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# Care Work as Art Work: Polvo de Gallina Negra in the Context of the Feminist Movement in 1980s Mexico–City

*Tonia Andresen*\*

## **Abstract**

This article discusses the artistic practice of Polvo de Gallina Negra, Mexico's first feminist art collective, which was closely related to the women's movement in the 1980s. I focus on their gesture of defining maternal work as prerequisite for their artistic work, a strategic move that criticizes the underlying distinctions between private and public, productive and reproductive, thereby introducing new strategies and techniques into the realm of art. Through denaturalizing care work in their performance *Madre por un día* (Mother for a day) (1987) they articulate a critique of the underlying paradigms of art and labor. Furthermore, their practice poses questions concerning an art historical preoccupation with political movements and activist art and, as I argue, demands a methodological expansion within the discipline.

**Keywords:** Polvo de Gallina Negra • care work • art and labor • feminism in Mexico • performance art

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On October 7, 1983, three artists — Maris Bustamante, Mónica Mayer, and Herminia Dosal — joined a protest against sexual violence in Mexico-City. During the march, they presented their 20-minute performance *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz* (Peace means respecting the rights of other people's bodies) (fig. 1) in which they displayed a small exhibition of images demanding the right to physical integrity as well as an end to sexist representations in the media due to their complicity in the degradation of women (Sánchez 2004, 188).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they prepared a magic potion to cause 'mal de ojo', the evil eye, to possible violators. Afterwards they distributed small sachets that contained said potion to the protestors. The recipe (fig. 2) was later published in the feminist magazine *Fem* (1984) and functions as starting point of the first Mexican feminist art collective.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Receta para causarle el mal de ojo a los violadores o el respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz* (Recipe to give the evil eye to rapists, or peace is respecting the rights of the bodies of others), 1983. Documentation of performance, b/w photograph, 16.8 x 13.2 cm © Pinto mi Raya Archivo, Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma. Accessed January 19, 2024. <https://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra/feminismo-y-formacion/item/12-polvo-de-gallina-negra>.

1 My description of the performance is based on the information of a newspaper article in *Excelsior* in 1983 cited by Araceli Barbosa Sánchez, cf. ead., "La violencia de género: su representación en el arte mexicano".

2 Herminia Dosal left the collective shortly afterwards, it was then sustained by Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer.

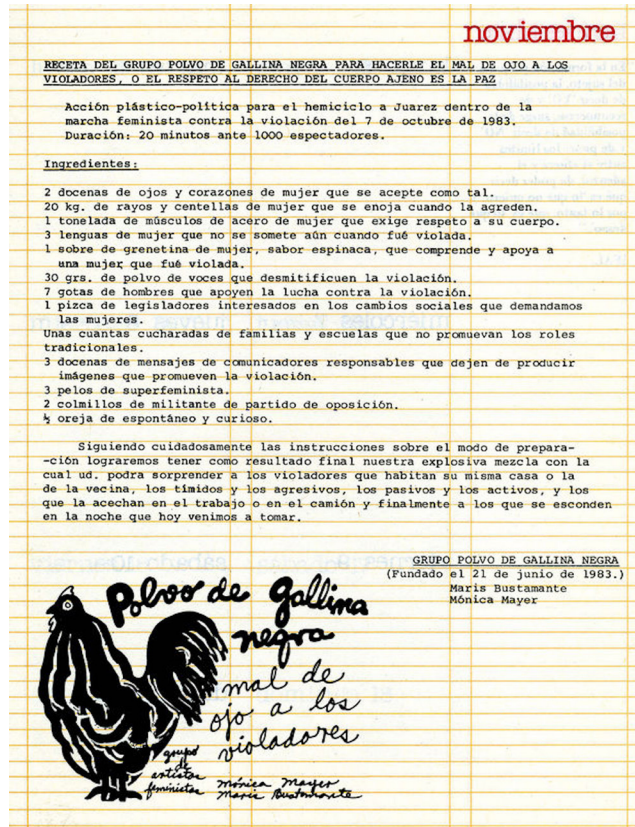


Fig. 2. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Receta contra el mal de ojo* (Recipe against the evil eye), 1984, Photocopy of feminist daily planner published by Centro para Mujeres, 25 x 21.5 cm © Pinto mi Raya Archivo, Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma. Hammer Museum, Digital Archive, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*. Accessed January 19, 2024. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/art/art/receta-contra-el-mal-de-ojo-recipe-against-the-evil-eye-with-herminia-dosal>.

*El respeto al derecho del cuerpo...* shows the close relationship between the artists and the feminist movement at large which raises certain methodological questions for an art historical discussion of their work: How does the interpretation or analysis change or differ when an art work is made precisely for a demonstration and therefore a political context? Does the political become a concept? A work of art? Or is it rather that the underlying point of origin is not to make 'art' but politics? While nowadays it is common, especially in feminist art exhibitions, to integrate political posters or flyers,<sup>3</sup> Polvo de Gallina Negra understood their practice decidedly as feminist *art*. This included a questioning of artistic techniques and strategies which were understood as decisive to formulate an artistic critique of certain role ascriptions as well as discriminations in the art field. Therefore, I will contextualize Polvo de Gallina Negra's practice with the Mexican feminist movement at the time as well as their connection to the art movements of Los Grupos, which arose in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968. Following their founding potion-recipe Polvo de Gallina Negra began to focus increasingly on their situation as mothers, care workers and art workers within their long-term project *¡Madres!* (1983–87) questioning the distinction between care and art work as well as critiquing

3 An example is the collective See Red Women's Workshop from the UK that created posters for the women's movement in the 1970s.

the underlying ideological assumptions attached to maternal work. Artists from Latin America have increasingly been concerned with care work since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I adopt care work as a framework for art historical research, referring to the works of feminist scholars such as Andrea Giunta and Helen Molesworth.<sup>5</sup> The latter considers such works as an “engagement with questions of value and institutionality that critique the conditions of everyday life as well as art” (Molesworth 2000, 82). This critique of the so-called private sphere is a recurrent issue of feminist politics that emerged concurrently, not only in Mexico but in whole Latin America.<sup>6</sup> In the course of capitalist development, the work categorized as ‘female’ is excluded from the realm of productivity as feminist scholars show and therefore not considered as ‘work’. This is due to the fact that care does not ‘produce’ a product but rather maintains a status quo. Early on Argentine-Cuban feminist Isabel Largaña identified the invisibility of care work as a main factor in the foundation of women’s oppression (1972, 177–200). The Mexican feminist magazine *La Revuelta* prioritized the topic in 1977 and in addition to Largaña also referred to Italian feminists Silvia Federici and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa who were fighting for the recognition of care work with their demand: “wages for housework” (see Toupin 2018). Furthermore, it was a text by Marta Acevedo that animated women to meet in groups to discuss their own experiences as well as question their assigned role as ‘natural’ care workers (1970).<sup>7</sup> This practice is also recurrent in Polvo de Gallina Negra’s approach that set their own experiences as mothers and art workers programmatically as conceptual basis for their artistic endeavors. Concludingly, their practice employs the feminist method of consciousness-raising while at the same time politicizing the private sphere through art in the public sphere questioning the distinctions between ‘private’ and ‘public’, between ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’, a distinction that is also recurrent today.

4 This research has been conducted as part of the project *Cleaning, Cooking, Caring. Care Work in Art in Western and Eastern Europe, the USA, and Latin America since 1960* at the Institute of Art History, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. It is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), led by Prof. Dr. Anne Söll and Dr. Friederike Sigler. An exhibition was also created as part of the project, which was on view at the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat in Bottrop, 22 October 2023 until 3 March 2024, see also the comprehensive exhibition catalog: Friederike Sigler, Linda Walther (eds.), *Kochen Putzen Sorgen. Care-Arbeit in der Kunst seit 1960/ Cleaning Cooking Caring. Care Work in Art since 1960* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2024).

5 Helen Molesworth’s groundbreaking essay established care work as a framework with regard to the US-feminist art works of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly. See ead., “Art Work and House Work”, *October* 92 (2000): 71–97. For a discussion on Latin American feminist artists, see Andrea Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano. Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo* (Buenos Aires: siglo veintiuno editores, 2018); ead., “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975–1987”, *Artelogie* 5 (2013: Femmes créatrices en Amérique latine: le défi de synthétiser sans singulariser): 39–62. For a discussion of feminist works that deal with domestic and care work, see Giulia Lamoni, “(Domestic) Spaces of Resistance: Three Artworks by Anna Maria Maiolino, Letícia Parente and Anna Bella Geiger”, *Artelogie* 5 (2013: Femmes créatrices en Amérique latine: le défi de synthétiser sans singulariser): 422–436; Karen Cordero Reiman, “¡Madres! Reconfiguring ‘Abducted Motherhood’ in Mónica Mayer’s Personal and Collective Artwork,” in *Feminist visual activism and the body*, ed. Basia Sliwinska (New York: Routledge, 2021), 182–197. For a general discussion of Mónica Mayer’s work and Polvo de Gallina Negra in the context of Mexican feminist art, see for example Alberto McKelligan Hernández, “Mónica Mayer: Translocality and the Development of Feminist art in Contemporary Mexico” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2017); Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, *Women Made Visible. Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

6 In this context the differences between women from educated middle-classes and mainly Black and Indigenous working classes became obvious, especially concerning the delegation of care work as middle-class women were able to pay a worker to carry out said work. Lisette González Juárez points out that this conflict led to the establishment of a working group inside the Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer (MLM) concerning waged care work in 1978 that resulted in the establishment of the feminist group Colectivo Acción Solidaria con Empleadas Domésticas (CASED) that aimed to support domestic workers, cf. ead., “Trabajo Invisible. Trabajo doméstico: Reivindicación en el movimiento feminista mexicano,” in *Cartografías del feminismo mexicano, 1970–2000*, ed. Nora Nínive García, Mária Millán, Cynthia Pech (Ciudad de México: Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, 2007), 117–160, 132.

7 For a comprehensive text about domestic and care work in the context of the Mexican feminist movement, see Lisette González Juárez, as quoted in footnote 6. I thank Karen Cordero Reiman for the references.



## Egalité, Liberté, Maternité or Birth for Art's Sake

For *Egalité, Liberté, Maternité: Polvo de Gallina Negra attacks anew*, the artists designed seven postcards, 28 x 21.5 cm, which were sent out in an edition of 300. Letter #4 (fig. 4) features a large circle that looks like an egg cell, which is matched by drawn sperm swimming around between blocks of text. Above this is written in small letters “L’art pour l’art”, but the first “art” is crossed out and replaced by “birth”: “Birth for art’s sake”. Thus, they define themselves as “the only art group that has achieved pregnancy for purely artistic purposes”.<sup>8</sup>

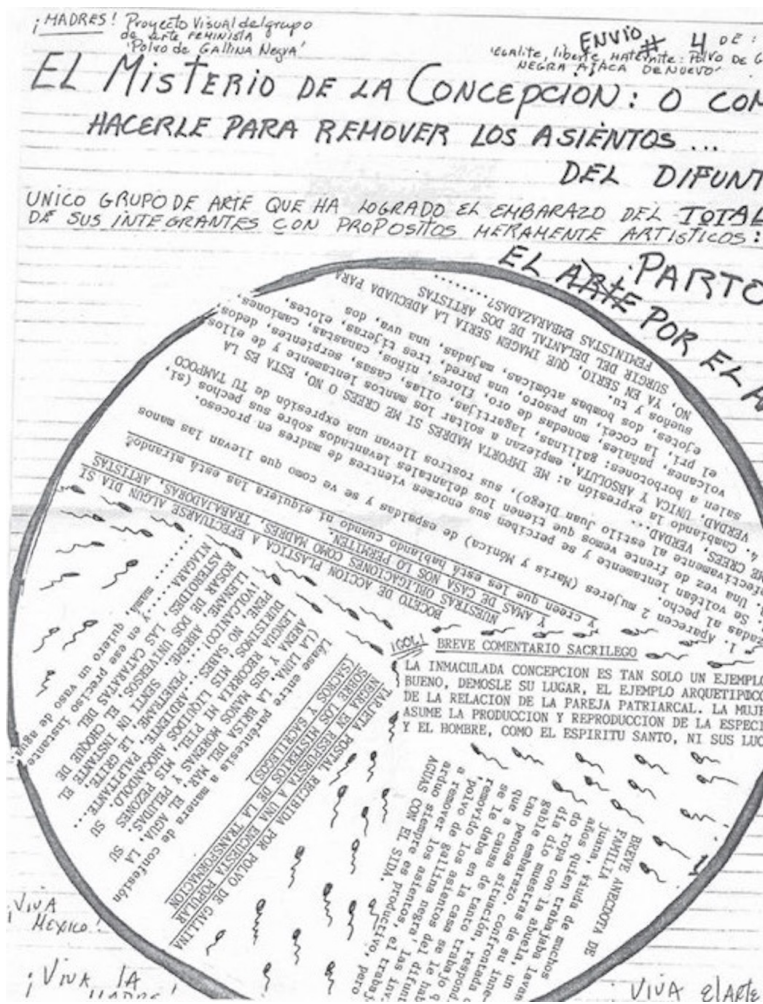


Fig. 3. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Egalité, liberté, maternité: Polvo de Gallina Negra ataca de nuevo* (Polvo de Gallina Negra attacks anew), 1984–87, Postcard #4: *El Misterio de la concepción o como hacerle para remover los asientos... del difunto* © Pinto mi Raya Archivo, Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma. Rosana Blanco Cano. *Cuerpos Disidentes del México Imaginado: Cultura, género, etnia y nación más allá del proyecto posrevolucionario*. (Madrid/Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert, 2012), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Orig: “[Ú]nico grupo de arte que ha logrado el embarazo del TOTAL de sus integrantes con propósitos meramente artísticos”, translation by the author. If not stated otherwise, all following translations from Spanish into English are made by the author.

One of the text blocks is titled “Sketch for a plastic action to be performed one day when our obligations as mothers, workers, artists, and housewives allow us to do so”. It outlines the instructions for a performance in four steps. Two women (Maris and Mónica) stand with their backs to the audience, their arms crossed. Slowly, they turn around so that their pregnant bellies emerge from under the aprons they wear. With serious and determined expressions, they lift their artificial bellies, releasing a wide variety of objects and things: Hens, pots, houses, snakes, fingers, three pairs of scissors, two dreams and you. At the end of the instructions, it says: “No, but seriously, what image would be appropriate to emerge from the apron of two pregnant feminist artists?” The fact that the performance is destined to be *performed one day*, when their various roles as mothers, artists, care workers, and wage laborers allow it, sarcastically, and humorously denounces the artists’ multiple burdens. Literary scholar Rosana Blanco Cano points out that the objects Polvo de Gallina Negra drop from their belly dummies are traditionally used in purification rituals against the ‘evil eye’.<sup>9</sup> However, here the ‘evil’ is not the result of a diffuse other but the result of social stigmatizations that the artists make visible through the objects, which at the same time invoke the domestic-private sphere and thus the work performed by women.<sup>10</sup> The problem of representation that is ingrained in care work is put forth by the artists in their closing question and can be understood as a search for an adequate artistic strategy (cf. Vishmidt 2017, 63). In contrast to male coded industrial or agricultural work they cannot refer to an already established tradition as has been developed in the context of Mexican muralism, for example (cf. Anreus et. al. 2012; Lear 2014, 235–255). At the same time, it could also be understood as a mischievous attempt to grasp the discrepancies between care and art work as diametrically opposed and the devaluation attached to care work.

The problem of the double burden is discussed by the artists in one of their recipes, similar to the first recipe in the context of *El respeto al derecho del cuerpo....* These differ from the letters in so far as they were not sent out to a specific audience but rather functioned as manifests. In Recipe #3 with the title *To continue in the struggle of Feminist Art, or even if they push us away, or if they cut us off, we will not leave*, is written:

If you, as a feminist artist, find yourself at a certain moment with the fact [...] that art critics no longer mention you. That you yourself begin to be flooded with doubts about your art or your militancy [...]. Or if you begin to seriously feel the effects, no longer of the double burden (care and waged work), not even of the triple burden (care, waged and artistic), that is to say, when you find yourself on the threshold of the quadruple burden (care, waged, artistic and collective artistic work): DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED, DO NOT LET YOURSELF BE CRUSHED [...].<sup>11</sup>

9 The name ‘Polvo de Gallina Negra’ means translated ‘Black Hen Powder’ and refers to a powder sold on Mexican markets as a remedy against the ‘evil eye’. According to the artists, they chose this name as protection for their own feminist endeavors in a patriarchal society, as well as company in such a difficult undertaking, see MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo and UNAM, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mónica Mayer. *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: Una Exposición Retrocolectiva/When in doubt ask: A retrocollective exhibit* (Mexico-City/Barcelona: Editorial RM, 2016), 60–61.

10 The objects also refer to the work of the Curanderas, female healers, in Mexico.

11 Orig.: “Si Ud., como artista feminista se encuentra en un momento determinado con que está o se siente sola [...] que los críticos del arte ya no la mencionan. Que Ud. misma empieza a inundarse de dudas sobre su arte o su militancia [...]. O si empieza a sentir seriamente los efectos, ya no de la doble jornada (trabajo doméstico y trabajo asalariado), ni siquiera de la triple jornada (doméstico, asalariado y artístico), es decir, cuando se encuentra Ud. en el umbral de la CUADRUPLE JORNADA: (doméstico, asalariado, artístico y artístico en grupo) NO SE DESANIME, NO SE DEJE APLASTAR [...]”. The manifesto was written for the performance event *La Fiesta de Quince Años* at the Academy San Carlos, 18 September 1984.

The artists negotiate not only their precarious conditions of production but also the structural invisibility that accompanies a feminist art practice. This approach is related to the formation of feminist art in Mexico in the 1980s, both on a practical and theoretical level.<sup>12</sup> Women artists were not only discriminated against by male artists and/or critics but also isolated within the political-feminist movement, since activists usually understood the art field as bourgeois (cf. Magali Lara in Barbosa 2008, 157; Aceves Sepúlveda 2019, 171). An exception is the beforehand mentioned issue *La Mujer en el Arte* (Woman in Art) (1984) of the feminist magazine *Fem.*

## Feminist Art and the Feminist Movement

The magazine was founded in 1976 by Margarita García Flores and Alaíde Foppa and became one of the most influential feminist publications in Latin America (Aceves Sepúlveda 2019, 80). The cover of the issue *La Mujer en el Arte* (fig. 4) drawn by Magali Lara shows a clothesline with dress and tights, underneath it says in handwritten letters: “Llevo mi destino cosido al cuerpo” (I carry my destiny sewn to my body), and in brackets below: “luego lo lavo” (I clean it later). It is striking that the cover directly refers to care work, that is washing clothes, in the context of feminist art.



Fig. 4. Cover of the magazine *Fem* IX, no. 33, 1984. Drawing by Magali Lara. Foto: Screenshot.

12 Female artists began organizing exhibitions collectively since the 1970s such as “Collage Intímo”, Casa del Lago, 1977; “Lo normal”, La Casa de la Juventud, 1977; “Muestra colectiva feminista”, La Galería Contraste, 1978.



This demonstrates in a broader sense that not only the question of a ‘female’ aesthetic as well as a discussion of women artists was at the core of the feminist art movement but also the working conditions that were directly addressed in the magazine by the group Tlacuilas & Retrateras which had conducted a survey among female artists.<sup>13</sup> What is less astonishing is that the editors in the editorial note, not without irony, stress that readers might be “surprised that in this issue dedicated to the arts, we address such prosaic problems such as the rising price of meat and the shortage of milk”, thereby reinforcing a conception of art as detached from everyday problems such as the economic realities faced at the time.<sup>14</sup> This shows the difficult nature of the connection between the two fields, which Mayer later reflected on claiming that she and her colleagues were “not been able to find our natural public among feminists. Either we have not been able to respond to their needs, or they have not understood that we are not only interested in politics. Art is our main concern” (Mayer 1998/99, 53).

Even though feminist art still needed an explanation at the time, the issue of *Fem* poses important questions and ideas concerning a feminist art practice. In her text “Proposal for a feminist art in Mexico”, Mayer defines feminist art not only as the “objects produced by artists but the critical influence of feminist culture in the arts,” (1984, 12; translation by author) arguing that, feminist art not necessarily emerges from militancy but implicates a questioning of the “essence of art” (ibid.). This meant that new strategies and practices that lead to a broadening of what was considered ‘artistic practice’ needed to be developed that included a closer relation to the public. In this context she highlights the importance of an art that directly relates to the everyday, especially the daily life of women (ibid., 13). She then identifies different forms of feminist art, emphasizing the importance of an activist art as an integral part of feminist mobilizations acting in favor of a transformation of visual realities as well as negating the idea that art should act autonomously without content and political affiliation (cf. ibid., 14). In contrast to the editor’s statement, the issue works against the perception of art as separated from the political struggles of equality but rather makes the art field as an expression of patriarchal oppression visible. This went along with a connection to the wider social as well as working conditions experienced by the artists, hence the inherent reproduction of a gendered labor division. What remained invisible in this context, however, was the class-specific affiliation of the artists, which was not addressed throughout the issue.

The working conditions female artists faced at the time were scandalized by the collective Tlacuilas & Retrateras who identified the assigned role as mothers and wives as one of the main reasons that made it particularly difficult for them: “[...] it is evident that their creativity must be directed towards the home and the family” (Tlacuilas & Retrateras 1984, 42). Consequently, their ascription to care work is cited as a reason for the low number of female artists, since, unlike their male colleagues, they cannot devote themselves fully to their artistic activities and,

13 The group consisted of Consuelo Almeda, Karen Cordero Reiman, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Lorena Loaiza, Patricia Torres, Nicola Elizabeth Valenzuela.

14 Aceves Sepúlveda suggests that the statement is also to be understood in the context of efforts by middle class feminist groups trying to establish wider coalitions among working class and indigenous groups, cf. ead., *Women Made Visible. Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City*, 172.

in exceptional cases, hardly receive any recognition for their work. Critiques of the expected role as mother and care worker are therefore connected to the wider feminist struggles in Mexico. Not without coincidence, as Karen Cordero Reiman notes, one of the first protests organized by the group *Mujeres en Acción Solidaria* took place on Mother's Day in 1971: It opposed the ideological charge of motherhood (cf. Cordero 2021, 183).<sup>15</sup> Polvo de Gallina Negra's performance *Madre por un día* (Mother for a Day) (1987) is situated precisely in this context and is a striking example of the new strategies and practices that became defining for the feminist art movement in the 1980s.

## "Mother for a Day" (1987) Or Denaturalizing Care Work

The performance took place on August 28, 1987, on the talk show "Nuestro Mundo" (Our World) in collaboration with the host Guillermo Ochoa. The program was a popular format of the Televisa channel, consisting of a mixture of short news and interviews. Aceves Sepúlveda states that even though Televisa's productions and the corporation itself were one of the main bastions for the reproduction of conservative and mainstream views on gender relations in Mexico, they were also, on some rare occasions, a place of experimentation (Aceves Sepúlveda, 69).

This was the case with *Madre por un día*, one of the best-known Mexican feminist performances today. Maris Bustamante had already been invited in 1979 by Ochoa to his program because of her work *La Patente del Taco*. After she patented the intellectual copyright of the taco, he discovered it after reading print coverage about her action. They kept in contact and she also appeared as a guest on his show in 1983 with the 18 minutes long performance *Las amas de casa* (The Housewives). The performance consisted of Bustamante wearing different aprons on top of each other, each one filled with domestic items, such as a slice of cake or disposable handkerchiefs. It reminds slightly of the already described performance in the letter #4. With the action Bustamante not only made visible the objects or work tools that are used and needed to carry out domestic and care work, but also the social status of the housewife which could be seen by the different textures of the fabric of the aprons. These, as Araceli Barbosa states, constitute the uniform of the women in the artist's house (cf. Barbosa 2004, 66).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Bustamante expressed in the program that she wanted to dedicate the performance to all the housewives, thus revaluing the work they carried out on a daily basis that was often not considered as such (cf. *ibid.*).

<sup>15</sup> The feminist movement was divided into roughly two ideological currents, liberal feminists who believed in changing the state constitution and socialist feminists who understood women's oppression as tied to the capitalist productive system. The letter was also concerned with the realities of indigenous and working-class women as opposed to their own middle-class backgrounds. Opinions on the extent to which there were overlaps between feminist groups and the popular labor movements of indigenous women still differ today. Marta Zapata Galindo argues that the Mexican feminist movement did not succeed in establishing alliances between the different actors (cf. ead., "Feminist Movements in Mexico: From Consciousness-Raising Groups to Transnational Networks," *Feminist Philosophy in Latin America and Spain 189: 1–19*) while Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda pleads for a more differentiated discussion (cf. ead. 2019, 126–127).

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to access the performance myself. My analysis is based on the description Barbosa makes in her book *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México. Una perspectiva de género*, 65–71.

Polvo de Gallina Negra's performance begins with a short interview in which the artists explain that the goal of their foundation was to deconstruct images of women conveyed by the media, especially the depiction of motherhood (fig. 5-6), because mothers have been represented primarily by male artists, who do not reflect the experiences of women, but rather their own ideas and projections.



Figs. 5–6. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Madre por un día* (Mother for a day), 1987, Video, color, sound, 17 minutes, 27 seconds. Video-Stills © Pinto mi Raya Archivo, Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma. Screenshots.

Furthermore, they explain their project *¡Madres!* and frame their parallel pregnancies in cooperation with their husbands as prerequisite as they already did in letter #4. The moderator, Guillermo Ochoa, replies in disbelief and thereupon Bustamante emphasizes their scientific accuracy, having born two girls just three months apart.<sup>17</sup> The male gaze on pregnancy that the artists try to dismantle with their project is justified by Ochoa with the statement that this might be simply “[...] because it is hard for men to get pregnant”.<sup>18</sup> The artists take this as an occasion to begin with their performance. Maris Bustamante defines the setting and declares: “[...] for us, the television program today is like the museum of modern art [...]”,<sup>19</sup> following Mónica Mayer introduces various props and tools for the transformation of Ochoa, who, as the performance title promises, is to become a mother for a day: a pregnant belly dummy sewn into an apron, a crown with the inscription *Reina del Hogar* (*Queen of the Home*), medicines that help against anxiety and dizziness as well as provoke cravings, a golden book for the first *hombre-madre* (*man-mother*) in which several objects are glued to

17 Orig.: “[...] Iniciamos este proyecto de la maternidad con la ayuda muy solidaria de nuestros esposos, que también son artistas, Víctor Lerma y Rubén Valencia, y ellos nos ayudaron y entonces decidimos embarazarnos para hacer un proyecto artístico sobre la maternidad [...] Lo hicimos tan científico porque la metodología no nos falló casi que su hija es mayor de la mía cuatro meses, ¡qué grado de cientifidad comprobado!”; English: “[...] The project began with the birth of our daughters, achieved with the support of our husband's, artists Víctor Lerma and Rubén Valencia who kindly helped us get started on the motherhood project. [...] We were so scientific about this, and our methodology was so perfect, that her daughter is only four months older than mine. Can you imagine the precision of our methodology! How scientific our group is!”

18 Orig.: “[...] es que el embarazo se les da poco a los hombres”.

19 Orig.: “[...] para nosotros la televisión hoy es como el museo de arte moderno [...]”.



protect against evil eyes, as well as everyday objects, such as a noodle. The artists hand said objects to Ochoa and ask him to put them on — Bustamante and Mayer themselves wear aprons with sewn-in abdominal prostheses — with the aim that he learns to understand them and their position. The audience laughs while Ochoa, visibly amused, puts on his apron and belly while Bustamante crowns him (fig 7-12). The presenter then begins to caress his pregnant belly and exclaims in a high-pitched voice to his co-host: “Ay, se movió! Tocále Toño, se movió!” (Touch it Toño, it moved!). He follows Bustamante’s instructions and takes the pills she hands him, flips through the little booklet, and then sits down in his chair, feigning fatigue. Without receiving any further instructions, let alone having to do any work, Mayer hands him his ‘mother diploma’, which confirms his successful participation in the performance, thus verifying being a mother for a day.



Figs. 7–12. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Madre por un día* (Mother for a day), 1987, Video, color, sound, 17 minutes, 27 seconds. Video-Stills © Pinto mi Raya Archivo, Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma. Screenshots.



The action, which lasts a total of seventeen minutes and is accompanied by the laughter of the audience, ends with a conversation between the collective and Ochoa, further dressed in apron, belly and crown, in which he asks skeptically: “[...] and, all of this is a work of art?”<sup>20</sup> That the approach was also bewildering to the viewers is shown by the numerous calls received in the aftermath of the broadcast, complaining about the artists’ ‘disrespectful’ treatment of motherhood (cf. Blanco Cano 2012, 68). The performance raises questions: Why does the title say *Mother for a day* when Ochoa is not urged to carry out care work such as cleaning or cooking but instead is ‘made’ pregnant? And why did the artists stage their intervention in the context of a television show, knowing that they would probably not be taken seriously?

It is interesting to note that they define the framework of the performance through the objects, but do not give Ochoa any concrete (working) instructions. Hence the presenter plays his role as a woman and mother by means of stereotypical images of pregnant women: He literally performs *reproductive labor* by portraying pregnant women as immobile and confined to the domestic sphere (“I feel like an unmade bed, embarrassed and out of place [...] I just want to curl up”; “[...] I don’t feel like doing nothing”<sup>21</sup>). It is noticeable that he indeed commits himself to being pregnant, but at the same time omits talking about other care activities that comprise maternal work, for example cooking. The latter is suggested by the noodle in the booklet presented by Bustamante as well as her following question, asking whether or not he knows how to cook. The fact that he does not elaborate this further gives the impression that the idea of doing care work is either very foreign to him, or that he simply does not know how to do it. Instead, he presents a stereotypical view of a middle- or upper-class housewife who possibly can delegate the dirty housework to a waged worker while being able to stay at home and not being forced to face a double burden as working-class women are. This view is not only created by Ochoa’s behavior but is furthermore forced by the objects brought along by the artists, which do not contain concrete care work tools such as cooking pots, cleaning rags or diapers, but rather represent pregnancy primarily in its physicality with the help of the belly and medication. Two aspects are at play here: First, by reducing maternal work to pregnancy — which could be understood as a humoristic and satirical reduction — the artists create an exaggerated enactment of masculinized behaviors, and assumptions about pregnancy, and the classed stereotypes related to bourgeois housewives. Second, the artists suggest that with the help of the tools anybody can be transformed into a reproductive worker and therefore a mother, denaturalizing care work as genuinely female labor. According to Andrea Giunta, maternal work is detached “from the niche defined by publicity and the feminine and is converted into a group of devices that disassemble the body” (Giunta 2013, 19). By wearing aprons during the performance themselves, Bustamante and Mayer appear in their dual function as care workers and artists, thus also addressing the double burden that they are exposed to in their everyday lives (a fact that they also mention in the interview with Ochoa). *Madre por un día* strategically appropriates the scope and accessibility of the talk show format to deconstruct motherhood as fulfillment in front of millions of viewers through

20 Orig.: “Y todo esto es una obra de arte?”

21 Orig.: “Me siento como cama sin hacer ahorita, como gallina comprada [...] me dan ganas de atejonarme”; “[...] no me dan ganas de hacer nada”.

whimsical masquerade and slapstick-like moments. The performance, as I argue, is not a critique of the constitution of care work itself, but rather discusses and performs the ideology that places maternal work as a ‘natural’ feminine task.<sup>22</sup> That Bustamante and Mayer decided to stage their performance in the context of Ochoa’s program is tied to the wider context of artistic strategies employed in Mexico at the time.

## Collectivizing Art: Los Grupos

In the aftermath of the student protests and its brutal suppression by the military a transformation began within artistic production. The second generation of political artists worked collectively, employed conceptual strategies, created happenings, theater-like performances as well as installations as new media. Los Grupos focused on the didactic functions of their art opening new spaces such as public places or the streets. They decisively conceptualized their practice as Pan-American and international in contrast to the state-sponsored muralist’s ideas of national identity.<sup>23</sup> Maris Bustamante was part of No Grupo established in 1977. The name already functioned as an ironic reaction to the other groups. In contrast No Grupo included individual works and was less concerned with creating ‘ideological-political’ works, rather they used humor, irony, and satire as strategies. That Bustamante combined these with a decidedly feminist stance becomes visible in her work *El pene como instrumento de trabajo (para quitarle a Freud lo macho)* (The Penis as an Instrument of Labor/To Make Freud Un-Macho) (1982), a mask made from cardboard that showed her face with cut-out eyes and mouth having a penis instead of a nose in the middle of her face. Combining humor with provocation Bustamante used this mask in her so-called *Montajes de Momentos Plásticos*, plastic actions, to challenge the consistent phallocracy as well as the Freudian theory of ‘penis envy’.<sup>24</sup> Although many women were part of the Grupos movement, Bustamante was one of few who included a gender critique in her works. In general, ‘women’s issues’ were considered marginal and were not part of artistic debates (cf. Aceves Sepúlveda 2019, 27; Carroll 2019, 60; Mayer in McCaughan 2002, 117).

Another central reference was the Chilean artist Alejandro Jodorowsky as Blanco Cano shows (2012, 49). In 1967, during his two-year stay in Mexico, Jodorowsky destroyed a piano in the course of an artistic action in a television show (cf. Medina 2007, 97–103). This was part of his concept “efímeros pánicos”, panic ephemerals, which mixed theatrical aspects with artistic ones in order to break down barriers between the disciplines.<sup>25</sup> He also aimed to achieve transformation through a moment of shock: “Panic comprises all those things that help man

22 For an in-depth discussion of the ideological attachments to motherhood in Mexican society with regard to Polvo de Gallina Negra’s and Mónica Mayer’s practice see: Cordero, “¡Madres! Reconfiguring ‘Abducted Motherhood’ in Mónica Mayer’s Personal and Collective Artwork”, 182–197 and Blanco Cano, *Cuerpos Disidentes del México Imaginado: Cultura, género, etnia y nación más allá del proyecto posrevolucionario*.

23 For an in-depth discussion of the movement see Jens Kastner, *Kunst, Kampf und Kollektivität. Die Bewegung Los Grupos im Mexiko der 1970er Jahre* (Berlin: Verlag Walter Frey, 2019).

24 Instead of using the US term ‘performance’ Bustamante and her colleagues called their actions ‘plastic actions’. Kastner concludes that, on the one hand, this avoided an art-historical categorization and, on the other, emphasized the local specificity and independence of the concept, cf. *ibid.*, 127.

25 Medina points out that even though the ‘efímeros’ were reminiscent of the happenings of the 1960s in New York, they had theater as its basis instead of an extension of a sculpture or an action, see *id.*, “Pánico recuperado”, in *La Era de la Discrepancia/The Age of Discrepancies. Arte y Cultura Visual en México/Art and Visual Culture in Mexico 1968–1997*, ed. Olivier Debroise (Mexico-City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 2007), 90–103 (90–97 Spanish; 97–103 English), here 92.

enlarge the limits of consciousness until it becomes integrated into existence itself” (ibid., 99). The latter could explain why Bustamante and Mayer decided to use Ochoa’s program as a way to provoke the audience and confront them with the stereotypes attached to maternal work, even though the public might not have understood or even felt repulsed by it. In this context the cabaret-like strategy Polvo de Gallina Negra employs using masquerade and a prosthetic belly dummy, similar to Bustamante’s ‘nose-penis’, broadens the distinctions between high and low culture, a distinction that is always bound to class discriminations. Through the inclusion of popular elements as well as the pedagogical focus *Madre por un día* expands the artistic practice of the Grupos with a decidedly feminist perspective, thereby challenging prevalent ideas of art as genuine bourgeois activity.

## Politicizing the ‘Private’ Sphere or Art and Politics Revisited

Concludingly the artists make care work as work visible, thereby demystifying the assumptions as women’s ‘natural role’ and thus their fulfillment. By denaturalizing and deconstructing maternal work in *Egalité, Liberté, Maternité* and *Madre por un día* Polvo de Gallina Negra not only reframes care work, but also artistic work, in terms of its social relevance. It becomes clear that ‘art’ does not function as an autonomous field but is dependent on repetitive and devalued activities such as cleaning and caring. The integration of birth/care work as art work, as programmatically formulated by the collective, represents a “counter-model to the modern paradigm of production [...] – to that of art and of work” as Friederike Sigler shows (2021, 213; translation by author). Thereby the collective not only focuses on the underlying ideologies attached to maternal work — that is care work perceived as ‘love’ rather than work — but also the gendered relations concerning artistic work — that is artistic production perceived as male coded ‘genius’ detached from daily life.<sup>26</sup> Putting front their own experiences and identities as women, mothers and artists which were often excluded from the public realm of art shows once more that the private is indeed political.

That said, how can we frame the activism employed by Polvo de Gallina Negra? As has become clear the artists did not merely produce their works to function a political cause or movement. Rather their aim was to introduce feminism into the realm of art. While the close relationship between the artists and the feminist movement (and not the other way around) is best understood as a “temporary overlap[s], micropolitical attempt[s] at the *transversal concatenation* of art machines and revolutionary machines” as Gerald Raunig puts it (2007, 15), their framing of art as a feminist activist strategy extends this: through their practice Polvo de Gallina Negra disassemble the distinctions between feminist political theory and artistic practice. Thereby the artists firstly conceptualized a feminist position as basis for their artistic production and secondly developed an artistic technique — here care work — that functioned as feminist activist strategy. Effectively, the artists employ a reconfiguration of both fields, as Katy Deepwell puts it (cf. 2020, 10). That Mayer was indeed committed to frame art as a political instrument shows her engagement in various feminist groups such as the Movimiento Feminista Mexicano (Mexican Feminist Movement) which was part of the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas (Coalition of Feminist Women) founded in 1976, as well as her master’s degree she received from Goddard College in Vermont in 1980 with a thesis called “Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool”.

26 This distinction went hand in hand with a definition of craft and artisanship as ‘feminine’ and therefore ‘lower’ art forms.

Polvo de Gallina Negra's practice poses various questions for further discussing what is perceived as 'activist' art or 'artivism' as well as political engagement. In our contemporary time in which a social practice belongs to a good form of the art establishment and where it seems as if the failures of a neoliberal capitalist system are tried to be diminished by exhibiting 'good critical' art the question arises how to properly frame activist strategies. Kastner suggests to look closely on the connections between political art and social movements as "political, even political-emancipatory art does not necessarily have to be activist and/or linked to social movements" (2019, 34; translation by author). In the case of feminist art Andrea Giunta's differentiation between artists who employ feminist strategies without being part of a broader feminist movement — subsuming those works under "artistic feminism" — and those who were "organically involved in formations of feminist activism" (2016, 86) such as Polvo de Gallina Negra, becomes especially useful. Circling back to the question of the beginning and the methodological implications that accompany the idea of framing art through politics or rather as base for an art historical discussion implies shifting the narrative towards an inclusion of political movements, activists and actions thereby disrupting art historical categorizations and mechanisms of exclusion. Polvo de Gallina Negra developed its practice at a time in which many artists tried to "redefine the links between militant politics and art practices" (Aceves Sepúlveda 2019, 184) and succeeded in reframing care work as art work thereby strategically stirring up the art field as well as feminist politics.



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