, Mayer employed the forms of archival production encouraged by the Woman’s Building and the FSW in a new geographic context, considering the specific conditions of the Mexican art world. Her archival efforts focused attention on artistic efforts that mainstream artistic institutions in Mexico had rendered invisible. While these collection efforts related to the larger phenomenon of *los grupos*, Mayer and Lerma also collected materials that specifically related to women artists, feminist art collectives, and feminist activist efforts. In this manner, the PMR archive aimed to bring visibility to artistic efforts that remained outside the interest of commercial galleries, government-sponsored museums, and academic institutions of the late twentieth century.

In addition, Mayer and Lerma employed the PMR archive to document their artistic collaborations, a form of artistic practice that frequently alluded to the construction of gender roles in contemporary Mexican society. The archive thus served as a record of a sustained exploration of the ways in which customs and traditions produce specific roles for men and women in the social world. In 1980, as part of their official wedding celebration, Mayer and Lerma encouraged their guests to reflect on the ways in which marriage was supposed to signify a transformation for married women, in particular. During the ceremony, Mayer and Lerma distributed altered wedding invitations that described how guests would be able to witness the

73 Mayer in Jones and Mayer, “‘Lubricating the System’ and Other Feminist Curatorial and Art Dilemmas: Amelia Jones in Dialogue with Mónica Mayer,” 230.
birth of “la Sra. Lerma (Mrs. Lerma)” at midnight (fig. 4.25). The two artists then encouraged their wedding guests to become active participants in an art project:

We took [our guests] out of the party, and we took them to Mónica’s old room. In the closet, there were four small, sugar figurines, like those used to decorate wedding cakes: a wedding couple and ourselves. We asked our guests, as the fairy godfathers and fairy godmothers of this newborn to bestow a ‘gift’ upon her. The guests wrote down their gifts on small pieces of paper, and thus Mrs. Lerma was born.74

In this performance, Mayer and Lerma explored the ways in which certain rituals reveal the social position of women in Mexican society. By specifically relying on the tropes of fairy tales – such as the bestowing of magical gifts upon the newly born Sleeping Beauty of yore – the artists humorously criticized the unrealistic expectations of matrimony (fig. 4.26). In fact, several of the “gifts” written down on paper by the wedding guests relate to the sexual relationship between Mayer and Lerma, transforming the traditional chaste idea of wedding brides dressed in white. The small, sugar figurines constructed by the artists humorously stand apart from the somber objects traditionally placed on top of a Mexican wedding cake.

In this performance, the two artists transformed their marriage ceremony into a public, participatory performance. The project echoed earlier examples of feminist art, employing wedding rituals as the subject matter of artistic projects, such as the extensive performance, To Love, Honor, Cherish..., organized by the Feminist Art Workers in 1978 (figs. 4.27-4.29). In this piece, members of the collective “married” the Woman’s Building on the institution’s five-year anniversary, exploring the cultural myths that surrounded brides in the United States.75 The project developed by Mayer and Lerma, however, highlighted the specific marriage expectations in contemporary Mexico. Inserting these photographs of the wedding celebration into the PMR

74 Pinto Mi Raya, “Material clasificado del archivo de Pinto Mi Raya: Las Bodas y El Divorcio,” 2012, 7, Archivo Pinto Mi Raya.
archive, allowed the two artists to record a form of personal, experimental artistic practice unmentioned in other institutional archives.

The interests of Mayer and Lerma also led them to position the manipulation of the archive as central to their artistic practice. In 1990, ten years into their marriage, the two artists realized they did not have an official wedding portrait. As described by Mayer, this was the direct result of a mistake made by their chosen wedding photographer, who ruined the camera’s film.76 As a way of humorously rectifying this situation, the artists planned a public action titled *Foto falsa a los 10 años de boda* (*Fake Photograph, 10 Years after the Wedding*), taking place at the Centro Cultural Santo Domingo.77 This performance dealt with the notion of photography and memory, as the two artists stated that the goal of this endeavor was to produce a “fake photograph” for their extensive and growing artistic archive.78

Mayer and Lerma posed in costumes that emphasized the artificiality of the whole endeavor (fig. 4.30). The artists transformed their attire using plastic garbage bags, producing costumes that only superficially resembled the clothing of an elegant wedding, a decision that appears to mock the rituals of wedding celebrations. Through the various forms of documentation that resulted from the performance, the artists called attention to the arbitrary nature of photographic documentation as a whole. By emphasizing the artificiality of the recorded event, Mayer and Lerma led audience members to reflect on the role played by photography in contemporary archives. Through this project, the PMR aligned itself with the larger forms of archival art emerging in the international art circuits of the late twentieth

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76 Pinto Mi Raya, “Las Bodas y El Divorcio.” 11. *Foto falsa* was part of a larger collaboration between Mayer and Lerma revolving around their wedding celebration and marriage.

77 Ibid.

78 Carlos Blas Galindo served as the judge, while Perla Schwartz and Bustamante were also members of the wedding party. Ibid.
As discussed by Hal Foster, archival art “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.” Through the insertion of Foto Falsa within the vast number of documents in their collection, Mayer and Lerma underscored the constructed nature of historical narratives. The autobiographical nature of their work, however, distinctly linked them to earlier feminist artists, going as far back as the early performances and other forms of experimentation in the Feminist Art Program (FAP) in Fresno, California.

The PMR project and Feminist Activist Efforts in Mexico

The emergence of the PMR project coincided with a period of intense change in feminist activist efforts in Mexico. Scholars have described this period as a moment in which feminism underwent a process of institutionalization, particularly within the Mexican government and universities. In 1987, for instance, the state government of the state of Guerrero established the Secretaría de la Mujer (Ministry of Women), the first ministry in the country specifically focused on women’s issues. In addition, several centers for estudios de la mujer, or women’s studies, emerged during this period. The UNAM established a gender studies program in 1992, with different programs emerging in state universities across the nation throughout the rest of the decade. These government offices and academic centers served as critical sites for feminist intervention and critique, highlighting the ways in which gender affected social structures in contemporary Mexico. In a similar manner, the PMR project, through its independent gallery

80 Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5. Through this clarification, Foster distinguishes archival art from the larger array of artists who employ archives in their work.
81 See Bartra, “Tres décadas de neofeminismo en México,” 68.
83 Bartra, “Estudios de La Mujer. ¿Un paso adelante, dos pasos atrás?,” 203.
and archive, served as an examination of the ways in which gender affected artistic circuits, establishing a space for feminist critique.

Throughout the 1990s, women’s organizations and feminist activists made a concentrated effort to produce texts, magazines, and other forms of media that chronicled the activities of the movement as a whole. As described by Ana Lau, “Feminists have produced radio programs, organized conferences, symposiums, colloquiums, and have managed to established, along with female academics, multidisciplinary research and teaching centers with an emphasis on gender, leading to the publication of specialized magazines and a plethora of academic studies related to the characteristics of women in Mexico.”84 Through these publications, feminist activists produced textual materials that would allow future generations of activists and scholars to understand the trajectory of a complex, and polyvocal social movement.

In particular, the establishment of the magazine *Debate Feminista* in 1990 exemplified the ways in which the PMR project coincided with the interests of feminist groups. The magazine, founded by Marta Lamas, published essays and other materials in Spanish, as well as texts translated from other languages.85 As discussed by Márgara Millán, *Debate Feminista* “presents an open structure in the sense of constantly offering a space ‘from another place,’ dedicated to views that are not always openly feminist, and publishing some male authors in most of its issues.”86 In this manner, the magazine functioned as a site of translocal exchange, allowing for an ongoing dialogue between feminist groups in Mexico and organizations in other regions of the world. By establishing a network of exchange, *Debate Feminista* prefigured the strategies that Mayer and Lerma would regularly employ in their artistic project.

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84 Ana Lau, “El nuevo movimiento feminista mexicano a fines del milenio,” in *Feminismo en México, ayer y hoy*, 17.
The PMR project also related to the growing concern to maintain a historical record of feminist activism in Mexico as a whole. In particular, activists such as Victoria Jiménez exemplified the trend towards historical preservation and archival pursuits. Jiménez was one of the participants in Mayer’s *Traducciones*; she was also one of the members of the TyR collective. Throughout her life, this particular activist employed photography to document the various public actions associated with Mexican feminist groups. Jiménez began amassing this collection in 1964, establishing an archive of over 3,000 photographs and 500 documents; the collection was later donated to the Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.  

Even though PMR emerged in the specific artistic context of the late 1980s, the project continues to this day. Indeed, Mayer continues to employ the archival component of the PMR to document her ongoing artistic interventions in the urban environment in Mexico City. In 2012, for instance, Mayer organized the “Taller de Activismo y Arte Feminista (Feminist Activism and Art Workshop).” Participants in this workshop began a series of discussions modeled on the C-R sessions that were central to artistic instruction of the FSW, further extending the influence of the particular model of feminist activism and artistic production initiated in the 1970s. The conversations and debates focused on motherhood in Mexican

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88 In recent years, Mayer and Lerma have employed new technologies to expand the reach of the PMR archive. In 2012, the two artists produced *Archivo Activo (Active Archive)*. This project consisted of a collection of DVDs containing digitized documents from the PMR archive, organized under topics such as public art, alternative spaces, photography, women artists, and digital art; the collection of ten discs reproduces over 10,000 individual documents. The two artists have donated this resource to various artistic institutions in Mexico, such as the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico. See Marta Olivares Correa, “Ágora: Pinto Mi Raya. Archivo Activo, Un Proyecto Conceptual,” *Revista Discurso Visual*, no. 22 (October 2013), http://www.discursovisual.net/dvweb22/agora/agomartha.htm.

society, leading participants to organize a series of public actions that were part of a project known as *Una maternidad secuestrada es (A Sequestered Motherhood Is).* On May 11, 2012, Mayer, Lerma, and other participants congregated at the Zócalo in Mexico City, in an event titled *La protesta del día después (The Protest of the Day After).* Participants in this event held signs that began with the phrase “*Una maternidad secuestrada es (A sequestered motherhood is),”* with the sentence being completed in different ways. As a whole, the signs highlighted different social conditions that established a form of “sequestered motherhood.” One of the phrases read “*Qué me muera en una clínica clandestina porque el gobierno o la iglesia no me dejan decidir sobre mi cuerpo* (Dying in a clandestine clinic because the government or the Church won’t let me make decisions related to my body)” (fig. 4.31). Mayer and Lerma incorporated these photographs into the PMR archive, expanding the reach of a collection that records actions and events that fall outside the interest of mainstream artistic institutions.

In other projects, Mayer and Lerma more closely focused on archival production itself. The two artists organized the “Taller: Visita al archivo de PINTO MI RAYA (Workshop: A Visit to the PINTO MI RAYA Archive)” in 2014. In this workshop, taking place over several days, Mayer and Lerma brought together a small number of participants interested in the PMR archive, and archival practice in general (fig. 4.32). The format of the workshop included presentations organized by the two artists, but it also emphasized the contributions of the participants. In an exercise, Mayer asked participants to describe a document of personal significance; participants then completed an automatic writing exercise related to this document. In her description of this activity, Mayer emphasized how it echoed the exercises developed at the Woman’s Building.

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90 Ibid.
and the FSW.†2 In this manner, the PMR project familiarized a new generation of Mexican artists and activists with the techniques and methods of 1970s feminist artists. Through these workshops, Mayer continued the efforts in feminist pedagogy she had developed in Mexico throughout the 1980s, including projects such as Traducciones, as well as the workshops she organized in the Academy of San Carlos that led to the creation of TyR.

Through these workshops Mayer and Lerma, however, did not aim to include women in canonical histories of Mexican art. Instead, the PMR archive served as a site to examine the existing art historical narratives prevalent in government institutions, commercial galleries, and mainstream academic centers. As such, Mayer and Lerma exemplified the artistic practices described by Pollock in her discussion of feminist contemporary art. The PMR archive served as a “virtual feminist museum,” an artistic intervention that served as an “open laboratory rather than a story. It is not aiming to be definitive, offering an alternative canon. It offers a series of situated readings, owned but offered to the reader as a means of sharing an excitement about the study of the visual arts.”†3 Through their ongoing workshops, Mayer and Lerma engage in an archival practice that linked their efforts to the model of feminist art developed by the FSW in the 1970s. Serving as an open site for a new generation of activists, artists, and scholars, the PMR project allows for different understandings of contemporary art in Mexico, building and extending an earlier feminist effort to transform academic knowledge, art history, and artistic practice itself. The PMR project thus allows Mayer to serve as an instructor – and mentor – of emerging artists in the country, further establishing her role as an important conduit in the disseminations of feminist artistic models within a translocal arena.

†2 Ibid.
†3 Pollock, Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum, 11.
Conclusion

The extensive – and ongoing – PMR project by Mayer and Lerma negotiated between several distinct artistic traditions that operated in the Mexican art world of the late twentieth century. In the early curatorial efforts associated with the project, the two artists emphasized the creation of a new “cultural circuit,” a description that reveals the lingering influence of Acha’s conception of contemporary art in Latin America. Through their artist-run gallery, Mayer and Lerma sought to establish relationship between the public and artists, establishing a distribution system for contemporary art that sidelined government institutions and commercial galleries.

The project, however, soon focused on archival practices, leading to the creation of the PMR archive. Mayer and Lerma collected materials that illustrated the efforts of past women artists, feminist art collectives and activist groups, preserving documents ignored by mainstream artistic institutions in Mexico. The PMR archive thus echoed a form of archival activity initiated by feminist artists of the 1970s. Through the PMR project, Mayer and Lerma developed a form of archival practice that remains distinct in the contemporary artistic circuits of Mexico, highlighting women artists and feminist art collectives that remained absent in art historical discussions of Mexican art. In this manner, the two artists employed their archive as a site for critical reflection, allowing scholars, activists, and artists to consider the ways in which gender has affected artistic production in Mexico, as well as the writing of art history. The PMR project functioned as an extension of Mayer’s collective, feminist artistic practice, further allowing the artist to translate the model of feminist art of the 1970s to different artistic and geographic contexts.
CONCLUSION

In her discussion of feminist activism and scholarship in Latin America, Alvarez emphasized the difficulties in establishing connections between different communities of women. Noting the misrepresentations in academic work, including feminist scholarship, she underscored the “need to devise better ‘bridging epistemologies’ … so as to confront the mistranslations or bad translations that have fueled misunderstandings and obscured feminist alliances.”¹ Indeed, for Alvarez, the metaphor of translocal translation underscored how feminist discourse constantly adapts and transforms, negotiating the political and social structures of the region with the forms of activism and scholarship developing in the United States. Mayer’s artistic production, extending over a period of forty years, serves as a powerful example of the ways in which the visual arts – and feminist art in particular – contributed to the production of “bridging epistemologies.” Throughout her career, Mayer adapted the public art interventions of los grupos in Mexico with the model of collective art developed by feminist artists of the West Coast of the United States in the 1970s. In her different artistic projects – including installations, collages, public art interventions, performances, and archives – Mayer has not wavered from this process of translocal translation, producing works that critique women’s social role in her home country, even as she employed artistic strategies developed by feminist artists of the United States. Her artwork established a link between the forms of feminist activity developing in both countries, fostering exchanges between different communities and allowing for new understandings of Mexican women’s subjective experiences.

Through this process of translocal translation, Mayer followed an elusive, but ambitious goal. As an artist, she recognized the ways in which visual images aided in the construction of sexual inequality in her home country. Her career and large body of work showcases how she sought to transform the country’s social structures through her creativity and artistic projects, linking her with earlier generations of revolutionary women in Mexico. By examining the significance of Mayer’s work, we glimpse into an art historical narrative that remains missing from canonical studies of Mexican art, questioning studies that frequently favor the individual artistic genius of figures such as the Mexican Muralists. Mayer’s ability to negotiate different artistic models and techniques, deploying them in Los Angeles and Mexico City, allowed her to shake the foundations of an artistic canon that favored male artists. Through her decades of artistic output, she sought to transform the visual arts, thereby seeking to transform society and the everyday lives of Mexican women. Moreover, by focusing particular attention to the conditions affecting women in Mexico City, she challenged traditional art historical understandings that position artists from the United States as the originators, and “leaders” of feminist art. Instead, Mayer’s artistic production shaped the trajectory of feminist art in her home country, repeatedly deploying and transforming the forms of feminist art developed within a complex network of exchange.

Before 1978, when Mayer had only completed a short two-week workshop with Chicago, Mayer negotiated the different models of artistic practice developing in Mexico and the United States, creating a unique form of translocal feminist art. Her projects in exhibitions such as “Collage íntimo,” “Lo normal,” and “Salón 77-78” – which relied on collage, photographic representations, and extensive use of lettering – established the hallmarks of her artistic production. Similar to feminist artists in Los Angeles, Mayer employed the visual arts to explore
feminine subjectivity, literally writing down sexual desires and fantasies that were absent from
the art historical record. Through her production, Mayer also countered the idealized vision of
mujeres abnegadas found in the work of the Mexican Muralists, employing images and text to
portray a more complex form of femininity. Her straightforward depictions of male and female
genitals also countered the numerous representations of a sexualized female body that male
viewers could enjoy from a voyeuristic position. Indeed, her artistic production encouraged a
more nuanced understanding of female sexuality. In her first iteration of El tendedero, presented
at the MAM, Mayer employed the public model of feminist art developed by Lacy to denounce
the forms of sexual violent prevalent in Mexico City. By adapting the forms of public feminist
art developed in California to specifically explore the experiences of women in Mexico, Mayer
produced a form of art that was neither wholly Mexican or foreign, positioning the artist in the
interstices of different geographic and artistic contexts.

Her studies in Los Angeles allowed Mayer to develop her own form of translocal feminist
art, transforming the forms of representation developed by feminist artists of the FSW, as well as
Chicana artists in the Los Angeles region. Indeed, Mayer’s use of Marian iconography, in
projects such as Nuestra señora and La Dolorosa, reveals her familiarity with the images
produced by feminist and Chicana artists of the 1970s. Mayer’s images of religiosity also
echoed the paintings produced by Izquierdo during the post-revolutionary period in Mexico.
Through her work, Mayer thus referenced different generations of women artists from both
Mexico and the United States, developing images that reference the seemingly timeless religious
iconography to denounce the prevailing problem of sexual violence.

Traducciones best exemplifies Mayer’s commitment to foster dialogue and understanding
between different communities of women. Seeking to avoid the misrepresentations Alvarez
would later describe as “mistranslations,” Mayer developed an extensive program that brought together feminist activists and artists from the Mexico City and Los Angeles. Through the project, consisting of numerous workshops, gatherings, and visits to different sites in Mexico, Mayer provided a space for these different women to voice their experiences, providing a space for dissent and confrontation. In this manner, Mayer employed the collective model of feminist art to bridge the enormous gap between women from the United States and Mexico.

Indeed, by establishing a translocal dialogue between women from both countries, Mayer anticipated other forms of artistic exchange that would emerge in the later twentieth century. Traducciones resembles large-scale programs such as InSITE, a public art festival initiated in 1992 in the San Diego-Tijuana border region. As described by Debroise and Medina, InSITE originally emerged through the initiative of private individuals, though museums, galleries and other arts organizations in Mexico and the United States soon began participating in the festival. InSITE encourages artists to construct site-specific installations, with many of the participating artists exploring the political and social inequalities of the border region. In the different iterations of the festival, such as InSITE94 and InSITE97, artists produced works that establish a dialogue that transcends the geographic and political borders between the two countries. While Traducciones did not achieve the notoriety of InSITE, the project still exemplifies the growing interest in forms of art that transcend national boundaries, positioning Mayer’s translocal artistic dialogue as an important representative of developments in the contemporary art circuits of the late twentieth century.

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2 For a discussion of InSITE, as well as the list of participating artists in different iterations of the festival, see The Age of Discrepancies, 434–35.
After *Traducciones*, Mayer further solidified her position as a feminist art practitioner, deploying the pedagogical and artistic model of the FSW in Mexico City. In the feminist art collectives of the 1980s, such as TyR and PGN, Mayer developed public art performances, mail art missives, and televised performances, consistently exploring the subjective experiences of femininity and motherhood. Through these projects, Mayer and her collaborators confronted the specific ideal of selfless motherhood that emerged in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. These activities further served as a form of translocal translation, as Mayer’s artistic production paralleled the critiques of motherhood initiated by the FSW’s Mother Art collective. Mayer’s activities of this period, however, specifically explore the challenges and experiences of maternity in Mexico, linking her artistic production to the demands for reproductive freedom by Mexican feminist activists.

The ongoing collaborative project of PMR reiterates Mayer’s ability to transform and adapt the strategies developed by feminist artists of the 1970s to different geographic and artistic contexts. Through the PMR project, and particularly, its archival component, Mayer has constructed an ever-growing material record that describes the artistic production of numerous women artists, feminist art collectives, and feminist activist groups, providing a resource that remains absent from other centers of art historical investigation in Mexico. Indeed, as part of the PMR project, Mayer and Lerma have digitized many of the records of their archive, producing a digital version of the archive that they later donated to institutions such as the MUAC in Mexico City. In this manner, Mayer echoed the activities of the Center for Art Historical Studies from the FSW. Her archival project emphasizes how the production of feminist art must also consider archives and historical documentation, as a way of confronting art historical narratives that dismiss women’s contributions. Through the massive – and still growing – PMR archive, Mayer
has opened up the possibility of writing new art historical examinations of Mexican art of the 1970s and beyond, a process of which this dissertation is just but one example.

The PMR archive contributed to a form of historical record initiated by other feminist activists, such as Jiménez, responsible for the large-scale archive now housed in the Universidad Iberoamericana. In addition, the PMR project has served as a model for other archives focused on documenting feminist art and activism. An organization known as the Producciones y Milagros, Agrupación Feminista A.C., for instance, has spent the last few years documenting different public protests and feminist artistic projects in Mexico, distributing these records through websites and social media. The archive documents several of Mayer’s artistic projects, such as *Maternidades secuestradas*. The PMR project thus fits into a larger collective movement that aims to record and memorialize the diverse strategies and activities of Mexican feminist activists.

Decades after completing her studies at the FSW – and after the demise of this particular institution – she now stands as a practitioner of a specific model of feminist art and activism that developed in Mexico and the United States throughout the 1970s. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to construct an exhaustive examination of the multiple ways in which Mayer’s work affected contemporary audiences and artists, it is nevertheless important to consider the artist’s legacy in contemporary Mexico. How has Mayer’s presence and her development of feminist art transformed the visual arts of Mexico? How has her exploration of sexual violence

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4 As described by the founders, Producciones y Milagros, Agrupación Feminista A.C. “is dedicated to the continuous maintenance of a photographic, visual, and video record of feminist, lesbian feminist, and women’s movements in Mexico and Latin America (symposiums, actions, workshops, academic conferences, meetings, marches, etc.). We are currently working on the digitalization of this archive, as well as the establishment of a physical center to preserve these materials and facilitate community access.” See “Producciones y Milagros Agrupación Feminista - Quienes Somos,” accessed July 5, 2016, http://produccionesymilagros.tumblr.com/quiensesmos. For more on this digital archive, see “Producciones y Milagros Agrupación Feminista A.C.,” accessed July 5, 2016, http://produccionesymilagros.blogspot.com/.

5 The FSW closed its doors in 1981, although the Woman’s Building remained functioning for a few more years, until 1991.
affected discussions of this pressing issue? How did the presence of a particular model of feminist art from the 1970s affect younger generations of women artists? These questions are even more important considering the conditions Giunta highlighted in the “When in Doubt…Ask” exhibition catalogue:

> Today, when new and well-known forms of violence toward women are on the rise, feminism in general and artistic feminism in particular are generally rejected as agendas that have been surpassed by gender studies and queer studies. Far from having lost their currency, such agendas have become even more urgent – in the art world, too, where women’s representation barely reaches 30% in exhibitions and prizes.6

This recent exhibition emphasized how Mayer’s model of feminist art – far from being outdated – still functions as a powerful tool to examine and denounce gender inequality in Mexico. The show displayed documentation of earlier iterations of El tendedero from the 1970s, showing photographs of the installations Mayer presented at the MAM and in California. In addition, Mayer organized a new version of the clothesline, creating a new installation specifically for the show. For this new version, Mayer attended a workshop organized by habitajes and cohabita df, organizations that specifically focus on issues of sexual violence (fig. 5.1).7 Participants from this workshop organized a series of public protests, including a gathering at the Zócalo. The group also produced poster images public transportation buses and social media (figs. 5.2-5.3).8 These posters juxtaposed women’s portraits with written statements that denounced the objectification of the female body, echoing Mayer’s earlier artistic projects of the 1970s.

As explained by the artist, her experiences in the workshop and the creation of a new tendedero prompted her to consider the social changes that had taken place: “Four decades ago, I produced my tendedero all by myself, and there was no one else talking about this through the

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7 See Mayer, “El tendedero MUAC y el taller de habitajes.”
8 Participants from the workshop joined together to create a new art collective, known as Red de Reapropiación 2R; members included Yucari Millán, Gabriela Duhart, and Claudia Espinosa.
visual arts. Today, one finds several art collectives, and/or activist art, working on this insidious problem. I think this is what has changed." Mayer’s new tendedero, presented at the MUAC, linked past and ongoing efforts to curb sexual violence against women (figs. 5.4-5.6). As in the rest of her artistic production, Mayer employed the visual arts to link different communities of women, in this case establishing connections between past and present generations of activists.

The inclusion of a new clothesline in the MUAC exhibition underscored the viability of Mayer’s artistic proposals, revealing how contemporary audiences and artists can still rely on the forms of feminist art developed by earlier generations. But Mayer’s artwork has also expanded the possibilities for later generations of women artists, including those with a more tenuous connection with the forms of feminist activism and artistic practice of the 1970s. In a roundtable discussion organized by Debate feminista, Mayer and Bustamante had a conversation with younger artists, including Lorena Wolffer and Mónica Castillo. The younger artists emphasized the challenge in understanding the legacy of earlier feminist artists, given the lack of proper documentation and art historical rigor. In particular, Wolffer noted:

I have the impression that there is a lack of documentation regarding the work you [Mayer, Bustamante, Lara] completed, you know? Although, as often happens with most of contemporary Mexican art, you hear rumors about what you all did, or what Proceso Pentágono was all about. There really is a lack of accessible information to find out what really happened.¹⁰

Despite these problems, the younger artist was aware of the feminist art proposals developed by Mayer, including the performances she developed as part of PGN.

Wolffer has produced works that continue the explorations initiated by Mayer in the 1970s and 1980s, establishing an artistic dialogue between different generations of women artists. In 1995, she developed Mexican Territory, a performative action that explored “the

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¹⁰ Lorena Wolffer in Arias and Lara, “¿Arte feminista?,” 280.
passive condition of most Mexicans toward the country’s worst economic and political crisis in decades.”

For this piece, the artist positioned her nude body underneath a bag containing blood, allowing drops to fall on her abdomen over the course of six hours (figs. 5.7-5.9). According to Wolffer, “by choosing to perform the piece nude, [she] converted the tableaux into a sexualized image that turned the piece into an ‘attractive’ but disturbing spectacle to the voyeuristic spectator.” Using her body, the artist represented the social conditions of her home country, employing the metaphor of torture to give visual form to the economic and material challenges faced by Mexico’s populations. Echoing Mayer’s earlier work, Wolffer referenced earlier representations that linked the nude female body to the Mexican nation, employing the visceral drops of blood to create an unsettling image that challenged the legacy of photographs such as La buena fama durmiendo.

In other projects, Wolffer more closely followed the example of public, feminist art developed by Mayer in her art collectives. In the 2010s, the artist organized a series of events known as Espacios de enunciación (Enunciation Spaces).

In this public gathering, different women described their experiences of violence, coming together as a group to highlight a problem that remains sidelined by legislators and other government institutions (figs. 5.10-5.12). By providing an opportunity for women to describe – and denounce – the forms of violence they experience, Wolffer echoes earlier projects by Mayer, such as the public protest of El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz. Indeed, in another project, Muros de replica (Reply Walls), Wolffer also echoed Mayer’s different tendederos. For this project, Wolffer set up four banners

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12 Ibid., 72.

13 For the artist’s documentation of her extensive body of work, see “Lorena Wolffer,” accessed July 25, 2016, http://www.lorenawolffer.net/00home.html.
in the Zócalo, bearing the statement: “Soy mujer y he sido víctima de violencia por parte de un hombre. Éste es mi nombre y esto es lo que tengo que decirle a mi agresor” (I am a woman and I have been a victim of violence from a man. This is my name and this is what I have to say to my aggressor.” As described by the artist, different women wrote down their experiences for over four hours, with several passersby reading the different experiences of violence (figs. 5.13-5.16).

Wolffer’s artistic proposals have led her to identify as a feminist, even though she believes the art world stigmatizes the term.14 Echoing Mayer’s consideration of the ways in which feminist discourse adapts to different geographic locales, Wolffer also distinguished the ways in which artists in Mexico and the United States react to gender inequality. In her view, women artists from the United States view feminism as a project that failed to live up to its potential, and therefore was worthy of little attention; in Mexico, people view gender inequality as irrelevant to artistic practice.15

Castillo, who also participated in the roundtable discussion with Mayer and Bustamante, does not identify as a feminist, or more specifically, as a feminist artist. Still, in the roundtable discussion, she mentioned that she viewed the efforts of Mayer and Bustamante through the lens of nostalgia.16 In a later interview, she noted the difficulties in conceptualizing her work through the lens of feminism, or grasping what gender inequality meant for her on a personal level.17 Despite her ambivalent relationship to feminism and feminist art, Castillo’s artistic production echoed the artistic strategies developed by Mayer throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In Autorretrato para armar (Self-portrait to Build), Castillo constructed a sewing box, including a depiction of her face on the lid, as well as the title of the work (figs. 5.17-5.18). Opening the

14 Wolffer in Arias and Lara, “¿Arte feminista?,” 281.
15 Ibid., 280.
16 Mónica Castillo in Arias and Lara, “¿Arte feminista?,” 281.
box, viewers find an assortment of sewing materials, including numerous bundles of thread and scissors, along with different forms of embroidery that represented sections of the artist’s face, such as her mouth and eyebrows. In this manner, the artist playfully requested viewers to finish her self-portrait. Like Mayer, and several other feminist artists of the 1970s, Castillo employs craft materials traditionally associated with femininity, such as sewing, but she deploys this medium in an artistic project meant for galleries and museums, challenging the traditional hierarchies between “high art” and “low art.” Moreover, by presenting segments of her face and prompting viewers to perform an action, Autorretrato para armar echoed Mayer’s postcards for the “Lo normal” exhibition. Both artists presented viewers with a different form of self-portraiture, one that requires the audience’s participation. Castillo’s work, presented to Mexican audiences in the aftermath of Mayer’s work, falls into a genealogy of feminine representations by women artists in Mexico.

The artistic production of Wolffer and Castillo – to cite just two examples from Mexico’s contemporary art scene – thus builds and expands on Mayer’s feminist art proposals. These artists deploy representations of the female body, subtly critiquing the simplistic archetypes of docile, passive femininity circulating in the canon of Mexican art, and Mexican visual culture. Even though Wolffer and Castillo were too young to participate in the feminist art collectives initiated by Mayer, their work circulates within the specific art world transformed by the earlier artist’s feminist activity. Mayer’s contributions to Mexican art – not only through her artistic projects, but through her lectures, workshops, and archive – only gives us an inkling of the myriad ways in which women artists confront the various forms of gender inequality and discrimination in society at large, and in the visual arts in particular. Through her artistic

18 For an analysis of this particular work and its relation to other self-portraits by Castillo, see Sylvia Navarrete, “Una Cara Cualquiera,” in Mónica Castillo/1993-2014 (Mexico City: CONACULTA, INBA, 2004); Valera Galán, “Los Autorretratos de Mónica Castillo.”
production, Mayer engaged in a deliberate strategic negotiation, adapting and transforming artistic strategies and images circulating between Mexico City and Los Angeles, developing a form of feminist art best described as translocal translation. Her artistic production – only beginning to be explored and analyzed in exhibitions such as “When in Doubt” – exemplifies the ambitious and utopic goals of feminist artists to transform existing social structures through the visual arts. Art historians seeking to understand the different generations of women artists in Mexico can rely on the materials of the PMR archive, further revealing the importance of Mayer’s activities for academic research. In this manner, Mayer shaped the trajectory of feminist art in Mexico throughout the end of the twentieth century, while her archival project will continue to shape feminist scholarship and writing in the future.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1. Registration form, Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1972.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 1.2. Proceso Pentágono, *Pentágono*, 1977. Installation presented at the Paris Youth Biennial X.
Photography by Lourdes Grobet
Figure 1.3. Photograph of a Tepito Arte Acá Mural, 1979. Private collection.
Figure 1.4. José Guadalupe Posada, *Soldadera maderista*, c. 1910. Metalcut on paper.
Figure 1.5. Photograph of soldaderas in training, c. 1910. Casasola photographic archive.
Figure 1.6. Photograph of soldaderas in training, c. 1910.
Casasola photographic archive
Figure 1.7. *Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer* protestors on the Zócalo, Mexico City.

Archivo General de la Nación, Enrique Díaz Collection
Figure 1.8. Newspaper clipping, showing Mónica Mayer at a protest organized by the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas, demanding the legalization of abortion in Mexico, 1977. Mexico City.

Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 1.9. First World Conference on Women, Mexico City, 1975.
Figure 1.10. Catalogue cover of “La mujer como creadora y tema del arte,” 1975.

Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City
Figure 1.11. Ignacio Rosas, *Tomasa Venegas*, c. 1910. Oil on canvas.
Figure 1.12. Alfredo Ramos Martínez, *Portrait of Mrs. Belinda Palavicini*, 1915. Pastel on paper.
Figure 1.13. Diego Rivera, *La molendera*, 1924. Encaustic on canvas.
Figure 1.14. María Izquierdo, *El alhajero (The Jewel Box)*, 1942. Oil on canvas.
Figure 1.15. Remedios Varo, *Presencia inquietante (Unsettling Presence)*, 1959. Oil on canvas.
Figure 1.16. Frida Kahlo, *Las dos fridas (The Two Fridas)*, 1939. Oil on wood.
Figure 1.17. Frida Kahlo, *La columna rota (Broken Column)*, 1944. Oil on Masonite.
Figure 1.18. Angela Gurria, *Contoy II*, 1973. Stone.
Figure 1.19. Helen Escobedo, *Ambiente gráfico*, 1972. Lacquered iron.
Figure 1.20. Invitation for “Collage íntimo,” 1977.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
L. ¿Qué título le ponemos a la exposición?
M. ¿Pues qué es lo que tenemos en común?
R. La técnica y el feminismo. Los tres hacemos collage.
L. Habría que explicar las técnicas individuales.
M. A mí me gusta la fotografía porque se acerca a la realidad y las telas porque son elementos de la experiencia femenina.
L. Uso fotos, barro, arena, color y otros elementos que tienen que ver con el mar. Me valgo del collage como medio. Me gustaría compartir los sentimientos que produce el mar, mostrando sus habitantes: conchas, arena, sol, gaviotas, surfesadores, etc. de la manera como yo los veo.
R. Yo trabajo más los grabados y tintas porque me interesa combinar las dos técnicas y salir de lo que tradicionalmente es un grabado.
M. ¿Por qué feminista?
L. Usamos formas encerradas que son como el proceso de concientización. En ellas sacamos todo lo que llevamos dentro, pero que sabemos es accesible a los demás.
R. ¿Y la temática?
M. Siempre se parte de lo íntimo como tema. En nuestro caso es obvio que se representan nuestras vivencias como mujeres con una actitud feminista.
M. Mis pinturas todas parten de problemas de la mujer: el tabú sexual, la mujer como objeto, la autoridad del hombre, la maternidad, el ser mujer, etc.
L. Mi posición feminista respecto a mi obra es esencialmente la de enfrentarme a un mundo sexistas, pero con idealizaciones y sueños de mujer. Las conchas, las gaviotas y la arena son elementos femeninos con los que me identifico y nos unimos en el mar. Las figuras no tienen sexo, la que tiene sexo es mi conciencia y con ella se expresa mi pintura.
R. Yo represento situaciones y relaciones dadas con la gente, específicamente en algún momento de la intimidad.
M. Entonces, ¿qué título escogemos? ¿Collage feminista?
R. No, suena más personal Collage íntimo.
M. Bueno, Collage íntimo.

Figure 1.22. Invitation for “Collage íntimo,” 1977.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 1.23. Mónica Mayer, *A veces me espantan mis fantasías (Sometimes My Fantasies Frighten Me)*, 1977.
Photographs and objects on canvas
80.5 x 60.5 x 4.7 cm
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 1.24. Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Figure 1.25. Diego Rivera, *La muerte del campesino (Death of a Peasant)*, 1926–27, fresco, 11 ft. 7 in. x 12 ft (3.54 x 3.67 m)

Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.
Figure 1.26. Diego Rivera, general view of *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*, 1930-1931. Fresco. Palacio de Cortés, Cuernavaca.
Figure 1.27. José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1926. Fresco. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Colegio de San Ildefonso), Mexico City.
Figure 1.28. José Clemente Orozco, *Revolutionaries*, 1926. Fresco. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Colegio de San Ildefonso), Mexico City.
Figure 1.29. José Clemente Orozco, *Workers*, 1926. Fresco. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Colegio de San Ildefonso), Mexico City.
Figure 1.30. José Clemente Orozco, *Las soldaderas*, 1929. Oil on canvas.
Figure 1.31. José Clemente Orozco, *La bandera (The Flag)*, 1928. Lithograph.
Figure 1.32. José Clemente Orozco, *Catharsis*, 1934. Fresco. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.
Figure 1.33. Diego Rivera, Detail of murals for the Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1924. Mexico City.
Figure 1.34. Diego Rivera, *La maestra rural (The Rural Teacher)*, 1924. Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City.
Figure 1.35. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *La Buena fama durmiendo (The Good Reputation Sleeping)*, 1939.
Figure 1.36. Mónica Mayer, *Pareja (Couple)*, 1977. Photograph, gauze and acrylic on canvas
100 x 79 cm
Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes / Colección del Museo de Arte Contemporáneo No. 8
Figure 1.37. René Magritte, *Le Viol*, 1934. Oil on canvas.
Figure 1.39. Faith Wilding, *Peach Cunt*. 1971. Watercolor on paper, 25 x 19 in.
Figure 1.40. Faith Wilding, *Womb*. 1971. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 15 in.
Figure 1.41. Promotional poster for “Lo Normal,” 1978
Esperanza Balderas
Rosalba Huerta
Magali Lara
Mónica Mayer
Carolina Paniagua
Hilda Ramírez
Lucila Santiago

FELICES LOS NORMALES

Felices los normales, éstos seres extraños
Los que no tuvieron una madre loca, un padre borracho, un hijo delincuente,
una casa en ninguna parte, una enfermedad desconocida
Los que no han sido calcinados por un amor devorante,
Los que vieron los 17 rectos de la sortija y un poco más.

Los llenos de zapatos, los arácnidos con sombreros,
Los satisfechos, los gordos, los finos,
Los rín fin fin y sus secuaces, les que cómo no, por aquí.
Los que ganan, los que son queridos hasta la empuñadura,
Los flautistas acompañados por ratones,
Los vendedores y sus compradores,

Los caballeros ligeramente sobrehumanos,
Los hombres vestidos de trueno y las mujeres de relámpagos,
Los delicados, los sensatos, los finos,
Los amables, los dulces, los convertibles, y los bebibles,

Felices las aves, el estereol, las piedras
Pero que den paso a los que hacen los mundos y los sueños,

Las ilusiones, las sinfonías, las palabras que nos desharatan
Y nos construyen, les más locos que sus madres, los más borrachos
que sus padres y más delincuentes que sus hijos
y más devorados por amor a calcinantes,
Que les dejen su sitio en el infierno,
Y hasta.

Roberto Fernández Retamar.

Figure 1.42. Promotional flyer for “Lo Normal,” 1978.
Figure 1.43. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Lo normal (On Normality)*, 1978. Print with intervention by stamps

10 cards
65.5 x 71 cm

MUAC, UNAM
Figure 1.44. Mónica Mayer, *Lo normal (On Normality)*, 1978.
Print with intervention by stamps
10 cards
65.5 x 71 cm
MUAC, UNAM
Figure 1.45. No Grupo, Secuestro plástico (Artistic Kidnapping), 1978.
Figure 1.46. Suzanne Lacy, Dori Atlantis, Jan Lester, and Nancy Youdelman, *I Tried Everything*, 1972. Title image.
Dear Mark Eden,

I have always been very impressed by your before and after pictures. I never thought that it would apply to me. I have been small-busted all my life and I really want to do something about it. When I read the testimonials in your ad, I realized that it could apply to me.

I am enclosing a "before" picture. I will send more after I received your product.

Thank-you.

Sincerely,

Nancy Yudelman

April 9, 1972

Dear Mr. Yudelman,

Thank you for your interest in our product. I am returning the picture you enclosed with your order, which is now being processed.

Sincerely,

Rita Young

April 25, 1972

Figure 1.47. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.
Figure 1.48. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.
Figure 1.49. Documents from *I Tried Everything*, 1972.
Figure 1.50. Installation view, *I Tried Everything*, 1972. CalArts.
Figure 1.51. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978.
From the exhibition “Salón 77-78. Nuevas Tendencias”
Documentation of participatory installation
Variable dimensions
Figure 1.52. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978. From the exhibition “Salón 77-78. Nuevas Tendencias” Documentation of participatory installation Variable dimensions Photography by Víctor Lerma
Figure 1.53. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978. From the exhibition “Salón 77-78. Nuevas Tendencias” Documentation of participatory installation Variable dimensions Photography by Víctor Lerma
Figure 1.54. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1978. From the exhibition “Salón 77-78. Nuevas Tendencias”
Documentation of participatory installation
Variable dimensions
Figure 1.55. Stamping RAPE on map of Los Angeles in *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977. City Mall in City Hall, Los Angeles
Figure 1.56. Chalking sidewalks near sites of rape, *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977. Los Angeles
Figure 1.57. Public event, part of *Three Weeks in May*, May 1977. Los Angeles
Figure 2.1. Photograph of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in front of *Womanhouse*, 1972.
Figure 2.2. Kathy Huberland, *Bridal Staircase, Womanhouse*, 1972.
Figure 2.3. Documentary photograph of Faith Wilding in *Embroidery Room, Womanhouse*, 1972.
Figure 2.4. Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, Arlene Raven, c. 1972. Woman’s Building Ephemera, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.6. Sheila Ruth, First day group meeting, second year of the Feminist Studio Workshop, 1974. 
Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.7. Sheila de Bretteville, First day group meeting, second year of the Feminist Studio Workshop, 1974.
Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.8. Denise Yarfitz, Jamie Wildperson, Jerri Allyn, Anne Gauldin, Patti Nicklaus, Leslie Belt, *Ready to Order?*, 1978.
Lafayette’s Cafe, Venice, California.
Photography by Maria Karras
Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.9. All City Waitress Marching Band, created by Jerri Allyn, Leslie Belt, and Chutney Gunderson (pictured in front with baton), with Anne Mavor (in sequined suit), plus 29 more waitresses, December 1979.
DooDah Parade, Pasadena, California.
Photography by Mary McNally
Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.10. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, *Making it Safe*, 1979.
Figure 2.11. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, *Making it Safe*, 1979.
Figure 2.12. Documentary photograph of Suzanne Lacy, *Making it Safe*, 1979.
Figure 2.13. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1979. From the *Making it Safe* project by Suzanne Lacy, Los Angeles Documentation of participatory installation Variable dimensions
Figure 2.15. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1979. From the *Making it Safe* project by Suzanne Lacy, Los Angeles Documentation of participatory installation
Variable dimensions
Figure 2.16. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, 1979. From the *Making it Safe* project by Suzanne Lacy, Los Angeles Documentation of participatory installation Variable dimensions
Figure 2.17. Take Back the Night March, 1978. San Francisco. Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.18. Take Back the Night March, 1978. San Francisco. Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.19. Float created by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz with members of the Feminist Studio Workshop for “Take Back the Night” march, 1978.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.20. Mónica Mayer, Suzanne Lacy working on parade float, 1979. Photograph. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.21. Judy Baca at “Venas de la Mujer,” September 1976. Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.22. Documentary photography of “Venas de la Mujer,” *Chicano Women’s Environmental Mural* on display, September 1976.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.23. Documentary photograph of “Venas de la Mujer,” September 1976.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 2.24. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Nuestra señora (Our Lady)*, 1977-78.
Graphite and ink on tissue paper.
Polyptych with 7 panels.
39.4 x 38.1 each.
Figure 2.25. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Nuestra señora* (*Our Lady*), 1977-78. Graphite and ink on tissue paper. Polyptych with 7 panels. 39.4 x 38.1 each.
Figure 2.26. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Nuestra señora (Our Lady)*, 1977-78. Graphite and ink on tissue paper. Polyptych with 7 panels. 39.4 x 38.1 each.
Figure 2.27. Yolanda López, *Guadalupe Triptych*, 1978. Oil pastel on paper.
Figure 2.28. María Izquierdo, Altar de Dolores, 1943. Oil on board. 60.3 x 49.9 cm. Private collection.
Figure 2.29. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows)*, 1978-1979. Photocopy with intervention. Polyptych with 6 panels. 71 x 56 cm each.
Figure 2.30. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows)*, 1978-1979. Photocopy with intervention. Polyptych with 6 panels. 71 x 56 cm each.
Figure 2.31. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *La dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows)*, 1978-1979. Photocopy with intervention. Polypych with 6 panels. 71 x 56 cm each.
Figure 2.32. Andy Warhol, *The Last Supper*, 1986. Screen print and colored graphic art paper collage on HMP paper.
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh.
Figure 2.33. Andy Warhol, *Ingrid Berman, The Nun*, 1983. Screen print.
Figure 2.34. Photograph of Mayer’s letter denouncing the removal of her artwork, dated October 29, 1980.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.35. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence)*, 1984.
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper
Polyptych with 7 panels
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.36. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence)*, 1984.
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper
Polyptych with 7 panels
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.37. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas* (*Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence*), 1984.
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper
Polyptych with 7 panels
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.3. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence)*, 1984.
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper
Polyptych with 7 panels
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.39. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas (Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence)*, 1984.
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper
Polyptych with 7 panels
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.40. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas* (*Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence*), 1984.  
Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper  
Polyptych with 7 panels  
70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.41. Detail of Mónica Mayer, *Diario de las violencias cotidianas* (*Diary of Everyday Acts of Violence*), 1984. Gouache, ink, pastel and photocopy on paper Polyptych with 7 panels 70 x 90 cm each
Figure 2.42. Alma Lopez, *Our Lady*, 1999. Photographic collage.
Figure 2.43. Presentation at Museo Carrillo Gil, *Traducciones*, 1979. Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.44. Photograph of the Basílica de Guadalupe for *Traducciones*, 1979. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.45. Documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.46. Documentary photograph of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979. Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.47. Pamphlet for *Traducciones* event, “Feminismo Mujer y Arte”, December, 1979. Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.48. Documentary photograph of *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists), 1979. Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.49. María Eugenia Pulido, documentary photograph of *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (*Translations: an international dialogue of women artists*), 1979.

Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.50. Yolanda Andrade, documentary photograph of *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (*Translations: an international dialogue of women artists*), 1979.

Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.51. Yan María Yaoyótl Castro, documentary photograph of *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (*Translations: an international dialogue of women artists*), 1979.

Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 2.52. Installation view of Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: an international dialogue of women artists).
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.53. Installation view of *Traducciones: un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* (*Translations: an international dialogue of women artists*). Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 2.54. Documentary photography of Suzanne Lacy, *The International Dinner Party*, 1979. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 2.55. Adelina Zendejas, Amalia Caballero, and Concha Michel, Mexico City, 1979.
Figure 2.56. Alailde Foppa, Ana Victoria Jiménez A., and Lilia Lucido-Mayer, Mexico City, 1979.
Figure 2.57. Notes from Fred Lonidier, *The Health and Safety Game*, c. 1976-79.
Figure 2.58. Correspondence from Fred Lonidier, *The Health and Safety Game*, c. 1976-79.
Figure 2.59. Detail of Fred Lonidier, *The Health and Safety Game*, c. 1976-79.
Figure 3.1. Mónica Mayer, poster for the “Arte Feminista” roundtable, 1976.
Print
60.3 x 41.7cm
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.2. Invitation for *La fiesta de quince años*, August, 1984. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.3. Invitation for *La fiesta de quince años*, August, 1984
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.4. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984.

Documentation of visual Project, photography by Ana Victoria Jiménez
Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 3.5. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984.

Documentation of visual project, photography by Ana Victoria Jiménez
Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 3.6. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984.

Documentation of visual project, photography by Yolanda Andrade.
Archivo Yolanda Andrade
Figure 3.7. Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, Nicola Colby, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Mónica Mayer, Marcela Ramírez, Patricia Torres, and Elizabeth Valenzuela). *La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party)*, 1984.

Documentation of visual project, photography by Yolanda Andrade.
Archivo Yolanda Andrade
Figure 3.8. Photograph of installation by Julia de la Fuente for La fiesta de quince años (The Quinceañera Party), 1984.
Figure 3.9. Polvo de Gallina Negra, photographic record of *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983. Mexico City

Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.10. Polvo de Gallina Negra, photographic record of *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983. Mexico City

Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.11. Polvo de Gallina Negra Group’s Recipe for Giving the Evil Eye to Rapists. Documentation for *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz (Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others’ Bodies)*, 1983.
Figure 3.12. Proceso Pentágono, *El secuestro (Kidnapping)*, action presented on a street near Bellas Artes in Mexico City, during the exhibition “A nivel informativo,” 1973.
Figure 3.13. Indra Olavarrieta, theatrical performance with patriarchal characters, 1976. Monumento a la Madre, Mexico City.
Figure 3.14. Poster for “Jornadas contra la violencia hacia las Mujeres,” 1987

Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 3.15. Pedro Meyer, cover of Sucesos para todos, July 14, 1977.
Figure 3.16. Pedro Meyer, cover of *Sucesos para todos*, June 23, 1977.
Figure 3.17. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage*, 1977. Los Angeles. Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 3.18. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, In Mourning and In Rage, 1977. Los Angeles. Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 3.19. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío Número 4*, c. 1987. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.20. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío Número 5*, c. 1987
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
SISTEMA INTERNACIONAL DE ARTE CORREO ERRÁTICO

Una alternativa a las Oficinas de Correo oficiales

An alternative to the official Post Offices.

1. El Sistema Internacional de Arte Correo Errático (EAMS, por sus siglas en inglés) llevará mensajes en cualquier formato –tarjeta, carta, paquete, etc. – realizados en cualquier medio –libro, cassette, cinta, película, etc.

   *The EAMS will carry messages in any format – cards, letters, parcels, etc. – and realized in any medium – book, cassette, tape, film, etc.*

2. El mensaje debe llegar a la oficina del EAMS por cualquier medio, exceptuando el correo oficial.

   *Puede ser entregado por el autor o por cualquier persona.*

3. El EAMS es gratis. Sin embargo, cualquier pieza que se pretenda enviar debe estar acompañada por una copia o un duplicado. Esta copia se pondrá en los archivos del EAMS después de la entrega del original.

   *The EAMS is free of charge. Any piece, however, intended for delivery should be accompanied by a second copy or duplicate. This second copy or duplicate shall be kept in the archives of the EAM after delivery of the original.*

4. Por cualquier medio, exceptando el correo oficial, el EAMS garantiza la entrega de las piezas encomendadas. Si, por algún motivo, la pieza permanece tres años sin ser entregada, será devuelta al autor por cualquier medio exceptuando el correo oficial.

   *The EAMS guarantees delivery of the entrusted pieces by any means other than the official Post Offices. If for any reason a piece remains uninstalled for three years, it will be sent back to the author by any means other than the official Post Offices.*

5. En sus instalaciones y siendo accesible a cualquier receptor potencial, el EAMS tendrá un surtido de piezas aún sin entregar. Por otro lado, no es necesario ser un receptor potencial para visitar el archivo.

   *The EAMS will keep on its premises a stock of yet undelivered pieces open to any potential receiver. On the other hand, it is not necessary to be a potential receiver in order to visit the archive.*

6. Las piezas de correo se aceptan sin importar su tamaño, país de origen, ni el país de destino.

   *Mail pieces are accepted regardless of size, country or origin and country of destination.*

7. El EAMS no se hace responsable de falsificaciones ni falsificadores. Cada pieza del EAMS debe llevar nuestros propios timbres y sellos.

   *The EAMS is not responsible for fakes and forgers. Every piece from the EAMS must carry our stamps and seals.*

8. Al usar el EAMS, usted apoya la única alternativa a las burocracias nacionales y fortalece a la comunidad internacional de artistas.

   *By using the EAMS you support the only alternative to the national bureaucracies and you strengthen the international artist’s community.*

Ulises Carrión
(Administrator de Correos)
(Post Master)

ERRATIC ART MAIL INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Horarios: Lunes a Viernes 17:00 - 18:00 hrs. Tel. 020-257941.

Figure 3.21. Ulises Carrión, *Sistema internacional de arte correo errático (International System for Erratic Mail Art)*, 1977.

Proposal for an alternative to the official mail system

Mimeographic print

A4-sized page
Figure 3.22. “Calico Kid, 5.” Export Newspaper Service of Mexico. August 31, 1959. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.23. “El Libro Semanal, 1257.” Novedades Editores. September 29, 1979. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.24. “Biografías Selectas, 50.” Editorial Argumentos. October 11, 1959. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.25. “Santo El Enmascarado de Plata, 17.” Editorial Icavi. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.26. “El Libro Semanal, 1391.” Novedades Editores. April 24, 1981. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.27. “El Libro Semanal, 1383.” Novedades Editores. February 27, 1981. Viva Mexico Collection, The University of Texas at Arlington
Figure 3.30. Polvo de Gallina Negra, ¡MADRES!, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, 1987.
Figure 3.31. Polvo de Gallina Negra, ¡MADRES!, Nuestro Mundo television show, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, Mexico City, 1987.

Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 3.32. Diego Rivera, general view of Chapingo chapel, 1926. Fresco. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Chapingo, Chapingo, Mexico.
Figure 3.33. José Clemente Orozco, *Cortés y Malinche*, 1926. Fresco. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Colegio de San Ildefonso), Mexico City.
Figure 3.34. José Clemente Orozco, *Soldier’s Wife*, c. 1930. Lithograph.
Figure 3.35. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Madre proletaria (Proletarian Mother)*, 1931. Oil on burlap.
Figure 3.36. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Madre campesina (Peasant Mother)*, ca. 1931. Oil on canvas.
Figure 3.37. Isabel Villaseñor, *Untitled*, 1934. Xylograph.
Figure 3.38. Frida Kahlo, *My Birth*, 1932. Oil and metal. Private collection.
Figure 3.39. Luis Ortiz Monasterio, Monumento a la Madre (Mothers’ Monument), c. 1949. Mexico City.
Figure 3.40. *Kneeling Female Figure*, 15th–early 16th century. Stone pigment.

Metropolitan Museum of Art.
As Mother Art we remove the mask of invisibility, wipe away the strained smiles of forced roles. We explore the pain, anxiety, anger and guilt of mothers. We affirm the delight, the strength, the care in nurturing our children. We reveal ourselves as complete human beings full of fears, desires, and dreams. We reflect the richness and variety of our own experience in our different lives. We insist upon the extraordinariness of the ordinary, the magic in the commonplace. We invent our own myths of motherhood which universally connect us to the past, the present and the future through birth, growth, and death. In Mother Art, we are creating ourselves through our art.

We join together collectively to draw from the distractions, interruptions, and fragmentations demanded by our daily existence to fuse them into a whole by which we are each stronger. We are committed to taking the private, personal aspect of traditional female experience and making it the valid content for our public art. We speak to all women in asserting this positive vision of ourselves. In Mother Art, we are beginning to make a revolution.

Figure 3.42. Mother Art, *Mother Art Cleans Up*, 1978. Los Angeles City Hall.
Figure 3.43. Mother Art, *Rainbow Playground*, 1974.
Figure 3.44. Poster for Mother’s day protest, Mexico City, 1971
Ana Victoria Jiménez Archive, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.
Figure 3.45. Documentary photograph of Polvo de Gallina Negra, participating in a march for voluntary maternity. 1991.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.1. Víctor Lerma and Mónica Mayer at Pinto Mi Raya Archive. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.2. Víctor Lerma, photograph of a sculptural object produced by Mónica Mayer, 1977. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.3. Mónica Mayer, *Untitled*, c. 1976. Contact sheet.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.4. Víctor Lerma, *Untitled*, c. 1977. Contact sheet. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.5. Photograph of an early meeting of Pinto mi Raya, Mexico City, c. 1991. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Estimado habitante de la Colonia Condesa:
El Arte nos invade. El sábado 16 de febrero de 1991, entre las 16:00 y las 20:00 horas, cuatro Galerías de Autor (o sea que los dueños son artistas) y la Escuela Decroly, inaugurarán simultáneamente la exposición:

"Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar"

en ellas participarán puras parejas de artistas enamorados, melocochones, cursis y apapachadores. Habrá Vino de Honor, transporte y hasta performances o acciones de artistas.
Pase una tarde agradable agarradito de la mano de su amor, recorriendo tranquilamente estos... sus espacios culturales de la Condesa.

Los Caprichos
Fernando Montes de Oca 38-A
Teléfono: 286-4021
Horario: martes a sábado de 11:00 a 19:00 horas

Foco
Tamulipas 207
Teléfono: 516-4880
Horario:
Previa cita

Pinto mi Raya
Sombrerete 505
Teléfono: 515-1220
Horario:
Previa cita

Unicornio Blanco
Tampiro 26-A
Teléfono: 514-9214
Horario: lunes a sábado de 10:00 a 14:00 y 16:00 a 20:00 horas.

Los Talleres Decroly
Zamora 187
Teléfono: 553-0815

Figure 4.6. Flyer promoting “Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar,” 1991.
Pinto mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.7. Julio Galán, *Tehuana en el istmo de Tehuantepec (Tehuana in the Tehuantepec Isthmus)*, 1987. Oil on canvas.
Figure 4.8. Installation shot of “Neocursi: artistas que realmente saben amar,” Mexico City, 1991.
Pinto mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.9. Diana Guzmán, *Polvo en los ojos (Dust in the Eyes)*, c. 1991. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.10. Arturo Guerrero, *Sueños pecaminosos (Sinful Dreams)*, c. 1991
Figure 4.11. Marisa Lara, *Mejor te lo platico (It’s Better If I Tell You About It)*, c. 1991
Figure 4.13. Nahum Zenil, *Vitrina (Cabinet)*, mixed media, 1991.
Figure 4.14. Flyer promoting the “Contaminación No” exhibition.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.15. Drawing from the “Contaminación No” exhibition.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.16. Marcos Kurtycz, sculptural object for “Madrecitas” exhibition, 1991. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.17. Mónica Mayer, *Tormenta* (*Storm*), 1991.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.18. Mónica Mayer, *Naufragio (Shipwreck)*, 1991. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.19. Mónica Mayer, *Tres (Three)*, 1990. Watercolor, color pencil, graphite, photocopy and transfer of photocopy on paper. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.20. Mónica Mayer, *Cuatro* (*Four*), 1990. Watercolor, color pencil, graphite, photocopy and transfer of photocopy on paper. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.21. Lola Álvarez Bravo, *El sueño del ahogado (Dream of the Drowned)*, c. 1945. Gelatin silver.
Figure 4.22. Lola Álvarez Bravo, *El sueño de los pobres (The Dream of the Poor)*, 1935. Gelatin silver.
Figure 4.23. Lola Álvarez Bravo, *El capital hambriento de sobre trabajo* (Capital, Hungry from Overwork), 1935. Gelatin silver.
Figure 4.24. Felipe Ehrenberg, *Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis*, 1990.
Figure 4.25. Altered wedding invitation, 1980. Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.26. Installation for performance, 1980.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.27. Documentary photograph of *To Love, Honor, Cherish...*, performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 4.28. Documentary photograph of To Love, Honor, Cherish..., performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 4.29. Documentary photograph of *To Love, Honor, Cherish...*, performance by the Feminist Art Workers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Building, 1978.

Woman’s Building Slide Archive, Otis College of Art and Design Library.
Figure 4.30. Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma, *Foto falsa a los 10 años de boda* (*Fake Photograph, 10 Years after the Wedding*), Centro Cultural Santo Domingo, Mexico City, November 30, 1990.
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.31. Participant of La protesta del día después (Protest of the Day After), May 11, 2012. Photography by Yuruen Lerma
Pinto mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 4.32. Mónica Mayer and other participants of the “Taller: Visita al archivo de PINTO MI RAYA (Workshop: A Visit to the PINTO MI RAYA Archive),” April 5, 2014. Photography by Yuruen Lerma
Pinto Mi Raya Archive, Mexico City
Figure 5.1. Flyer for the “Apropiaciones del espacio público ante el acoso sexual en el transporte público” workshop, 2015.
Figure 5.2. Photograph of public protest against public sexual harassment, Zócalo, Mexico City, 2015.
Producciones y Milagros, Agrupación Feminista A.C. Archive
Figure 5.3. Images produced by the Red de Reapropiación 2R collective, featuring images by Claudia Espinosa (Cerrucha), 2015.
Figure 5.4. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, installation, 2016.
Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City
Photography by Valeria Marriot
Figure 5.5. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, installation, 2016. Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City. 2016.

Photography by Valeria Marriot
Figure 5.6. Documentation of Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero (The Clothesline)*, installation, 2016. Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City. Photography by Mónica Mayer
Figure 5.7. Documentation of Lorena Wolffer, *Mexican Territory*, 1995. First presented at the 1995 Exchange Resources Festival, Belfast, Northern Ireland.
Figures 5.17-5.18. Mónica Castillo, Autorretrato para amar (Self-portrait to Build), 1996.