

DISOBEDIENT BODIES AND NARRATIVES IN LATIN AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY ART

Georgina G. Gluzman
Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas

Review of Andrea Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano. Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2018.

“Toys and stories are not innocent: they are the first cultural pressure”. This is how María Luisa Bemberg explained, in her short film *Juguetes* (1978), the impact of educational productions aimed at children.¹ The games and stories destined for little girls reflect a system of immanence (which, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is opposed to transcendence) that the patriarchal order will perpetuate in their adult lives.² The children’s characters of Anita and Pepín, whose books appear in the film, determined roles even within the art field. One of the girls filmed by Bemberg read out loud a fragment of their adventures and their destiny: “And Anita thought: ‘Pepín will be a great painter. He will be known worldwide.’”

The sharp short film by María Luisa Bemberg, which Andrea Giunta analyzes in detail in her book (p. 103), thus incorporated a mocking commentary on how art history has been written: male geniuses and female muses. Although the attacks to this model appeared several decades ago, as early as 1971,³ the history of art in Latin America has just begun to question categories, evaluations, and hierarchies. The legitimacy of Bemberg’s profound comment shows the strength of the debates and approaches of the so-called Second-wave feminism, a fact that should lead us to the critical re-evaluation of this evolutionary and segmented model of the women’s movement.

In this context, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano. Historia de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo* is a powerful reminder of how much has been done, how much can be done and how much still needs to be done in order to properly assess the production of Latin American women artists since the 1960s. The main hypothesis of this work is that many Latin American women artists have created new representations of the body, which Giunta characterizes as an emancipation from dominant cultural constructions (p. 13). These radical interrogations allow drawing synchronic links between artists who did not necessarily knew each other (pp. 17 and 27), in research paths that allow an escape from the logic of traditional narratives and their diachronic successions.

The book is divided into six chapters, preceded by an introduction of personal and political character, in which (among other topics) the author describes and analyzes the resistance to the exhibition *Radical Women. Latin American Art 1960-1985*, curated by herself and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill (pp. 17-23). The first chapter addresses several key issues for better understanding the rest of the book, among which are the obstacles to the visibility of female artists, already mentioned in the 1970s and 1980s, and the fallacious arguments that argue that the difficulties for women artists have been overcome. In addition, it includes relevant statistics that show, with the potency of the percentages, the unequal distribution of prizes in the Argentine scene from 1911 to the present (pp. 48-51). The author also offers a useful typology to understand the various alternatives of identification of art made by women (pp. 72-78). This classification, of undeniable value, avoids the fallacy that holds that women artists always make “feminist works” and asks for specific and situated readings, both in contextual terms and in connection to the trajectory of each artist.

The second chapter, based on a comparative approach, focuses on the work of two artists active in different media and situations: the Colombian painter Clemencia Lucena and the Argentine filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg, particularly through the study of her two fundamental militant short films. Here, the author investigates the intersection of feminism with left-wing politics. The third chapter discusses the experimental cinema of Narcisa Hirsch, a German-born Argentine artist. Giunta repositions “the friction that crosses” the life of the artist herself in the narratives on experimental cinema. This topic (the impossibility of neatly

separating the biography from the career) invites us to rethink the whole concept of artistic trajectory as an overarching idea, capable of accounting for the interlocking of the so-called antinomies between public/private and political/personal. The fourth chapter deals with the Mexican artistic scene, exceptional in the Latin American context due to the continuing presence of feminism, which reaches our days. The author analyzes the effects of the International Women's Year (1975) in the artistic field from a detailed analysis of several events and artworks.

The fifth chapter analyzes in depth the work *Sal-si-puedes*, by the Uruguayan artist Nelbia Romero, made under the dictatorship. The concepts of memory, archive, and resistance are articulated in the careful examination of a work that, although opaque, was interpreted in relation to state violence by its "reading community" (p. 205). The chapter is extremely valuable as a methodological exercise of interpretation beyond the available sources, since as Gabriel Peluffo Linari points out, no contemporary publication of the work could have analyzed or even mentioned this political dimension (p. 202). The sixth chapter examines some series by the Chilean photographer Paz Errázuriz, also crossed by the dictatorship in her country. Through a sensible reading, Giunta highlights "the capacity of her photographs to restore, in spite of everything, in forgotten and marginal spaces, the affects and their power of identification and transformation" (p. 29).

The multiplicity of methodologies deployed by the author, from quantitative analysis to comparative studies, demonstrates that feminism is not a methodology, but also politics.⁴ The coexistence of diverse approaches expresses the pressing need to find the conceptual instruments to be developed according to each case, the history to be reconstructed or dismantled. Giunta's text, in addition to telling stories of women artists, is an intelligent log of the vicissitudes of research. The epilogue, "Feminismo en tiempo presente", gives an account of the research process, of its personal and political history. Far from presenting a text told by a disembodied narrator, Giunta reveals the mechanisms and urgencies of her writing. The glossary that closes the book acts as a necessary repertoire for those who navigate the world of art, or any other male-dominated arena.

Finally, the erudition demonstrated throughout the text and the extensive bibliographies deserve a final reflection. The author expresses a stable recognition towards those who have navigated similar research paths. In the work of Andrea Giunta the contributions of other research resonate and are re-signified. There is an ethics in this recognition, but there it is also a politics: generically erudite, but specifically feminist. Most of the cited and acknowledged works have been written by women, against the tendency, explored in several studies,⁵ to cite mostly men. “Feminism: we need to cite each other into existence,”⁶ said the scholar Sara Ahmed a while ago. Giunta goes above and beyond this commitment.

To sum things up, Andrea Giunta’s book is both a remarkable work and a brilliant promise. It is a corollary of thorough research, developed since the 1990s by the author (p. 56). In addition, it is an invitation for more researchers to enter this field of investigation, because as Giunta writes: “The cases analyzed here are fragments of an emancipatory imagination” (p. 15). Andrea Giunta’s research reveals itself as necessary and desired, as it is disobedient.

Notas

¹ María Luisa Bemberg (dir.), *Juguetes*, 1978. Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5AjjBv_2bo (accessed 05-21-2018). All translations are my own.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *El segundo sexo*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999 [1949].

³ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, en Elizabeth C. Baker y Thomas B. Hess (ed.), *Art and Sexual Politics. Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*. London, Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1973, pp. 1-39 [1971].

⁴ Lisa Tickner, “Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference,” *Genders*, no. 3, November 1988, p. 92.

⁵ Dalmeet Singh Chawla, “Men cite themselves more than women do”, *Nature*, 5 July 2016. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/news/men-cite-themselves-more-than-women-do-1.20176> (accessed 20-03-2018).

⁶ Sara Ahmed tweet. Available at:

<https://twitter.com/sarahmed/status/843574390587604994?lang=en> (accessed 03-20-2018).