The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices

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The very need to organize a historical exhibition based on gender is evidence of a vacuum in the art system. Women have been systematically excluded or presented in stereotypical and biased ways for centuries. This has created a situation that is difficult to address, partly because the opportunities to do so are still few and also because many of the same prejudiced and exclusionary frameworks still prevail today. The reality is that many more women artists participated in the shaping of twentieth-century art than have been accounted for. In Latin America this has been partly because of sexism and also because the system, both on the continent and internationally, judges the quality of artists’ work on the basis of visibility and success, which are often denied to women.

For example, the Mexican feminist artist Mónica Mayer (fig. 1), who has been working since the 1970s, was largely absent from the art system, finally receiving much-deserved recognition with a retrospective at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City in 2016. This is because the very idea of feminist art has been anathema for the art establishment in her country. Ironically the qualities that have been celebrated in twentieth-century art—an antiestablishment stance, experimentalism, originality, and nonconformity—often do not apply when it comes to women artists. A key prejudice is that women artists are simply not as good as men, and from this follows a failure to ask the most crucial question in the field: Where are the women artists? In the twentieth century Latin American women and Latina artists have actively shaped the artistic languages of their time. Nevertheless, in the art historical accounts and exhibitions that have served as the major references in the field, men are the configurators of art history. Only a few women artists have been chosen to represent the field at large, and these figures have been highlighted again and again: Anita Malfatti, Tarsila do Amaral, and Amelia Peláez representing early modernism; Leonora Carrington, María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, and Remedios Varo for surrealism; Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Gego, and Mira Schendel for neoconcretism and geometric abstraction; and Ana Mendieta, Marta Minujín, and Liliana Porter for conceptual and experimental art. Fewer than twenty artists represent the hundreds of women artists, often unclassifiable, who are an intrinsic and important part of our history. Women artists have been made visible under the banners of surrealism, geometric abstraction, and more recently pop art. All these movements allow for some form of erasure or fitting of women into existing parameters. Abstraction in particular is comfortable because of its apparent neutralizing or absence of gender issues.

Among the stereotypes that have defined women artists in Latin America is that of their very “invisibility,” a tacit conviction that they are not good artists and therefore do not exist. Often women artists such as Mercedes Pardo (wife of Alejandro Otero) or Lola Álvarez Bravo (wife of Manuel Álvarez Bravo) have been made invisible simply by being the wives of recognized male artists. A widespread stereotype is that of the crazy, hysterical woman (mujer loca) and victim; such is the case with Frida Kahlo and, on occasion, Ana Mendieta. Also common is the notion of women as bad and kitsch artists, based on the idea that their aesthetic is often tasteless and unpalatable and that the issues they address (such as domesticity, sexuality, and social exclusion) are not important. Another pervasive misconception is that women’s role...
as mothers precludes them from being relevant and committed artists. Finally, any work associated with feminism has been viewed as bad art.19 Often male artists have been derisive toward their female colleagues, contributing to their isolation and invisibility. For example, Álvaro Barrios, in an interview with Miguel Ángel Rosas for his seminal book Obras del arte conceptual en Colombia, uses the example of Sara Modiano’s supposed disappearance from the public art sphere around 1987 to exemplify the lack of relevance and commitment to her art.20 In reality Modiano never stopped working, and the proof of this is the many ideas and drawings that she continued to develop in her notebooks.21

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Días reconocidos en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1960–1930 (1977) and in essays such as “La cultura de resistencia” (1971), she developed her ideas for an art of resistance, an art that was relevant to society and to its national and continental context.23 She was against a neutral modern art that was mimetic of international trends such as kinetic art and much abstract art and therefore dependent on and therefore played a minor role in her larger Latin Americanist context.24

Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela—and in each country, local art. Although she wrote about several women for different countries in Latin America, including Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and the Caribbean.25

International exhibitions have been important to the development of twentieth-century Latin American art, and many of the most important international exhibitions and publications that have brought to light the varied and prolific practices of women artists. For her 2008 essay, “Gender y feminismo: Perspectivas de la biografía de Teresa Burga” she focused on the role of women in biographies.26

The celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America occurred in 1981, which was the year of the first large exhibition of women artists.27

The show within, on the one hand, Marta Traba’s Aromatic Kitchen and, on the other hand, in a gender perspective.28

In 1970, the first exhibition in Latin America of the Museum of Modern Art (in New York, in 1993), curated by Waldo Rasmussen with contributions by Carol Belanger Gere, and international feminists and intellectuals.29

La formación de la mujer peruana (1980), which was published by the Museo de Arte Moderno, Lima (2007; fig. 5);30 the international exhibition artists, curated by Adriano Pedrosa in association with Rodrigo Mora, took place at four separate institutions in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, with a site-specific component that traveled through five countries in Latin America.31

In 2013 the online art magazine Artelea, an initiative of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, published an issue solely dedicated to feminism and art in Latin America, which included important articles on Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and the Caribbean.32

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Parallels and Intersections, the first survey of its kind, curated by Dana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni for the San José Museum of Art, which included work by many Latina artists and gave it a broad role within the larger context of the exhibition. Its catalogue includes three important chapters on Latina and Chicana artists, written by Amalia Mesa-Beams, Teresa Rizzo, and Jennifer González. One of the most important exhibitions to bring together Latin American and Latina artists during the first decade of the millennium was Deborah Culler’s “A Vivida: Actions, Agency, and Acting Out,” held at the Museo del Barrio in New York in 2008. This show about performance incorporated works by twenty-seven women artists as well as other artists who participated in artists’ groups. Its catalogue discusses works by more than fifty women artists and twenty-one groups that included women. This publication demonstrates how broad, experimental, and dialogical the performance art scene had been since the 1960s.

Many of the publications and exhibitions produced in the 1990s were true laboratories of inclusion and exchange. Lucy Lippard’s Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America (1990). Fig. 32) promises to open a broader dialogue between art practices in the Americas, as well as to analyze its lasting negative legacy. Chicana and Latino artists who had once been United States were responding not only to patriarchal politics that were as oppressive as those faced by their counterparts in Latin America but also to a second wave feminism that was often indifferent to the issues faced by women of color.

the majority of them were nevertheless formulated under the banner of international feminism, without clarifying the difference between a feminist framework and actual feminist art. In fact, most of the directory of Latin American women artists shown in these exhibitions do not consider their work to be feminist.

If Latin American women artists have been largely made invisible, Chicana and Latina artists have also been excluded from a larger dialogue within modern and contemporary art. There are many books for this, the Latin American and Chico art is often defined by what it is not, that is neither American nor Latin American art. This assumption is based on misconceptions and stereotypes of what Latino and Chicana art might look like and refer to, racial prejudices about nation and identity, and false or limiting perceptions of what a national art might be. Two phenomena have made a broader understanding of Latino art difficult.

One is the emphasis on social activism with an idea of art and culture that is not mainstream and is considered problematic because it is not glamorous enough and is too politicized. The second is (Euro-American) multiculturalism in the 1980s, which promoted ideas of cultural essentialism, leading cultural, national, and ethnic “identitarian” obsessions to become pervasive in interpretations of Latin American and Latin art. Multiculturalism has been so widely demonized that it is challenging to recover its positive aspects, such as the opening of a broader cultural dialogue between art practices in the Americas, as well as an analysis of its lasting negative legacy. Chicana and Latino artists who had once been...

Notes

1. This question is related to Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” in Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 163–78, but it differs from it in that the primary question leads into a discussion about...
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The works of Dolores Aragon, Patricia Brown, Johnathan Calle, Fémina Libre, and the late María Luisa Ross, as well as Andrea Giunti’s “The Iconographic Turn,” both in this volume...