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Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985

Curated by: Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta

Exhibition schedule: Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, September 16, 2017–February 10, 2018; Brooklyn Museum, New York, April 13–July 22, 2018

Exhibition catalogue: Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, exh. cat. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and Delmonico Books, 2017. 376 pp.; 550 color illustrations. Hardcover \$60.00 (ISBN: 978-3-7913-5680-8)

Reviewed by: Alison Fraunhar, Associate Professor, Department of Art and Design, Saint Xavier University, Chicago



Fig. 1. Delia Cancela, *Corazón Destrozado (Destroyed Heart)*, 1964. Oil on canvas, wood, silk, ink on paper. 59 1/16 × 47 1/4 in. Collection of Mauro Herlitzka

The exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* provides a broad, international overview of Latin American women artists during a period that encompassed a major epistemological shift in the art world: from modernism, with its faith in meta-narratives and universal idioms, to postmodernism, with its exploration of identity and subsequent breakdown of social norms and conventions. Part of the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA program of southern California-wide exhibitions and related events, *Radical Women* benefits from the ambitious and visionary multiyear Getty Foundation project Pacific Standard Time, the ascendancy of Latin American modern and contemporary art in the global art market, and the commitment to making visible under-exhibited and undervalued art produced by women in the United States, in the western hemisphere, and beyond. The exhibition is a revelation for the exposure it provides to artists whose works have not been seen in many years or, in some cases, have never been seen in the

United States. Moreover, the exhibition supplies a critical and crucial reexamination of the dominant discourse of Latin American modernism. As it explodes the canon of modern Latin American artwork and artists, *Radical Women* makes a forceful argument for nonspecialists that Latin American women artists, although remaining faithful to the contexts and conditions in which they found themselves, spoke beyond regional iconography to engage with a wide public both within the art world and the world at large. For specialists, the breadth and depth of the exhibition and its excellent catalogue provide an opportunity to explore artists and their practices in a richer context.

Curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta worked for seven years with an international group of artists, collectors, art historians, and curatorial assistants, conducting research and extensive interviews to assemble an archive of women artists across Latin America whose careers and work have often been overlooked in their own countries and also internationally. While there are several well-known artists included in *Radical Women*, the vast majority of the 120 artists in the exhibition have been, and remain, largely absent from both regional and international feminist art-historical narratives. Systematic institutional conditions have excluded these artists from wider visibility and discourse; in Latin America, with the dominant forces of the Catholic Church, entrenched patriarchy, and authoritarian states, marginalization of women was even more pervasive and resistant to change than was the case in North America and Europe during the period under consideration.

With *Radical Women*, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta set out to address three questions: “First, what 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?”¹ The first question is answered through detailed biographical data given in the wall texts and, at greater length, in the catalogue, documenting the personal and professional lives of the artists. Likewise, the second question is answered through textual materials in the installation, including charts that provide a timeline for political events in each country during the time period. To approach the third question, ultimately the heart of the exhibition, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta organized the work of the artists under the rubric of “the political body” in loose thematic groupings that invite reconsideration of associations with the political through bodies, particularly women’s bodies. The thematic groupings are: Self-Portraiture, Body/Landscape, Performing the Body, Mapping, Resistance, Words, Feminisms, Social Places, and The Erotic. The thematic groupings are arranged sequentially in the galleries with some overlap among them, allowing connections between works of art as well as shared concepts to flow seamlessly and provocatively throughout. Hence, the sense of the political extends far beyond the public sphere and infiltrates every aspect of human life.

The art selected for the exhibition is both material and conceptual; even when executed in conventional media, it serves to activate ideas rather than definitively represent social or epistemological positions; each serves to stimulate ideas rather than function as an object of aesthetic inquiry disconnected from the world. Although some of the artists in the exhibition explicitly engage with political and social issues, for the most part the art in *Radical Women* eschews overt engagement with specific political events, and even more so with folkloric themes and regional iconography, which have had the tendency to inflect perceptions of Latin American art in general and women’s art of the era in particular. The organization of the exhibition around the notion of the political body and embodiment, then, makes great sense. After all, social, religious, colonial, and ideological control has been disproportionately imposed upon women’s bodies, and the politics of the body are

inescapable in Latin America, with its layers of indigenous and Luso-Iberian cultural practice and institutional slavery.

The exhibition strategically focuses on what can be called the late modern/early postmodern era rather than on contemporary art, which is much more widely exhibited and embedded in the global art market at present. The works on view have one foot planted in modernism and the other dangling in the protean forest of the posts (post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism). Bracketing the exhibition temporally, Delia Cancela's 1964 *Corazón Destrozado* (fig. 1) and Yeni Y Nan's 1983 *Transfiguración Elemento Tierra* (fig. 2) present an arc from Pop Art, deployed to subvert romantic femininity, to self-portraiture, deployed to interrogate and destabilize identity. Cancela's *Corazón Destrozado* (*Destroyed Heart*), included in The Erotic grouping, exemplifies the Pop sensibility prevalent in the 1960s. Consisting of a large painted canvas with dangling biomorphic shapes tied to the bottom by ribbons, the image presents a flat, conventionalized heart whose bottom left side has been sliced away in curved lines echoed by the suspended fabric forms below. Both the image on the canvas and the forms are painted red. The universal recognizability of the heart and the hybrid painting/object structure situate the work within the Pop idiom, while the conventionalized formal language is slyly deconstructed, undermining romantic stereotypes.



Fig. 2. Yeni y Nan, *Transfiguración Elemento Tierra* (*Transfiguration Element Earth*), 1983. Thirty-two Polaroid SX70 photographs, acrylic, graphite. 38 × 38 1/2 in. overall (framed). Courtesy of the artists and Henrique Faria, New York

Almost twenty years later, the Venezuelan collective Yeni Y Nan's (Jennifer Hackshaw and Maria Luisa Gonzalez) *Transfiguración Elemento Tierra* (*Transfiguration Element Earth*) features thirty-two Polaroid photographs of the artists, their faces rendered masklike by mud, chalk, and other substances. Part of the Body/Landscape section, the photographs challenge the conventional association between the face and the unique identity of the subject. Several of the photographs have been scribbled on and crossed out in red marker. Working in the context of semiotic theory, the limits of identity, and the body, theirs is a major contribution to Conceptual art in Venezuela.

This temporal framing has excluded some of the few internationally famous women artists of twentieth-century Latin America, principally Frida Kahlo and Tarsila do Amaral, among a lamentably short list. Unfortunately, overexposure has reduced the work of these artists to a shorthand of misrecognition, in which complex iconography and overlapping issues are diminished to a set of tropes—this reductivist tendency also applies to widespread assumptions about the complexities of Latin American life and politics in general. Latin American women artists have frequently been expected to bear the burden of representation, to represent or contest particular forms of oppression along racialized and gendered lines. Indeed, prior to the advent and diffusion of postcolonial difference starting in the late 1980s, artists sought inclusion in international and global discourse.

As the exhibition richly demonstrates, exceptions to the reductivist tendency abound, as in the Brazilian modern movements *Arte Concreto* and *Tropicalismo*, both of which are well represented. Artists identified with these movements, including Lygia Pape and Lygia Clark, explored formal themes and social encounters using innovative materials in novel and rigorous ways, and their recent visibility in major international exhibitions is long overdue. In the exhibition, one of the few artists who has a major international presence is Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985), a feminist Conceptual artist who began to exhibit work in the early 1970s. Mendieta was a key figure in opening dialogues and sharing resources with Cuban artists, most of whom had been cut off from dominant US and Western European artistic trends since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which led to severed diplomatic relations and travel between the United States and Cuba. While Mendieta may be among the best-known Latin American artists of the era, conceptual and performative practices such as Mendieta's were widely practiced by artists from across the hemisphere, and seen throughout the exhibition.

The 1960s through the 1980s was a pivotal time in global political realignments, as independence movements signaled the transition from colonialism to uneasy democracy and neocolonialism in much of the world. Dictatorships aligned with both the right and left—modernist iterations of a centuries-old tradition of *caudillismo*—erupted across Latin America, and citizens struggled to find and articulate themselves within new political configurations, finding new freedoms as well as ongoing restrictions. In the art world, Pop and conceptual strategies began to shatter the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism in the global north, encouraging outward-looking Latin America artists to find connections to the United States and Europe. The rise of identity politics, closely linked to global independence movements, created spaces of agency and visibility for racially, geographically, sexually, and culturally disadvantaged people to explore and expose their subjectivity. *Radical Women* teases out these strands in subtle and provocative ways.

Prior to the spread of notions of postmodernism and postcolonial difference in the mid-1980s, artists, designers, scientists, and visionaries sought a universal or at least

international vernacular to allow the free flow of discourse. In assessing the context and zeitgeist of Latin American women artists from 1960 to 1985, it is important to recognize the tremendous cultural shift that took place during this time. Global shifts from tenuous and aspirational international modernism to the postcolonial realization of the structures of inequality that overly determined lives and histories—particularly of those from the global south and the ensuing politics of liberation and identity—marked the transition to the long contemporary moment. The wave of identity awareness and exploration that crashed ashore in the 1960s continues to reverberate as urgently and provocatively as it did decades ago.

The exhibition is complemented by a rigorous catalogue, organized by country, making it a useful and historically grounded counterpoint to the thematic structure of the exhibition. Artists are categorized by nationality, and this geo-historical organization raises some interesting questions: in an era characterized by diaspora, migration, and exile, the basis upon which some artists are included under the rubric of a particular country can seem arbitrary. For example, several artists developed their professional careers in the United States but are nevertheless identified by the country of their birth. In this category, Liliana Porter, Ana Mendieta, and Marisol (born in France to Venezuelan parents, and a resident of New York until her death), all long-term residents of the United States, stand out, as does Zilia Sanchez, who was Cuban-born and has been a resident of Puerto Rico since the early 1970s. The rationale determining national identification is not self-evident, but it instead highlights idiosyncrasies and tensions inherent in identity-formation within the myriad hemispherical flows of people and ideas occurring since the early modern period.

Beyond the bracing originality of *Radical Women*, another one of its towering achievements is its creation of networked archives and documentation of artists and artwork. As the temporal scope of the exhibition ranges from sixty to thirty-five years ago, the task was urgent. Not all of the artists represented in the exhibition are still alive, and several stopped making art decades ago. The exhibition and catalogue make an invaluable contribution to the history of women artists in Latin America, whose stories are only now beginning to attract long-deserved attention.

While many Latin American women artists have been, for reasons the exhibition makes abundantly clear, overlooked, a few, such as Zilia Sanchez, have begun to attract critical reassessment and newly awakened market interest, benefitting from the explosion of the Latin American art market in recent years. Others, particularly Sylvia Palacios Whitman, have benefitted from renewed critical and curatorial interest resulting from their participation in *Radical Women*, giving rise to further exhibitions and critical recognition. In addition to Ana Mendieta, Liliana Porter, Marta Minujin, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Marisol, and Cecilia Vicuna are among the few artists in the exhibition who have garnered sustained, if intermittent, scholarly and curatorial interest over time.

As an omnibus exhibition, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*—replete to bursting, overflowing, chock-full of a vast array of work—does not invite the kind of contemplation and attentive viewing that can be practiced in a smaller, more focused exhibition. Instead, it encourages the viewer to make connections across media, countries, and most particularly across the thematic categories. Specialists will be tempted to question the inclusion and exclusion of certain artists within the logic of the exhibition, but the pleasures of discovery will more than balance perceived omissions.

Notes

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- ¹ Cecilia Fajardo Hill and Andrea Giunta, *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and Delmonico Books, 2017), 16.