

Esa otra mitad del cielo



## Esa otra mitad del cielo: Feminist Strategies in Post-1968 Mexican Art

Bringing together materials from the archives and collections of the Institute for Studies of Latin American Art (ISLAA), *Esa otra mitad del cielo: Feminist Strategies in Post-1968 Mexican Art* showcases the activities of the collective Polvo de Gallina Negra (1983–1993) alongside solo works by members Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer. The exhibition focuses on particular strategies of Polvo de Gallina Negra that combined social activism and radical humor.

Late 20th-century Mexico City was marked by a lively convergence of political activism and cultural transformation. In the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, in which the Mexican Armed Forces killed students during a peaceful protest, many of the city's activist-artists pursued collaborative work and political change by forming a number of collectives, initiating what came to be known as the *grupos* generation. In this same period, the United Nations declared 1975 as the International Women's Year, inaugurated with the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City. The conference increased the visibility of feminism in the country, opening up discussions on gender, politics, and women's role in society. Bustamante and Mayer emerged as key figures in this environment, eventually joining forces as the duo Polvo de Gallina Negra in 1983.

In the late 1970s, Mayer traveled to Los Angeles, where she worked alongside feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, while Bustamante became an essential bridge between feminism and conceptual art in Mexico. Bustamante and Mayer combined their approaches when—initially alongside artist Herminia Dosal—they established Polvo de Gallina Negra, adopting a name meaning “black hen’s powder,” a medicine to ward off the evil eye. Though committed to social transformation like the *grupos* before them, the duo’s focus on women’s exclusion from the public realm distinguished them from their mostly male counterparts. The counter-pedagogical, feminist strategies they adapted and invented included infiltrating mass media through lively TV appearances, participating in street demonstrations, organizing consciousness-raising workshops, and developing mail art projects.

*Esa otra mitad del cielo* examines how these particular strategies emerge in the work of Polvo de Gallina Negra, and in Bustamante's and Mayer's individual practices. Mayer's *A veces me espantan mis propios sentimientos, mis fantasías* (*Sometimes my feelings, my fantasies frighten me*, 1977) and *Lo normal* (*The Normal*, 1978) question the cultural fears surrounding women's desires, suggesting that such fantasies are an integral part of life. In *Instantánea a Frida* (*Snapshot of Frida*, 1991), Bustamante embodies famed Mexican painter Frida Kahlo to critique the ways in which women's images are commodified. Polvo de Gallina Negra's approach to long-term projects such as *¡MADRES!* (1983–87) was often programmatic, involving multiple steps—much like a recipe. Decades later, new generations of artists and organizers are revisiting and reimagining the duo's strategies. Their legacy endures, epitomizing the desire to make visible “*esa otra mitad del cielo que nos correspondía*” (“that other half of heaven that belonged to us”).

## An excerpt from Mónica Mayer, “A Brief Account of the Comings and Goings of Feminist Art in Mexico During the Last Decade of the 20th Century and the First Decade of the 21st Century.”<sup>1</sup>

Mónica Mayer

It seems like it was yesterday.

In Mexico, we began to talk about feminist art in the mid-1970s, although there were earlier exhibitions that showed that women artists enjoyed the warm sense of solidarity that is a basic ingredient for such art to exist. One example is the exhibition/tribute dedicated to Frida Kahlo in July 1956 at Lola Álvarez Bravo’s gallery. According to Raquel Tibol (1983),<sup>2</sup> that exhibition brought together the work of around forty artists, including Machila Armida, Remedios Varo, Olga Costa, and Fanny Rabel. I highlight this event because it anticipates the impact that Kahlo would have on the artistic production worldwide on several generations, as well as her rise to *top ten* popularity in recent years: her exhibition at the Tate Modern in London in 2005 was the most successful Mexican show of all time, and in 2006 one of her works sold for 5.6 million dollars—the highest price ever reached by a female artist up to that point.<sup>3</sup> It seems that Frida Kahlo is to women’s art what the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is to Mexico’s Independence: a powerful and inescapable image that summons and unites. This is not surprising. If feminism was founded on the idea that the personal is political, it is no coincidence that it chose Kahlo as one of its biggest icons, since decades earlier, through her work, she had already demonstrated that the personal is artistic. Feminist art emerged in the context of militant 1970s feminist groups and in a moment when institutions began to embrace—in their own way—the ideas of women’s liberation that were spreading throughout the world. In 1975, for instance, the International Women’s Year Conference was held in Mexico City, and, as often happens, there were cultural events to accompany the political ones: the Museum of Modern Art presented the exhibition *La mujer como creadora y tema del arte* (*The Woman as Creator and as Subject*



Fig. 1 Installation by Maris Bustamante, Magali Lara, Mónica Mayer, Rowena Morales, and Adriana Slemnson for *El Foro de la mujer* at the Festival de Oposición, 1982, organized by el Partido Socialista Unificado de México.

*of Art*), in which—very much in keeping with the times—men were the main participants. At that time, it was still considered normal for a woman’s role in art to be limited to that of the muse.

Oh well. Art, which serves many functions, sometimes aligns with governmental interests, as in the case of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, although at the same time it allows us to understand what is happening in a particular era. However, for me, what is most interesting about art is its capacity to transform us, both those of us who produce it and those who consume it. Art reflects who we are, but it also helps us reach our aspirations, and allows ideas to take root in emotions and vice versa. Art is to society what dreaming is to the body: an irrepressible space where experience (the past) and desire (the future) coexist—a space that is essential for deep changes to emerge in the present. I believe that is why, almost intuitively, from the beginnings of the feminist movement—whose struggles take place both in public and in private life—its activities carried a strong artistic charge, and



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 eternidad, el ser mujer, etc.

L. Mi posición feminista respecto a mi obra es esencialmente la de enfrentarme a un mundo sexista, 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 escogee? ¿Collage feminista?

R. No, suena más personal Collage íntimo.

M. Bueno, **Collage íntimo**.

L. ¿Qué título le ponemos a la exposición?

M. ¿Pues qué es lo que tenemos en común?

R. **La técnica y el feminismo, las 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, surfreadores, 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 conscientización. En ellas sacamos todo lo que llevamos dentro, pero que sabemos es accesible a los demás.

Fig.2 Ephemera from the 1977 exhibition *Collage íntimo*, held at the Casa del Lago in Mexico City. Identified are the co-organizers: Mónica Mayer, Rosalba Huerta, and Lucila Santiago.



Fig. 3 Cover of *Fem* magazine, vol. 9, no. 33, April–May 1984, featuring an illustration designed by Magali Lara. The content of this issue included Polvo de Gallina Negra’s recipe for casting the evil eye on rapists.

why in many marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations there was theater or performance. Moreover, a good number of us artists joined the feminist movement or collaborated with the cause by creating images for flyers and posters. Others began to question the patriarchy from the trenches of art itself.

To begin with, there was a process of self-definition: Is feminist art the art made by women, the art made by feminists, or the art with feminist themes? Since reflection on the subject was only just beginning through foundational essays such as “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” by Linda Nochlin, originally published in *Art News* in 1971, artists and critics of the 1970s began organizing exhibitions in order to learn in an empirical way.

I remember several, such as the one held alongside the *First Mexican-Central American Symposium on Research about Women* (Museo Carrillo Gil, 1977), which brought together eighty women artists. Curated by Alaïde Foppa, Raquel Tibol, and Sylvia Pandolfi, this exhibition changed my

life because even after having studied art at UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City], I hardly knew any of the participants: women were invisible in history classes. That same year, Rosalba Huerta, Lucila Santiago, and I presented *Collage íntimo* at the Casa del Lago (Fig. 2). One of the merits of this exhibition was that, because of its subject matter, it was naturally regarded as feminist. In 1978, the desire to define what feminist art was led us to organize the *Muestra colectiva feminista* at Galería Contraste. This exhibition was particularly interesting because it brought together the artistic work of both amateur militants and professional artists, making it clear that being a feminist does not guarantee artistic quality, nor even an interest in developing politically engaged art.

In the 1970s, a very strong generation of artists with a clear feminist vision emerged, including Magali Lara, Lourdes Almeida, Yolanda Andrade, and Carla Rippey (Fig. 3). The work of all of them has continued to bear fruit.

Later, in the early 1980s, three feminist art groups were formed: Bio-Arte (Nunik Sauret, Roselle Faure, Laita, Guadalupe García Vasquez, and Rose Van Lengen), Tlacuilas y Retrateras (which emerged from a workshop I taught at [the Academy of] San Carlos and included Ana Victoria Jiménez, Karen Cordero, Nicola Coleby, Patricia Torres, Elizabeth Valenzuela, Lorena Loaiza, Ruth Albores, Consuelo Almeida, and Marcela Ramírez), and Polvo de Gallina Negra (formed by Maris Bustamante and I). All of these groups sought to make their art political, and that the form and content of their work reflected feminist ideas. It is no coincidence that all three worked in genres such as performance; since one of the requirements of performance is the presence of the artist, the reflection of gender was unavoidable. In a performance, you are there, with your sex, race, and age. The fact that the artist is present also prevents the tendency to erase women, a tendency that still operates, because—unlike observing a painting—when witnessing a performance there is no way to assume that the work was by a man. Moreover, performance and feminism

fit together very well: the former sought to erase the line between life and art, and the latter between the personal and the political. At their core, both were fighting against our disgusting habit of fragmenting and compartmentalizing reality. The desire was to make visible that other half of heaven that belonged to us.

This *boom* of feminist art—as I like to call it—soon faded away. Something caused the course of our mission to shift. Maybe it was the earthquake of 1985 or the fall of the Berlin Wall. It probably sank in the death throes of the PRI [Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party] and the arrival of neoliberalism with its commercial and individualistic view of art. Polvo de Gallina Negra—the last surviving group—succumbed in 1993 to the pressures of everyday life: it was difficult to maintain ourselves, produce art, and care for small children (especially in the case of Maris, who was widowed in 1990). Moreover, the times had changed, and strategies had to change: in the first stage, it had been important to be loud and to denounce the oppression of women; at a later moment it was necessary to begin formulating proposals.

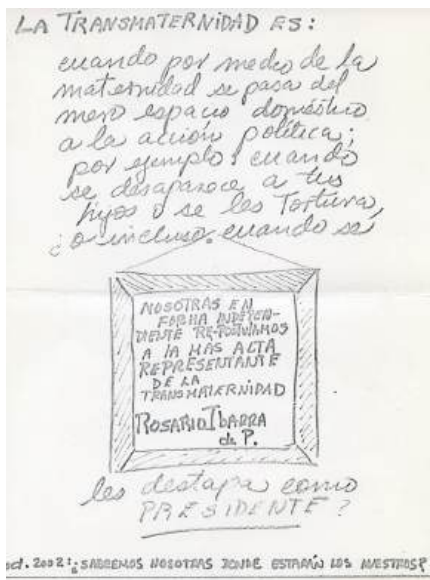


Fig. 4 Polvo de Gallina Negra, Ephemera from *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad*, from the *Egalité, Liberté, Maternité: Polvo de Gallina Negra ataca de nuevo series*, 1987.

1. Originally published in Spanish as *Un breve testimonio sobre los ires y venires del arte feminista en México durante la última década del siglo XX y la primera del XXI* in *Debate Feminista* 40 (October 2009).
2. Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: una vida abierta* (Mexico City, MX: Biblioteca de las decisiones, 1983).
3. On November 20, 2025, Kahlo’s 1940 self-portrait *El sueño (La cama)* sold for nearly \$55 million after fees, a new public auction record for the artist—and the record for any work by a Latin American artist.

Rte. Cristina Jiménez Curiel  
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H6  
31



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Av. Revolución # 1608  
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Concurso "Carta a mi Madre"

12 DE NOVIEMBRE  
DÍA DEL CARTERO

2-20

Polvo de Gallina Negra, Envelope from Carta a mi madre, 1987.



Polvo de Gallina Negra, Letter from *Carta a mi madre*, 1987.



# POLVO DE GALLINA NEGRA

MARIS BUSTAMANTE Y MONICA MAYER  
5-92-18-20 Y 2-71-30-82



precios válidos hasta  
la conferencia:  
"Las Mujeres Artistas  
o se solicita esposa"  
14 de junio  
¡APROVECHA!



LISTA ACTUALIZADA DE PRECIOS POR PRESTACION DE SERVICIOS  
DEL GRUPO DE ARTE FEMINISTA "POLVO DE GALLINA NEGRA"  
(VALIDA HASTA EL 10 DE MAYO DE 1990)

- |   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1.- POR ACEPTAR ASISTIR A EXPOSICIONES                                | \$ 200,000.00  |
| 2.- POR SALUDAR AL EXPOSITOR  | \$1,000,000.00 |
| 3.- POR EXPRESAR COMENTARIOS FAVORABLES                               | \$1,200,000.00 |
| 4.- POR EXPRESAR COMENTARIOS DESFAVORABLES                            | \$4,000,000.00 |
| 5.- POR PARTICIPAR EN REUNIONES SOCIALES                              | \$2,000,000.00 |
| 6.- POR TERAPIAS PARA ENFRENTAR A CRITICOS                            | \$5,000,000.00 |
| 7.- POR CAUSAR EL MAL DE OJO A QUIEN SEA                              | \$3,000,000.00 |
| 8.- POR ABESORAR ACERCA DEL MERCADO DEL ARTE                          | \$7,000,000.00 |
| 9.- POR UN PAQUETE DE CHISMES DEL MEDIO                               | \$ 700,000.00  |
| 10.- POR ACEPTAR EXPONER CON ALGUIEN (SEGUN EL SAPO ES LA<br>PEDRADA) |                |
| 11.- OTROS: SEGUN ESPECIFIQUE EL CLIENTE                              | \$             |

## ¡ PINTORAS DEL MUNDO UNIOS!

LA PLASTICA COMO ARMA DE LIBERACION FEMENINA!  
¡ MAL DE OJO AL MACHISMO CULTURAL!



CONTRATO DE ESPARCIMIENTO

YO, MARIS BUSTAMANTE, ME COMPROMETO FORMALMENTE A QUE EN CASO DE QUE MONICA  
MAYER MUERA ANTES QUE YO, HARE TODO LO HUMANA Y ARTISTICAMENTE POSIBLE PARA  
QUE EL 50% DE SUS CENIZAS SEAN ESPARCIDAS O DEPOSITADAS EN LA ROTONDA DE LOS  
HOMBRES ILUSTRES, Y DE NO SER POSIBLE, EN LAS CERCANIAS DE LAS DE FRIDA KAHLO.

\_\_\_\_\_  
MARIS BUSTAMANTE

\_\_\_\_\_  
TESTIGO #1

\_\_\_\_\_  
TESTIGO # 2



Polvo de Gallina Negra, performative action at a pro-choice demonstration, 1991.



“But I also know that transforming a system—especially one we have built over so many millennia, like the patriarchal one—is not easy, and it requires all kinds of political, social, cultural, and personal actions for change to take hold. In the work of [contemporary feminist artists], I see a yearning to embrace themselves or others instead of lashing out. The way they approach the problem—and the solutions—are different. I believe my generation fulfilled its own dream and helped make women more visible. I hope [this new generation of artists] achieves theirs.”

Final paragraph of Mónica Mayer, “A Brief Account of the Comings and Goings of Feminist Art in Mexico During the Last Decade of the 20th Century and the First Decade of the 21st Century,” *Debate Feminista* 40 (October 2009).



## **Esa otra mitad del cielo: Feminist Strategies in Post-1968 Mexican Art**

*Esa otra mitad del cielo: Feminist Strategies in Post-1968 Mexican Art* is co-curated by Alma Chaouachi, Mike Curran, Lila Gould, Bruna Grinsztejn, Gladys Lou, and Devon Ma, with generous guidance from Mariano López Seoane, Director of the Graduate Program and ISLAA Fellow in Latin American Art at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (CCS Bard). The exhibition and publication result from a graduate seminar at CCS Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, supported by the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA), New York City, as part of the ISLAA Artist Seminar Initiative.

The ISLAA Artist Seminar Initiative supports graduate seminars on key figures and periods of Latin American art, with a focus on living artists who participate in conversations with students or on historical figures represented in the ISLAA collection. Students collaborate to produce a public-facing exhibition that aims to expand art historical narratives and provide a platform for emerging curators.

Special thanks to Mariano López Seoane for his tireless dedication to this project. Our deepest appreciation goes to Mónica Mayer for her invaluable collaboration, and to Mayer and Maris Bustamante for the privilege of spending time with their archives and extraordinary legacies. Special thanks to Magali Lara, who was also part of that generation and who helped us understand the stakes and context of these feminist strategies we are bringing forth. Thank you to Madeline Murphy Turner for sharing her research, knowledge, and experiences with this material, and to Brenda Hernández Novoa, Victor Lerma, Yuruen Lerma, Samantha McCain Veach, Juan Diego Pérez la Cruz, and Cecilia Sánchez Duarte for providing their images of Mayer's *El tendadero* (1978-). Thank you to the entire exhibitions and administrative staff at CCS Bard, specifically Jaclyn Arndt, Amanda Bard, Lauren Cornell, John DeSousa, Alex Downs, Laianna Ferruggia, Andy Gabrysiak, Jeremy Kiracofe, Ben Kujawski, Amy Linker, Maeve McCool, Anthony Montouri, Jen Nugent, Ramona Rosenberg, Mary Rozell, Albert Shahinian, Ian Sullivan, Eli Thorne.

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