

## Evocations. Honouring the Memory of Women Artists

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### Abstract

The life and work of women artists has been, more often than not, neglected and excluded from history. There are artists, groups, authors and institutions around the world who have made and continue to make efforts to shed light on excluded artists by showing their work in exhibitions, compilations, websites or social media accounts. The ongoing project *Evocations* aims to honour some of those forgotten artists through the creation of artwork inspired by them. Until now, this project has consisted of four participatory public performance art pieces and a collective exhibition honouring eleven women artists who have not been properly recognised for their achievements. By undertaking these participatory performances in public space locations, the art, ideas and lives of these women are drawn into the daily life of contemporary Mexico.

**Keywords:** women artists, feminism, art, public performance, Mexico

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## Introduction

The systematic erasure of women and their contributions in all areas of life is an issue that continues to occupy debate worldwide. But it is usually put in the spotlight by other women who create exhibitions, seminars, websites, maps and a wide array of publications. There is still so much work to be done to give women the place they deserve in history and in the contemporary art world.

The ways women have been excluded from the art world have varied. To summon just a few examples: male artist groups who obstruct women's work like the Mexican muralist Maria Izquierdo; husbands who appropriate their wife's creations like the painter Margaret Keane or writer Colette; other husbands who feel threatened by a woman's talent, like Elena Garro's, forcing her to burn her writing; women who, for fear of not being published or shown in exhibitions, had to change their names or use only their initials, like the now justly recognised writer Joanne Kathleen Rowling. As Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own*: "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" (Woolf, 1929, p. 51). In 1950, Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos wondered in her thesis *On Feminine Culture* if women produce their own culture, if it is different from that of men, and if not, what are the reasons. She observed that the world of culture was closed for women, because "its inhabitants are all of male sex" (Castellanos, 2005, p.22). It has been historically such a difficult world to trespass for women, that she refers as smugglers to those who have been able to get in, like Safo, Santa Teresa, Virginia Woolf or Gabriela Mistral. She could later count herself into that outstanding smugglers' list.

Almost two decades later, the American poet and feminist activist Robin Morgan coined the term Herstory, to "emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (Women's Media Center, no date), drawing attention to the fact that the official history has been mostly written by men, registering only what they have considered of value and not taking into account most of women's contributions in any realm of life. This also becomes clear in Linda Nochlin's essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971), where she questions why women are not usually found in catalogues, exhibitions, books and other ways of preserving the memory of humanity.

While these examples are in the past, many exhibitions in the present still include far more men than women, except when they are devoted exclusively to women's work. For example, in 2016 the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico City organised the exhibition *Exploratory Exercises 2. Contemporary Creators in the MACG Collection*, which occupied one floor of the building with work made by women. However, in the rest of the exhibitions there were barely a couple of women included. What is the point of making women visible in the arts as a theme if we continue to not be taken into account as creators in the normal context? These exclusive exhibitions are of no use if they don't help create real awareness of how women have been historically excluded and continue to be. In this regard, the Australian feminist Germaine Greer's words in *The Obstacle Race* (1979) still ring true that books and exhibitions dedicated to women are usually done in a condescending tone, without a deep study of the creators and their context.

### **Shed light on each other**

Nowadays in Mexico, women are a majority in art schools, but a minority in exhibitions. According to data from 2017, in the National Autonomous University of Mexico women were 65% in the art and design schools, but only 40% of the work shown in the main museums in Mexico were made by women (CIEG, 2017).

There are, however, some institutions that are addressing the issue. For example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington has had a campaign since 2017 in which they ask people if they can name five women artists (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2017). Most people are able to immediately mention Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe in second place, and only a few get past that point, making evident how little the general public knows about this subject. The museum also created the #5womenartists with the intention of spreading the campaign through social media. In view of the generally discouraging panorama, many artists have decided to create their own spaces and organisations in order to make themselves present outside the patriarchal artistic system that takes so little account of them.

In the 70's, feminist artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro were founders of the California Institute of the Arts Feminist Art Program and created Womanhouse, an installation and performance space dedicated to women's art. Judy Chicago, with the help of many other women, created *The Dinner Party* (1979) installation, a room-size triangular table displaying ceramic plates and tablecloths in honour of 1038 women of history. Now, in her older age, Judy Chicago is a well celebrated feminist artist and *The Dinner Party* is permanently on show at the Brooklyn Museum, New York which shows a growing interest and recognition of women's art in society. A less known precursor of this ground-breaking work was Virginia Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell, who painted *Famous Women Dinner Service*, 50 plates with the portraits of important women in history. Mary Beth Edelson in *Some Living American Women Artists* (1972) used Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to create a collage with 80 women artists alive at the time, making them visible and celebrating them.

The activist collective Guerrilla Girls carry out exhaustive research on the situation of women in the arts. For example, their poster *Do women have to be naked to enter the Met?* (1989) criticised the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where from the art on show, women were found almost exclusively as nude models in art made by men, but rarely did they appear as authors. Sadly, even today the Guerrilla Girls continue to draw attention to ongoing inequities in the arts.

In Mexico, Monica Mayer's Pinto Mi Raya (I Paint My Line) art archive, the online women's museum MUMA Museo de Mujeres, the exhibition series Mujeres Mirando Mujeres (Women Looking At Women), Colectivo Nopalitos fanzines, Mala Fanzine, Mujeres Vinileras dj collective, the instagram account Ellas Artes, Mujeres Artistas (Them Arts, Women Artists), Circulo Literario de Mujeres (Women's Literary Circle), Tejiendo Redes en Teatro (Weaving Nets in Theatre) and Colectivo Habitación Propia (Own Room Collective), are just a handful of examples of self-managed artistic projects that aim to spread the creations and skills of women artists.



Figure 1. *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago 1979. Photo by Cynthia Granados.

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This is some of the ‘Herstory’ that my work builds on. From my concern about the excessive number of women artists still hidden in the shadows of history, I created *Evocations*, an artistic project with the aim of giving light to deceased Mexican - or international who lived and worked in Mexico- women artists and writers who have not been properly recognised. *Evocations* consists of honouring these women by creating art inspired by them.

### Andrea

The first work I created for *Evocations* in collaboration with Yunuen Diaz was about Andrea Villarreal, presented in the 2017 Foro Mujeres Lideres de Mexico (Women Leaders of Mexico Forum) in the state of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, where Andrea was born in 1881. The performance was done at the Tecnologico de Monterrey University as part of our presentation of the exhibition and fundraiser Nasty Women Mexico.

I chose Andrea because she was an early feminist at the beginning of the 20th Century as well as an active part of the Mexican Revolution, both through her writing and with actual weapons. She and her sister Teresa founded the feminist magazine *Revista Mujer Moderna* (Modern Woman Magazine) in 1910 while they were in exile in Texas, U.S.A. In it, she exhorted women to be rebellious beyond the whim of men.



Figure 2. *Evocations*: Andrea Villarreal, 2017.



Figure 3. *Evocations*: Andrea Villarreal, 2017.

The participative performance invited the attendants, mostly women, to put on a mask to embody Andrea's spirit, write on a piece of paper what they thought was the revolution Mexico needs now, and throw it to a bullseye with a slingshot made of

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clothespins. We decided to use these materials related to housework to allude to the so-called “women’s work”, that artists like Andrea were able to challenge, demonstrating their capability as women goes far beyond house chores. Being this an academic event, we were hoping our invitation to participate in the performance would not be rejected, and we were happily surprised to see that many women of different ages were eager to take part in the action.

### Pita

The second performance for *Evocations* was about Guadalupe Amor, best known as Pita Amor, a Mexican poet who lived from 1918 to the year 2000. Although her poetry was recognised and celebrated during her life and after, in her old age she was constantly ridiculed for being rude to people and dressing extravagantly and was especially recognised for wearing big flowers on her head. I was invited to create a performance for the celebration of the centenary of her birth at *Un Paseo por los Libros* (A Stroll Through Books), a long hallway that connects two of the main subway stations in the centre of Mexico City and is home to dozens of bookshops and public cultural activities.



Figure 4. *Evocations: Pita Amor*, 2018. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

The performance focuses on Pita’s first poem *I am my own home* (1945), which she said to have written with an eyeliner on a napkin after arriving home from a party at the age of 27. In this poem she portrays her sadness and anxiety inside a “round house” of “round loneliness”. Using the napkin and the round shape as references for the performance, I wrote each stanza of the poem on a napkin and placed them on the floor forming a circle around me.



Figure 5 - 6. *Evocations: Pita Amor*, 2018. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

I invited passers-by to step into the circle with me one person at a time, I took one of the napkins, read the stanza aloud and folded it to form a flower which I gave to the person to take away. This way, I was dissolving Pita's round loneliness by sharing her poem with others. The performance ended with the last napkin left on the floor as a shrine, along with a natural flower that I wore in my hair.

This being such a public space where people are usually in a rush, I thought it would be harder to draw an audience's attention. However, it was interesting to see the reactions: people staying close by to see what was happening but not too close so they would be called to participate, some that later decided to approach the action, others who were passing quickly but came to me without hesitating when I called them with a gesture of my hand and left as quick as they arrived after participating, and a lovely lady who I didn't realise wanted to be called and didn't approach me until her friend told me about her and I invited her in. These are the interactions that I most value from my performances in public space, when I am able to interrupt people's daily routine with something that surprises them, makes their day different and maybe leaves them thinking about what just happened.

### **Frida**

For Frida Kahlo's birth anniversary in 2021 I created a performance inspired by the corset she had to wear throughout her life after the serious tram accident she suffered when she was 18 years old. While Kahlo is well known, it can be argued that she is viewed as a less important artist than her famous husband Diego Rivera.

*Corset* was also a participative performance, touching on the different uses and meanings of this item. It was presented at the open-air cinema at the Parque Hundido park in Mexico City, before the projection of the 1983 Mexican movie *Frida, Naturaleza Viva* (*Frida, Living Nature*). I made three different corsets: the medical, made of bandages, the restrictive elegance made of shiny fabrics and the patriarchal gaze made of paper *mache* with eyes drawn on it – which I wore one on top of the other. The action consisted of taking each of the corsets off and giving the pieces to the women in the

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audience, following the soundtrack of different women saying words related to the corsets.



Figure 7. *Corset*, 2021. Photo by Lizette Abraham.



Figure 8 - 9. *Corset*, 2021. Photo by Lizette Abraham.

The last piece of clothing under the corsets referred to freedom. It had Frida's painting *Xochitl, Flower of Life* (1938) printed on it and 8 artificial red flowers. I chose 8 women from the audience, took them on the stage with me and gave them each a flower while saying "thank you" to them. It was important for me in this action con connect in the end with other women, as to recognise and set us free from the pain we go through because of the gender stereotypes imposed on us from the moment we are born.



## Annette

*Evocations* started as an individual project but was later done with the Colectivo Habitacion Propia (Own Room Collective), including myself and seven other artists.



Figure 10. *Evocations* by Colectivo Habitacion Propia, 2021.

Photographer Lizette Abraham chose to honour playwright and puppeteer Mireya Cueto (1922-2013), painter Laura Aranda did a portable mural about poet and muralist Aurora Reyes (1908-1985), Graciela Robles, who creates wire sculptures, made one inspired by Cordelia Urueta's (1908-1995) paintings, illustrator Gabriela Colmenero honoured painter Susana Sierra (1942-2017), painter Fernanda Reyna did etchings inspired by monumental sculptress and arts manager Helen Escobedo (1934-2010), Radharani Torres created a live action work about Estrella Carmona's (1962-2011) murals and the music she liked and printmaker Diana Suarez created etchings in honour of sculptress Naomi Siegmänn (1933-2018).

In my case, almost by luck I came across Annette Nancarrow thanks to getting a job managing a new artist residency in the house that she built in Mexico City. Annette was born in New York in 1907, studied arts in Hunter College and The University of Columbia and became a painter, muralist and jewellery maker. After visiting Mexico in 1935 she decided to move to this country the year after.

I was very fortunate to meet Annette's son Luis Stephens and daughter-in-law Karen de Luca, who showed me her artwork and told me about her life. One particular anecdote caught my interest: she was the first woman to have a solo show at the prestigious Galeria de Arte Mexicano (Gallery of Mexican Art) in 1947, where she suffered a bad

experience, the details are unknown, but it caused her to decide never to exhibit in Mexico again.

My performance titled *A Necklace for Annette* is a ritual piece to symbolically heal Annette's wounds. I wondered what could have happened to her and pondered about all the obstacles that women face in the art world only for being women. With this question I interviewed artists and arts managers in Mexico and New York, confirming that most of us have experienced some kind of discrimination, harassment or patronising attitudes while trying to make our way in the arts. I composed a soundtrack out of the most relevant phrases from the interviews, which played during the performance.

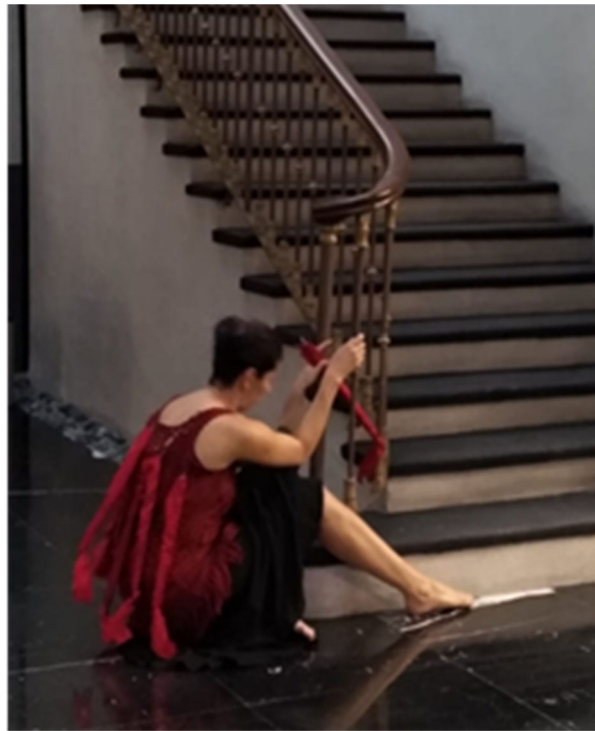


Figure 11. *A Necklace for Annette*, 2021. Photo by Gabriela Colmenero.

In her paintings Annette recurrently portrayed bulls and bullfighters, so in the performance I appear with wooden sticks covered in red fabric hanging from my back, referring to a bull that has been hurt by the bullfighter's banderillas.

The action starts with me walking heavily through the space, trying to take off the banderillas and approaching some members of the audience for help. After I have them all in my hands, I peel off the red fabric from them revealing decorations with bright coloured jewellery and craft materials, as an alchemical act to transform pain into beauty. I tie up all the red pieces of fabric to create a rope and hang the banderillas on it. I put it on as a necklace while I look into a mirror with the shape of Annette's bust – with her characteristic short curly hair –, as a sign of support to her and all the women artists going through rough times. I leave the necklace on the mirror to create the final altar and walk away.



Figure 12 - 13. A Necklace for Annette, 2021. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

*Evocations* is an ongoing project that aims to give voice to and honour female artists, not only by sharing the work they did but through the work of contemporary creators who are also building our place in the art world, both in public space and galleries. Our ancestors inspire us to stay on track. Hopefully one day these rescue exercises will no longer be necessary, when the artists who have remained in the shadows receive the recognition they deserve.

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