



## CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ART ACTIVISM FOR FEMINIST AGENCY COMBATTING GENDER VIOLENCE

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Since 1977, with the Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's performance "In Mourning and In Rage", [1] art activism has been established in the feminist movement as a way to raise public awareness and political lobbying for women's rights, especially against violence against women and girls (VAWG) and gender violence (GV).

At that time, the feminist movement was developing new forms of activism, new issues and new modes of organisation, in what would later be called the *second wave*, along with *old* forms of the feminist social movement. In spite of divergences about what counts as a social movement, feminism and other social movements were making their way to organise political participation in forms distinct from the working class or civil rights movements in other historical periods. These new forms of political activism were named by some authors as *new social movements* (Offe, 1985).

Language and culture construct identity, and the body is partially their product. Tradition shows us our place in the world: family, social status, legal rights, official culture and images. The role of texts, images, and media is unquestionable, be they artistic or in common use: they work as transmitters of ways of seeing the world, across several societies, providing us with a glimpse of each time period and the desires and social models of each era.

Artists involved in the movement used their skills and creativity to empower women and enforce feminist political events. They challenged the masculine privilege in establishing what was *artworks* and crafts as well as authorship, erasing the boundaries of this dichotomy, denouncing the social reproduction of symbolic violence through erudite art (Mulvey 1975), defying the dominant views of Art History, and resisting art commodification.

In this article, I will describe the findings of research being developed mostly in Iberian (Portugal and Spain) and Latin America countries (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, among others). A team of researchers are working in the intersections between art activism, GV prevention/education, and feminist movement/agency. For the purposes of this article I will focus on the possibilities of art activism in promoting feminist agency.

The *corpus* of analysis comprehends parades, performances and installations across Latin America and Iberian countries combatting VAWG, and specially femicide/feminicide. VAWG was elected as a topic in the political agenda since CEDAW (1979) and established in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). These conventions meant a political sign of wide recognition of VAWG and GV as social problem and a matter for State intervention and social policies. Femicide, as the killing of a woman, girl or other person because of her/his gender condition, was first brought to light in the social sciences by Dianne Roussell, in 1976. More than twenty years later, the

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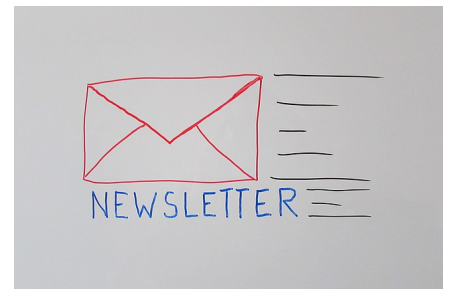
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killings in Ciudad Juarez triggered a new concept developed by Marcela Lagarde, *feminicidio* (*feminicidio*), to point out State's accountability for the murderer's impunity.

It was also by the impulse of Latin American feminism, initiated in 1981 in Bogotá, that the 25<sup>th</sup> of November was elected to be the International Day for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women, remembering Mirabal sisters as a paradigmatic examples of diverse forms of VAWG and GV, including State's GV and political violence as well as IPV and femicide.

### Method

For the purposes of the analysis we used a method combining visual critical analysis with documentary interpretation as proposed by Karl Mannheim, complemented by an interpretive (hermeneutic) approach to comparability.

The construction of this analysis implied a double move: i) the identification of the common elements of the images analysed, including similar strategies for action; ii) the understanding of the specificities of each one, singular meanings produced in the course of action. The corpus of the analysis was selected in the basis of a *theoretical sampling*, that is a sample that mobilizes the dimensions of the concepts and theory we intend to evidence or to challenge.

The visual documents are from a large variety of sources to illustrate common elements in such a wide range of events and works.

### Brief summary of the findings

The new distinctive elements of feminist movement in the last decades are, on the one hand its *visuality*, and on the other the crucial role of the woman's body as political agent. Concomitantly, public spaces have become the locus for feminist aesthetic pedagogy.

### Visuality in the centre of political action

Visual communication has increased in feminist groups, parades, performances, and other political events. Images are increasingly present in our lives and social media plays a part in this change. Several authors have highlighted how our contemporary world is both represented and constituted in and by images. Images are also used to keep memory heritage, bringing to the present someone or something that is not there anymore.

In this sense, bringing the murdered women to our present day and to our memories is part of the agenda to make every woman/person important. Many of the public manifestations (including parades, performances and installations) combatting femicide/feminicidio portrayed the individual women murdered. [2]. Sometimes, there is no photo, but their names and other biographical details are displayed in a visual way. [3]

### Corporeality and the aesthetic body

The body has gained a central role as a crucial site for feminist (and queer) agency. Presented as (indigenous) warriors, [4] in installations or parades, women's bodies are displayed as a collective force, complemented with expressions of emotions of rage and joyful happiness for feeling empowered in political struggle. Some parades show a massive number of persons/bodies, creatively gathered with written messages or drawings. [5]

From being a simple repository of human agency the body transits to a central place in producing and displaying meanings. This move makes a contemporary rupture against the modern binary dichotomy between body and spirit/intellect. This has been particularly relevant to feminist struggles insofar the body (the *female or non-hegemonic body*) is also the locus of the violence and discrimination, both in its physicality, feelings, and emotions.

### Public space / the street as a locus for feminist aesthetic pedagogy

In Brazil and other Latin countries, public spaces, especially streets, plazas and community places, have been elected as sites for social pedagogy, for already four decades. Paulo Freire with *the pedagogy of the oppressed* and Augusto Boal with *the theatre of the oppressed* were among them. Concomitantly, especially in the USA, from the 1970's onwards, feminist artists engaged in political activism have worked on activist-aesthetic tools and contributed to increase the consideration of "art as an activist medium" (Fryd 2007: 25). Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy were among many others.

In the last few decades, with more or less aesthetic sophistication, feminist and LGBTI+/queer movements have used public spaces, namely the streets, to display their political agency. They occupy public arenas to re-signify these spaces as sites for them /us to be there as persons with full right to individual and collective identity/ies.

### Final remarks

There is sufficient evidence that feminist movements around the world have been occupying public spaces in which the body/ies and the aesthetic are playing an increasingly crucial role. The contribution of artistic tools as well as the work of many feminist artists have designed new modes of thinking and performing feminist and queer struggles, empowering the collectives along the way.

### Notes:

[1] In previous historical moments, art has been used to criticize social injustice, also to denounce violence(s). It can be noted, as an example, Goya (*Capricho 24*, 1797-98). One of the distinctive elements of feminist art activism in the seventies was its collective authorship and public displaying. This performance can be accessed [here](#).

[2] More images with portrayals of women murdered can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

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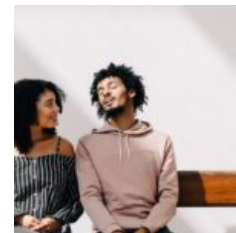
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[3] See for instance the **installation in Porto**, Portugal, by UMAR, and **here**, or **in France**.

[4] See the example in **one installation in Rio de Janeiro**, and in **parades**.

[5] See for example, in **Porto Alegre, Brazil**, among many others.

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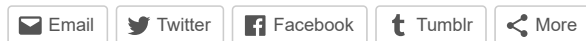
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