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# Introduction

## Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta

*Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* examines the practices of women artists working in Latin America and the United States active between 1960 and 1985, a key period in Latin American and Latina history and in the development of contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> Among the 120 artists and collectives featured, representing fifteen countries, are emblematic figures such as Lygia Clark, Ana Mendieta, and Marta Minujín alongside lesser-known contemporaries such as the Cuban-born abstract artist Zilia Sánchez, the Colombian sculptor Feliza Bursztyn, and the Brazilian video artist Leticia Parente. The artists whose works are included in *Radical Women* have made extraordinary contributions to the field of contemporary art, but little scholarly attention has been devoted to situating their production within its social, cultural, and political contexts. The exhibition presents the first genealogy of radical and feminist art practices in Latin America and by Latina artists, thereby addressing a lacuna within the history of twentieth-century art.

*Radical Women* grew out of our shared conviction that the vast body of work produced by Latin American women and Latina artists has been marginalized and hidden by dominant, canonical, and patriarchal art history. Our efforts were focused on making work by women artists visible and providing it with the complex theoretical and critical framework that it deserves. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill was aware of Andrea Giunta's essay from 2008, "Género y feminismo: Perspectivas desde América Latina," and invited Giunta to cocurate the project.<sup>2</sup> Research on the exhibition began in early 2010, and the original idea was for it to open two years later. But the project grew in scale and complexity to such an extent that it has required seven years to review archives, to travel to meet and interview artists, and to select, through an exacting and exciting process, the

works to be included. As collaborators we agreed on one key point: given the absence of these artists and their works from art historical narratives of the period, the task of analyzing their history and contributions was paramount and pressing. We disputed essentialist positions on the feminine and attempted to develop situated perspectives that take into account the specific contexts in which the works were formulated and the parameters on the basis of which society has established the cultural markings of male and female genders. We also agreed, from the outset, that we would not address more contemporary art; the essential task was, in our view, to undertake a historical study of pioneering works that, because of excluding global and local perspectives, had been rendered invisible.

The first stages of our research involved exchanging information with colleagues and artists in Latin America and delving into the libraries of the Getty Foundation and the University of Texas at Austin, where we worked with students in the department of art and art history. Our focus was on formulating a complex curatorial argument and assembling an archive of artworks, which grew until it became unwieldy. Our initial concept was an exhibition that would encompass the period from 1945 to 1980; its title was to be *Rethinking Modernism into Conceptual Art: Women Artists in Latin America, 1945–1980*. We understood that, despite the recent emphasis on the histories of conceptualism and other movements in Latin America starting in the 1960s, recognition of the participation and contributions of women artists was severely lacking, with the exception of just a few figures. After two years of research, we had a list of more than three hundred artists. The exhibition had become unfeasible because of its magnitude and an encyclopedic perspective that made its aims and agenda too general.

We then decided to reduce the period (1960–85) and shift our conceptual focus to the notion of the political body. This new approach required research on the body and its rediscovery as a subject and allowed us to identify what we would soon understand to be a radical turn in the iconography of the body. This included a complete reconsideration of themes and languages that challenged the dominant classifications in the field of Latin American and Latina art. The works produced by the artists represented in *Radical Women* propose a different body, a researched and rediscovered body deeply bound to the political situation in much of the continent at the time, specifically in the many countries ruled by authoritarian governments that aimed to control behavior, thought, and bodies. The lives and works of these artists are enmeshed in the experiences

of dictatorship, imprisonment, exile, torture, violence, censorship, and repression but also in the emergence of a new sensibility. Although we researched all the countries in Latin America, we did not find artists in every country whose works fit the concept of the exhibition. We hope that many more women artists will be featured in future curatorial projects.

In October 2012 the Hammer Museum agreed to further develop and host the project as part of the Getty Foundation's initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. The support of the Hammer Museum and of the Getty made it possible to conduct further research in ways that would have been unthinkable otherwise. In the first two years, our investigations had been limited to research in libraries and to the occasional study trip; now we were able to travel extensively throughout Latin America and the United States. Since the research was so far-reaching, we divided it into zones. Andrea Giunta focused on Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay; Cecilia Fajardo-Hill on Central America, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela; both worked on Mexico and Peru; Fajardo-Hill and Marcela Guerrero, the Hammer Museum's curatorial fellow, did research on Brazil and Puerto Rico and on Chicana and Latina artists in the United States.

In June 2014 we held a workshop at the Hammer Museum to evaluate the state of the project four years in.<sup>3</sup> At that point a question that had been unresolved since the project's inception became central to its future, mainly whether or not to include Chicana and Latina artists. The fact of being Chicana or Latina in the United States necessarily means enmeshment with Mexico or other countries in Latin America. It was clear, moreover, that Chicana and Latina artists, like Latin American women artists, had been systematically excluded from art history and that many of the pressing themes of their works were connected to—or even the same as—those addressed by their Latin American counterparts. The decision to include Chicana and Latina artists contributed to the opening of a necessary, if long-resisted, dialogue between the Latin American, the Latino, and the Chicano.

The questions that guided us throughout this project were threefold. First, what has happened to these artists and their works? Second, what were the cultural, political, and ideological circumstances that made it possible to elide or even to disappear them? And third, what was the nature of their contributions? From the beginning of the project's organization, we came up against a contradiction. On the one hand, a great many progressive artists, fellow curators, and students supported us, enthusiastically providing

information that helped the exhibition take shape. On the other, we ran into resistance in the form of a question put to us time and again: why only women artists? This was often followed by the dubious, if not outright offensive, remark that “women artists are trendy.” Some argued that women artists had already gained due recognition, and hence this project not only was unnecessary but should not be done because it confirmed the idea that Latin America is *machista*, or male chauvinist. When we looked for information on experimental works by women artists, we were often met by a complete lack of knowledge. Sometimes we were discouraged from pursuing obscure references found in archives or forgotten publications. One well-known conceptual artist acknowledged that women artists had been systematically marginalized but explained that he did not have the moral authority to attempt to remedy that situation. He professed his lack of interest and went on to state that he found the work of some feminist artists blatantly kitsch. Finally, others asserted that, given the emergence of contemporary perspectives in, for instance, queer studies, an exhibition dedicated to women artists was not only irrelevant but also outdated. That unbridled resistance, expressed outright or with sarcasm, evidenced the ongoing prejudice of critics and reinforced our political decision to go ahead with the original idea.

We hope that the research conducted for *Radical Women* and the aesthetic and theoretical explorations that we have undertaken make enduring contributions to the scholarship on the period. But our most pressing task is to make visible artists and works previously unseen or not considered in the specific terms that this exhibition proposes. What we ultimately have attempted to do is to activate the intellectual, emotional, and affective experiences that these artists and works aspired to provoke. We also hope to provide frames of reference and information that will deepen knowledge of the radical women artists who constitute this chapter of history and of the circumstances in which they produced their art.

The exhibition layout is structured around themes rather than geographic or chronological categories. These clusters of works serve to render visible the thematic connections and shared concerns of artists who, in most cases, did not know one another and were unaware of one another's work. We attempt then to propose dialogues and simultaneities that attest to common agendas and problems, issues that bridge different contexts. With the exception of Mexico—where a feminist art movement comparable to those in Europe and the United States emerged in the late 1970s and

continues into the present—no other country in the region experienced an organized feminist art movement during the years that this exhibition encompasses.<sup>4</sup> There was nothing analogous to the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles and its program in feminist art education anywhere in the region. Most of the artists featured in this exhibition did not set out to make feminist works, even though we, as curators and art historians, can now identify feminist agendas in their production. That is not the case, however, with the Chicana and Latina artists, who did in many cases directly engage feminism in their works and agendas, whether personal or political.

Regardless, the emancipation of women and of their bodies ran through social discourses during the period, and thus the works of many women artists who did not consider themselves feminists were linked to feminist agendas. The themes around which this exhibition is organized—the self-portrait; the relationship between the body and landscape; the mapping of the body and its social inscriptions; references to eroticism, to the power of words, to the performative body; fear of repression and resistance to domination; feminisms; and social places—suggest parallels between the agendas of European and North American feminist art and the issues that Latin American and Latina women artists addressed in their works.

The catalogue, unlike the exhibition, is organized around countries rather than themes. These different structures allow viewers to see the exhibition in one way but to study it in another. Although there are thematic essays in this volume, most of the essays address specific local art scenes. We made that decision in order to make the catalogue as useful as possible for educational purposes. The country- or region-specific essays tackle local feminist history, the role women artists played in each scene, and the relationships between their lives and works, on the one hand, and the local political situation and other forms of cultural expression, on the other. These are written by specialists in each country's or region's art and include significant bibliographic information as well as, in many cases, primary research. Many of the essays also propose questions and problems to be addressed in future scholarship. It is our foremost desire that this publication provides an impetus for future generations of historians, artists, and curators to keep investigating.

The primary purpose of *Radical Women* is to write a new chapter in twentieth-century art history, one that takes into account the contributions of Latin American, Chicana, and Latina women artists to contemporary art's experimental languages. The show is by no means

exhaustive; it does not encompass all the women artists who produced work in the period covered. We limited the scope to works that problematize the body—a body that, for the most part, had been addressed throughout art history from a masculine and patriarchal perspective, a perspective that the works by these artists began to dismantle systematically. This exhibition's aim is not only to make visible artistic productions missing from the narratives of international and Latin American art but also to analyze to what extent those productions constitute a different body. One of our hypotheses is that the reformulation proposed by these artists in their works made it possible to grasp other dimensions of sensibility and sexuality, dimensions that helped to divorce biology from sexuality and to redefine closed notions of gender.

It has been gratifying for us to witness the impact on the curatorial and academic fields made by the research that we began in 2010, research conveyed in articles and in papers and lectures delivered at museums and conferences. Artists who were previously completely unknown have been featured in shows, included in museum collections, and brought to the attention of the public. The opposition that we originally met has largely been overcome. Artists who in many cases were barely mentioned in art journals and museum catalogues are the subject of new scholarship. Today very few can argue that a historical exhibition of the radical production of women artists from Latin America and of Latina descent is irrelevant. The issue now forms part of an agenda that is as vast as it is urgent. Nonetheless, there is still a daunting amount of work to be done, and we understand that this is just a beginning.

## Notes

- 1 We have generally used the gendered terms Chicana and Latina and have not adopted the more recent nomenclature Chicana and Latina, which is not as relevant to the historical period of *Radical Women*.
- 2 Andrea Giunta, “Género y feminismo: Perspectivas desde América Latina,” *Exit Book* (Madrid), no. 9 (2008): 90–95.
- 3 In addition to the exhibition's curators and Marcela Guerrero, curatorial fellow, and Connie Butler, chief curator, of the Hammer Museum, our colleagues Julia Bryan-Wilson, Claudia Calirman, Miguel A. López, Mónica Mayer, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Camille Morineau, Catherine Morris, and Gabriela Rangel attended the workshop.
- 4 As noted in the discussion by Julia Antivilo Peña, Mónica Mayer, and María Laura Rosa, “Feminist Art and ‘Artivism’ in Latin America: A Dialogue in Three Voices,” and in some of the regional essays in this volume, there were artists in other Latin American countries who were active in feminist organizations or who identified as feminists, but they are exceptions.