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Special Issue – Isn't all art performed?

Feminist pedagogical / conversational performance art. The Work of Mónica Mayer^a

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Abstract: This paper shows how the early feminist pedagogical performance artworks of the Mexican artist Mónica Mayer are example of Connective Aesthetics and Conversational Art.

One performative artistic practice that has received little attention is feminist pedagogical performance art, although pedagogical projects have been discussed in the context of categories such as participatory art, new genre public art and dialogical aesthetics. For example, Claire Bishop considers pedagogical projects in the arts the result of: the social turn in art, the 'changing relationship between art and the academy', the emergence of Institutional Critique at the end of the sixties (as exemplified by the art practices of Joseph Beuys, Luis Camnitzer, Lygia Clark, Jef Geys and Tim Rollins) and the influence of Paulo Freire's pedagogy. However, she neither gives a definition of this kind of artistic practice nor does she articulate the differences between the roles played by: education in performance art in the USA and Europe, radical and critical pedagogies, artistic political activism in the USA such as California's Chicano Art Movement and more specifically Latin American militant artistic practices, as Camnitzer does in Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation.

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In contrast to Claire Bishop, Pablo Helguera proposed the term 'Transpedagogy' 'to refer to projects by artists and collectives that blend educational processes and art-making in works that offer an experience that is clearly different from conventional art academies or formal art education'. In Transpedagogy, Helguera notes that 'the pedagogical process is the core of the artwork'. However, he doesn't explain the influence of feminist pedagogies in this kind of projects nor does he consider their performative dimension. For her part, Suzanne Lacy distinguished the concept of 'new genre public art' from 'public art', which refers to 'sculpture and installations located in public spaces.'6 For her, 'new genre public art' is based in engagement and is thus a type of 'visual art that uses traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a wide and diverse public about issues that are directly relevant in their lives. For Lacy, 'the construction of the history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but on concepts such as audience, relationship, communication and political intention'.⁸ Moreover, regarding pedagogical projects, she introduced a different genealogy from Bishop introducing feminism, that had an important influence on her artistic practice, as well as her notion of 'new genre public art'. In this regard, she says:

In finding new ways to work, artists have drawn on models outside the arts to reinterpret their roles. Allan Kaprow called attention to the inherently pedagogical nature of art in a series of articles in the seventies called 'The Education of the Un-Artist'. Artist as educator is a construction that follows from political intentions. 'If art is to ever play a role in the construction of shared social experience, it must reexamine its pedagogical assumptions, reframing strategy and aesthetics in terms of teaching' (Richard Bolton, writer and artist). This was well understood by Judy Chicago and other feminist artists of the seventies, whose ideas about art were developed from an examination of issues of authority, representation, historical revision and the pedagogical of public disclosure on political systems. As the audiences for women's art became more populist, mandated by the breadth of the artists' aspirations for change, the discursive aspects of the work became as urgent as the aesthetic. Media appearances, classes, exhibitions, discussion groups, public demonstrations, consultations and writings were all developed as integral to the artwork, not as separate activities.⁹

For Lacy, as well as for feminist artists during the 70s and beginning of the 80s, the phrase 'the personal is political' was at the core of their artistic practice and education played an important role to achieve their artistic and political goals. Contemporary feminist art in the USA 'grew out of a theoretical framework provided by Judy Chicago, the most visible feminist artist from that era, along with others including Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Raven, Sheila

Levrant de Bretteville, MaryBeth Edelson, June Wayne and Lucy Lippard'. 10 The work of Judy Chicago is extremely important in this regard, because she was committed to the idea that 'art making was connected both to a broad public and to action', since content-based art making 'concerns a feminist, political, personal, or social issue or message in a tangible visual form.¹¹. In order to achieve her goals, Chicago used what she called a 'circle-based pedagogy', 'combining the consciousness-raising circles the women's movement had borrowed from Mao Tse Tung with managed group dynamics'. 12 As a result of these circles, participants did performances that Lacy called 'therapeutic exercise(s)' by which they shared their experiences. ¹³ Chicago's pedagogy, as well as that of Miriam Schapiro, plus Allan Kaprow's Happenings and performance art from the early seventies influenced Suzanne Lacy's work, in terms of her content-based approach to what she calls 'new genre of public art'. At the same time, she was a great influence for other artists who, she taught in the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. 14

Interestingly enough, US feminisms and feminist pedagogies influenced artistic production in Mexico during this period. Paolo Freire's influence on pedagogical projects in Latin America is well known, but in the case of feminist Mexican artistic pedagogies, his approach was taught alongside pedagogies initiated by the Woman's Building Program, such as Suzanne Lacy's approach to pedagogy, performance and media critique through the work of Mónica Mayer.

Mónica Mayer is a visual artist, performance artist, activist, art critic and curator who had the opportunity to attend the Feminist Studio Workshop at Women's Building Program from 1978 to 1980. According to Mayer, the educative process there was based in 'small groups', that let them to recognise that their problems were primarily social and not of their own making. In addition to addressing topics such as 'money, love, body and sexuality', there was 'a focus in the study of women artists of the past'. ¹⁵ In retrospect, she realises that the Program's focus on performance art was 'an ideal genre', because 'it was a new genre, without the limitations history, that let new ways for dismantling a long tradition of feminine oppression that was reinforced by centuries of artistic tradition'. While living in Los Angeles, she witnessed different performances such as those by the groups The Waitress and Mother Art, performances by Allan Kaprow, Linda Montano, Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, Linda Frye Burnham, shows and performances by the Incest Awareness Project and shows like GALAS. (Great American Lesbian Art Show).¹⁷ During this period, Mayer worked as an assistant on the project Ariadne: A Social Art Network by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz and participated in the project Making it Safe by Suzanne Lacy for which she presented *El tendedero* (The Clothesline, 1978/1979). ¹⁸ The year before, she presented this piece, which has since become one of her signature works of installation art, in the exhibition 'Salón 77-78. Nuevas tendencias' at the When the first an account, Warrent during function, Or Advisor or things from the second process. The Advisor or things from the second process or the second process. The Advisor of the Advisor or things from the second process. The Advisor of th

Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. 19

Figure 1: Mónica Mayer archive. I would like to thank Mónica for sharing her images.

In 1980, Mayer earned an MA from Goddard College, USA, with the thesis Feminist Art: an Effective Political Tool.²⁰ Here, she explained her most recent project Traducciones: Un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas (Translations: An International Dialogue of Women Artists, 1979), which was both an exhibition and as Andrea Giunta describes, a 'trans-national experience that consisted of bringing three women artists with ties to The Woman's Building (Jo Goodwin, Denise Yarfitz and Florence Rosen) to Mexico to give lectures and participate in a group workshop with women from Cuernavaca'. This event's many organisers included Magali Lara, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lilia L. De Mayer, Yan María Yaoyólotl Castro, Ester Zavala, Mónica Kubli, Marcela Olabarrieta, Yolanda Andrade and Ana Cristina Zubilaga. For the trans-national experience, they organised: lunches and dinners; visits to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a neighbourhood and Frida Kahlo's house; a presentation at the Museo Carrillo Gil translated, simultaneously by Mayer; plus the workshop in Cuernavaca at actor/playwright/poet and activist Nancy Cárdenas's house with the title Feminismo, Mujer y Arte (Feminism, Woman and Art) 'attended by between 30 and 70 women' with 'slide performances alternated with performances dealing with sexuality and the abuse of authority.²² Many women participated in this experience, but 'others expressed their disagreement with these experimental activities on political grounds²³ Finally, Mayer captured this experience via an installation at the Woman's Building accompanied by documentation.²⁴

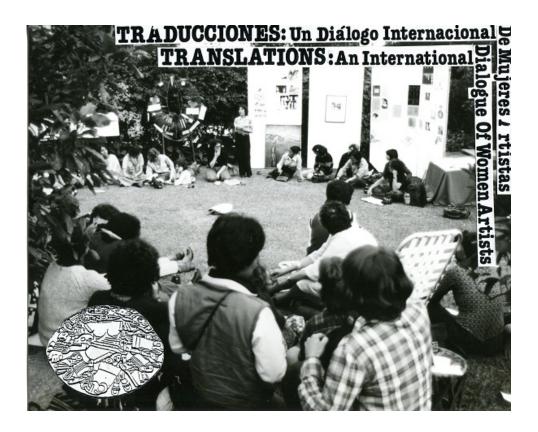


Figure 2: Invitation to *Traducciones: Un Diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas* based on a photograph by Denise Yarfitz. Mónica Mayer's archive.

Mayer's trans-national experience Traducciones: Un diálogo internacional de mujeres artistas is an example of what Suzi Gablik calls 'connective aesthetics', a term that describes the experience of different participatory and collaborative performative processes that are listener-oriented instead of visionoriented. The role played by performative conferences and workshops, not only in *Traducciones*, but also in Mayer's other artworks, show how feminist pedagogies introduced a different way to experience the artwork based on the complexity of the relationships enabled by the information and conversations prompted by the artist and how they are grounded on strategies that try to establish a common intersubjective background. In that way, her work with the interdisciplinary group Tlachuilas y Retrateras (Mónica Mayer, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Karen Cordero, Lorena Loaiza, Ruth Albores, Nicola Coleby, Isabel Restrepo, Patricia Torres, Consuelo Almeida, Elizabeth Valenzuela and Marcela Ramírez) offers yet another example of connective aesthetics. This group was formed during a course led by Mayer at San Carlos Academy. In addition to showing slides, students worked in small groups and in different formats 'so the personal part came out'. Participant's activities include research, interviewing gallery owners, participating in marches and organising an exhibition, which led to the group performance called La Fiesta de Quince Años (The Fifteen-Year Olds' Party). 26 For months, they invited people from

the neighbourhood, the media and different members of the artistic community, like artists and art critics, to represent the godmothers, godfathers and chambelanes.²⁷ Figure 3 shows an image of a translation of an invitation created by performance artist Melquiades Herrera, a member of No-Grupo.²⁸

MELQUIADES HERRERA

Why does the quinceañera still exist?

Is it a female initiation rite inherited from the pre-hispanic culture or a tradition imported from developed countries?

What are the reasons this celebration is so deeply rooted in our society?

Is it a patriarchal tradition that makes the daughter available to offer her as wive, as a commercial promotion for the waste and perseverance of social status?

What is it, where does it come from and what is the meaning of the iconography that surrounds this party?

How much personal importance does this celebration have for quinceañeras nowadays?

How would we want to be initiated as women and to what?

 $Is there something \ redeemable \ about \ the \ traditional \ quincea\~nera \ party?$

What alternatives do we propose for a different celebration?

The quinceañera

All these questions and more will be answered in visual, verbal, musical and edible ways at the FIESTA DE QUINCE AÑOS event that the group TLACUILAS Y RETRATERAS will present at the San Carlos Academy in August 1984.

This event will consist in the following activities: a group exhibition about the topic, the presentation of diverse plastic actions or performances and the GRAN FIESTA DE QUINCE AÑOS, a collective event in which you ARE AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT PART.

Because quincea \tilde{n} eras are traditionally accompanied by their godmothers, godfathers, ladies, chambelanes and friends, we request the active participation of our artistic and intellectual community for the success of our celebration .

We hope to have your pleasant company at our party and we also request your participation as: CHAMBELAN

Figure 3: Invitation created by performance artist Melquiades Herrera (translated).

During the event, they presented a performance of a Quinceañera party, including performances by other artists, an exhibition and poetry readings.²⁹ This event is yet another example of connective aesthetics such that feminist pedagogical processes enabled artists to transform the traditional teacher-student relation into a relation between a facilitator who becomes a part of the group with whom she collectively produces an artwork.

Finally, there is another example of Mayer's early production that was influenced by feminist pedagogies and shows the role played by performative lectures as a strategy for this kind of pedagogical feminist performances. She and Maris Bustamante co-founded the Mexican feminist group *Polvo de Gallina Negra* (Black Chicken Dust) in 1983. Working as a group, they produced performances, conferences, texts, mail art and organised exhibitions in order to promote the participation of women in art, alter reality from a feminist perspective and analyse the image of women in the arts and media. ³⁰ According to Mayer,

'the decision to name the group *Polvo de Gallina Negra*, which is a remedy against the evil eye, was simple: we considered that it



Figure 4: Photos of the participation of BioArte Group at La Fiesta de Quince $A\tilde{n}os$ by Rose Van Lengen. Mónica Mayer's archive.

is difficult in this world to be an artist and it is more difficult to be a woman artist and it is tremendous to try to be a feminist artist, so we think it would be wise to protect ourselves with the name.' 31

One of their most famous projects is *Madres!* (1983-1987), which includes Madre por un día (Mother for a day, 1987), one of their most recognised performances. Presented during the TV program Nuestro Mundo, hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, over 200 million viewers from Mexico, Latin America and the USA watched it.³² During the performance, 'Ochoa was invited by Mayer and Bustamante to wear an apron fashioned to make him look pregnant' and 'Bustamante, who did most of the talking, underscored the pair's feminist agenda, highlighting what it means to create work as women in the machista space of Latin America. Three years earlier, both artists were pregnant and gave 'a series of thirty-six lectures sponsored by Dirección General de Promoción Cultural de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (Office for Cultural Promotion, Department of Public Education)' as a part of the series Las Mujeres Artistas Mexicanas o se Solicita Esposa (Mexican Women Artists or Wife Requested).³⁴ For these performative lectures presented to students attending technical high schools and seminaries, they projected slides of the work of Lourdes Grobet, Yolanda Andrade, Magali Lara, Yan María Castro, Rosalba Huerta and Rowena Morales.³⁵ Mónica Mayer recalls how 'Maris always brought little bang snaps and before entering the lecture she took a little one to mark the beginning and they are tangerines, while giving their lectures.³⁶ During one of these performative lectures, Mayer says that 'at the moment the lights were turned off to project the slides she (Maris Bustamente) threw a bang snap. Then the principal (of the school) went mad, turned on the light, and asked, "Who did this? We need to get him out of here." '37. These kinds of actions interjected a sense of confusion and surprise to introduce their discussions about abortion, lesbianism, beauty, domestic violence to a Mexican society that was still extremely conservative.

Performative lectures such as Traducciones and $La\ Fiesta\ de\ Quince\ A\~nos$ show how feminist pedagogical performance art in the work of Mónica Mayer straddles participation and collaboration. Although the basis of the pedagogical processes that result in the different artworks use dialogue as an integral strategy, they do not fit the concept of dialogical aesthetics proposed by Grant Kester. With dialogical aesthetics, 'subjectivity is formed through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself'. However, as the performative artworks of Mayer and $Polvo\ de\ Gallina\ Negra$ show, dialogical aesthetic does not necessarily aspire to a 'local consensual knowledge' as Kester contends, but instead to moments of intersubjective interaction and exchange that can be experienced for either short or a long periods of time and thus produce a rather provisional sense of collectivity (like with the group $Tlacuilas\ y\ Retrateras$). As Suzanne Lacy stresses, 'the relationship is the artwork' because there is always much more than mere pedagogical processes at play, a posi-



Figure 5: La Fiesta de Quince Años. Photograph by Ana Victoria Jiménez. Archive of the Feminist Movement from 1964 to 1990 by Ana Victoria Jiménez. Francisco Xavier Clavigero Library, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.

tion shared by pedagogical artist Pablo Helguera.⁴⁰ In the same way, Mayer emphasises:

Cooperation and group work are fundamental aspects of feminist art. I understand feminism itself as the construct of a collective vision. For collective work to be successful, however, it has to be born of a real need; it cannot be forced. I know that a workshop is successful when there emerges among the participants a desire to work together in a group and to take their ideas to the outside world.⁴¹

For this reason, some feminist performative artworks show how the use of feminist pedagogies exemplifies connective aesthetics, while others exhibit what Homi Bhabha calls 'conversational art' that is 'dedicated to constructing its "object" and its "audience" through a process of ongoing dialogue' and 'is committed to exploring contextual contingency in defining the nature and values of the aesthetic experience'.

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NOTES

¹Bishop 2012, 242.

 2 Freire 2005.

 3 Camnitzer 2007.

⁴Helguera 2011, 77.

⁵Helguera 2011, 77.

⁶Lacy 1994, 19.

⁷Lacy 1994, 19.

⁸Lacy 1994, 28.

⁹Lacy 1994, 39-40.

¹⁰Lacy 1994, 27.

¹¹Lacy 1994, 27. Kiefer-Boyd 2007, 136. For more of Judy Chicago's pedagogy, visit The Judy Chicago Art Education Collection at Penn State in: https://judychicago.arted.psu.edu/participatory-art-pedagogy

¹²Green Fryd 2007, 24.

¹³Green Fryd 2007, 25.

¹⁴For more about the history of the Woman's Building check out From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture (Terry 2011) and Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building (Linton and Maberry 2011).

¹⁵Mayer 2004, 24.

 16 Mayer 2004, 25.

¹⁷For a history of performance art in Los Angeles, check out Meiling Cheng 2002.

 18 Mayer 2021.

¹⁹Mayer 2004; Mayer 2021.

 20 Mayer 1980.

²¹Giunta 2013, 14.

²²Giunta 2013, 15.

²³Giunta 2013, 16.

²⁴A video reconstruction of lectures given by Jo Goodwin, Denise Yarfitz and Mónica Mayer, as well as slides presented during this conference are on view at: youtube.com/watch?v=6YpAQ8mtRoo.

²⁵Interview with Mónica Mayer, 2021. Translation by Gemma Argüello

²⁶This celebration is similar to a 'Sweet Sixteen Party' in the USA.

²⁷A chambelán is a male escort who assists the Quinceañera in a choreographed dance.

²⁸Members of No-Grupo, a Mexican art collective known for performance art, were Maris Bustamante, Melquiades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez and Rubén Valencia. I would like to thank Karen Cordero for sharing her *La Fiesta de Quince Años* in-

vitation from her archive. Translation by Gemma Argüello.

²⁹For a video reconstruction with testimonies of the event watch *La Mítica Fiesta de Quince Años* by Liz Misterio in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCeWU2ihk7Y.

 30 Giunta 2013.

³¹Mayer 2017. Translation by Gemma Argüello

³²The performance is available here: https://vimeo.com/420786532

 33 Carroll 2005.

³⁴Bustamante 2005, 214.

³⁵Interview with Mónica Mayer. Translation by Gemma Argüello.

³⁶Interview with Mónica Mayer. Translation by Gemma Argüello.

 37 Interview with Mónica Mayer. Translation by Gemma Argüello

³⁸Maria Lind distinguishes these practices: 'Collaboration becomes an umbrella

term for the diverse working methods that require more than one participant. Cooperation, on the other hand, emphasizes the notion of working together towards mutual benefit. Through its stress on solidarity, the word collective offers an echo of working forms within a socialist system. Collective action refers precisely to acting collectively, while interaction can mean that several people interact with each other just as a single individual might interact with an apparatus by pressing a button, for example. Participation is more associated with the creation of a context in which participants can take part in something that someone else has created, but where there are nevertheless opportunities to have an impact' (Lind 2007, 185).

 39 Kester 2005.

⁴⁰Lacy 1994, 35.

⁴¹Giunta 2013.

⁴²Bhabha 1996, 40.

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