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# SUMMARY

## Feminist textiles against gender violence: Engrams of memory, testimony and affection

*Karen Saban\**

### Abstract

In the context of feminist struggles throughout Latin America, there is a form of political activism that has begun to take shape. It is based on diverse artistic expressions, such as performance, music, plastic arts, dance, and, among them, also embroidery or weaving practices, in which diverse material, textual and symbolic wefts are interwoven for the construction of new logics of social organization parallel to those of the heteropatriarchal system. Various women's collectives, from Mexico to Argentina, leave the domesticity of their homes to join the feminist slogan 'the private is political' and denounce the gender-based and feminicidal violence that plagues the present, making use of practices that had relegated women for centuries to invisibility and obedience. This article addresses the reappropriation of these same practices with aesthetic and political uses based on three reading hypotheses. These textiles are considered as applied arts to the work of political denunciation because: 1. they draw on millenary expressive and gestural forms, 'engrams of memory' (Aby Warburg 2010) transmitted and intensified through their transformation over time; 2. they make use of a triple code, given by their textual, figurative and haptic quality, opening up new affective possibilities of knowledge; and 3. they function as a testimonial document, in the three senses that the genre has known in its historical development: by the urgency of the denunciation it expresses, by its vicarious character in giving voice to the victims, and by its self-referential character.

**Keywords:** feminist textiles • feminicide • theory of affection • testimony • activism • collective memory

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Today dozens of feminist political weaving and embroidery collectives throughout Latin America use the textile arts to make visible, raise awareness, mobilise, and denounce the gender violence and feminicides that plague the continent, while highlighting the value of manual aesthetic practices historically produced by women and therefore devalued as art. These collectives emerged in the heat of the latest feminist wave that swept the continent in the 2000s, although the political use they make of textile arts goes back a long way and is linked to the civil human rights associations and organisations led by women in the 1970s and 1980s to denounce the crimes against humanity being committed by the dictatorships of the Southern Cone. Remember the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo or the Chilean “arpilleristas”. Both groups broke into the public space for strategic purposes, making a political issue out of the traditional role they had been assigned as female citizens devoted to the care and protection of the family in their homes. Both the white handkerchiefs and the “arpilleras” would travel beyond the borders of nation states, and the same form of struggle would be taken up in other contexts by other women’s human rights collectives in other parts of South America and the world. The memorialist practice of the arpilleras as a political struggle can also be found in Peru, Brazil, and even Ireland. A similar transculturation is evident in the case of the white handkerchiefs of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, which was dyed green during the 2000s in the feminist movement known as the “marea verde” due to the massive character it soon took on, travelling throughout Latin America.

Feminist embroidery is both a transcultural and transnational movement. It emerged in Mexico, with the collective Bordando feminicidio in turn inspired by the collective Bordando por la paz, which also emerged in Mexico City in 2011 from the experience of political activism of civil associations that sought to make visible and denounce the hundreds of thousands of disappeared left by the so-called “war on drugs” of the then President Felipe Calderón. This movement soon migrated to many other states and cities in Mexico and then to other countries, inside and outside Latin America. Groups of civilians, mostly women, gathered in the streets to embroider the names of the murdered in red, the disappeared in green, and the feminicides in purple on white handkerchiefs and make garlands or flags with which to demonstrate. Soon, gender violence became such a problem that the collective split up and founded Bordando feminicidios to concentrate on embroidering the names and stories of women murdered simply because they were women. The idea would travel again years later to Argentina with a similar impact, where the collective Tejiendo Feminismos would be founded, which emerged in 2019 in the heat of the struggles for the legalization of abortion. In this way, the disappeared of yesterday are linked to the feminicides of today in a violent plot without justice that persists to this day. This plot that crosses times and regions is the one that women are embroidering in these different aesthetic-political collectives.

There is a tragic and heroic narrative that links women to the practices of spinning. In Greek mythology, in the canonical literature and art of Western Europe, but also in the millenary traditions of the native peoples of Latin America and the world who pass on the wisdom of embroidery or weaving from generation to generation, the iconography that links women to cloth and thread has been central, sometimes to fix and reduce feminine identity, sometimes

to define the creative, communicative and political potential of women. And if this imagery, its reproduction, and representation have survived the times and have been renewing their potential until today, to be deconstructed and redefined in the textiles of our study, it is undoubtedly because it is part of the collective memory, as Aby Warburg understood it, that is, it concentrates an enormous amount of “expressive values” that function as “engrams of experience” (Warburg 2010, 3). The image of embroidery or weaving made by women would be a document in which a mnemonic imprint inherited from the past would have been captured, containing, and transmitting affects through a recurring type of expressions or gestures and which would, at the same time, awaken a series of emotions and associations that change depending on the context in the spectator. This mnemonic power awakened by images through the ages would be contained in the gestures and expressiveness in the representation of the human body, creating a “language of gestures” (Warburg 2010, 3) that shapes affectivity. As a living history of the memory of humanity, art would be a renewable force, not as repetition, but as a transformed force. The images of women embroiderers or weavers of the present that we see embodied in the activity of several feminist collectives in their struggle against patriarchy to stop inequality, gender violence and feminicides are deeply anchored in the history of gestures and expressivity, and that is why they move us. The human figures in concentrated, rhythmic, and patient movement reproduced in the photographs circulating about her work are anchored, on the one hand, in the ancestral Latin American practices of weaving and embroidery, and on the other, in the tradition of Western European art that arrived in Latin America hand in hand with modernity. Both “survive as heritage preserved in memory” (Warburg 2001, 3). In this article, we study the latter reminiscences and their transformation.

Paintings such as Vermeer’s *The Lace Maker* (1666-1668) or Renoir’s *The Girls’ Afternoon at Wargemont* (1884) focus on the indoctrination of women, who have eyes only for their spinning or embroidery, and are isolated from their surroundings, underlining their docility, serenity and diligence, domestic virtues of women until the 20th century, so dear to patriarchy. The photos of the feminist embroidery collectives take up this motif of the embroidered woman as a mnemonic trace but transform and re-signify it radically. The women are no longer alone or in a closed room, but in assemblies or spaces open to the community; their gaze is no longer submerged, but they look at each other, converse, exchange stories, they have become a collective. These images are also distanced from another series of pictures that are nevertheless present as historical heritage and form a memory of figures, forms, and gestures. This is the case of the images of seamstresses and spinners contributed by 19th century social realism, centered on the humble and working classes, and on the long hours without security, hygiene, or stability, typical of the working-class world of the industrial revolution. In contrast to those dreary pictures, the images of women’s embroidery collectives today exude happiness through the sovereignty of their actions, self-managed projects, and direct power relations over the means of production and the manufactured product. However, feminist textiles take as their material support an element closely linked to the exploitation of female labor even today, in the maquiladora industry, a scene which, as both sociologists and feminist anthropologists have shown, is a space directly related to the gestation of the brutal violence committed against women on the US-Mexico border. The embroiderers of the various femi-

nist collectives now lend their hands to the victims and give them back a collective body and a voice, reconverting, on the one hand, the solitary and oppressive scenes of embroidery in Western bourgeois canonical art and, on the other hand, those of the factory exploitation of women by the textile industry of yesterday and today into an intensified and transformed reminiscence, which in both cases moves away from the symbolic or economic exploitation of women through the ages.

Participants from various collectives often point out that the reason for choosing embroidery or weaving as vehicles for political activism lies in the textures, softness, or the ability to give shelter, key aspects for expressing affection, caring for the memory of victims, or giving warmth to processes of transformation in contexts of brutality and indifference. The intimate relationship between the embroidered textiles and the body, both victim and the embroiderer, is material, mnemonic and affective at the same time. Feminist embroidery, as a multisensorial artistic-political expression, in which expressive values and gestures inherited from the history of humanity are inscribed, overwritten and rewritten, constitutes a visual and mnemonic archive, but above all a tactile one, strongly linked to the world of affects. I would like to postulate that embroidered scarves are performative objects of affect in two senses. Firstly, because they come into contact with the embroidered subject to affect him empathically, just in the same way that the hand that embroiders the scarves has left forms of expression of the affects involved in the process of memory and healing. Secondly, because the scarves are created in a powerful collective circle, the assembly, and burst into the public space, making feminicides communal, material and tangible, acquiring through them a corporeal, vicarious, and decisive presence that would otherwise remain in the journalistic chronicles as mere private crimes or statistical data. The scarves are usually carried as banners in marches and strikes, cover pavements, squares, and walls, and reach the eyes of other demonstrators or unsuspecting passers-by, (con)moving them through the ethical and aesthetic effect of their presence.

Elsewhere, we argued that the term affect could be linked to trauma in psychoanalytic theory (Gallardo and Saban 2020: 21-22), since affect, like the condition of trauma, is not conscious, and remains at a moment before the articulation of language, thus also outside the laws of repression with its strategies of neglect or omission. The concept of trauma is associated with extremely painful experiences that cannot be cognitively understood and escape the tools of memory work. According to Freud, to cure them, the psychoanalyst has to help the patient make his way underneath the discourse and, thanks to small keys that are dotted in the mesh of the discourse, make a “conscious transcription of the repressed idea” (Freud 1915, 108). The psychoanalytic method of dealing with trauma does not consist in reconstructing all the traces, but in reweaving the stitch that was loosened from the weft. Affect seems to have the same fate. To give it authentic expression and get the memory flowing, fiction often chooses to weave with few threads, to give only an outline to what cannot be recounted (Saban 2013, 121-126). Feminist embroidery makes this theory palpable matter. It is not a question of finding meaning in the deaths, nor of placating the pain of their absence, but of finding a possible figuration to give them an edge, to stitch together the affects involved.

Embroidery is, a text with an extra-literary or extra-artistic value, which leads me to postulate that feminist scarves belong to the testimonial genre for three reasons that lie, in turn, in the three preponderant characteristics of the genre throughout its history (Saban 2019, 100). I refer to the union, in these embroideries, of three models of literary or artistic construction that are, at the same time, different paradigms of reading: the political-vindictory model, the model of the representation of subalternity and, finally, the subjective model of affects. In the first place, these embroideries are distant heirs of those first testimonies written especially during or immediately after the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s; like those, these embroideries continue to express a denunciation, although this is no longer of the “official silence of the terrorist states” (Calveiro 2006, 65), but of the state institutions or the media which in post-dictatorship omit, normalize or continue to make feminicides possible. As in the origins of gender, these embroideries seek to “draw the attention of international public opinion” (Rodríguez Freire, 2010, 115) and aim to change a series of facts that are urgent (Beverly 1992, 11). Secondly, these embroideries are testimonial because, obeying the second period of evolution of the genre, as it occurred in the 1980s, following the publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s memoirs in collaboration with Elizabeth Burgos, they represent a “progressive and supportive mode of engagement” (Oberti, 2015, 484) of the intellectual classes with the “sub-alterns” (Spivak 1988) or, as in this case, with humiliated and violated women. Recall that for Agamben the very condition of testimony is lacunar, it exists as the voice of a survivor who speaks in place of the one who is unable to do so because he or she has succumbed or become mute in the face of horror, that is, it replaces in absence the voice of the voiceless Other (Agamben 1998). The narrative framework of these handkerchiefs, made by living women - relatives, friends, or anonymous embroiderers - who receive a story from the archive to make it appear, is the first person. That is to say, the embroiderer, as if it were really a collaborative testimony, has offered her hand to embroider the voice of the murdered woman and will sign it beside the victim’s name. Thirdly, the embroideries are testimonies because they coincide largely with the affective turn that the genre has taken nowadays, but, in this case, also using elements typical of activism. According to the definition offered by Yanina Vidal, activism implies three things: 1. a type of art that moves away from the desire for mimesis and “textcentrism” (2020, 25), 2. “a public act [...] linked to a social struggle [...], a form of militancy” (2020, 26) and 3. an art that revalues “forms of representation that are not found in the hegemonic scene and therefore cannot be subjected to a traditional [...] evaluation” (2020, 26). In a similar vein, Laura Scarabelli called “narr-actions” (2021, 3) a corpus of texts in which a “scriptural attitude” of three types is embodied. They are texts that not only “simulate the real world and become witnesses of the present” but also act upon it, become “praxis, gesture that ‘puts’ words into discourse, expansion of these very words” and, finally, texts that necessarily pass through the body and generate “an embodied experience of writing” (Scarabelli 2023, n.p.). Based on all these definitions, I propose that feminist embroideries are testimonial activist interventions, narr-actions, both affective, political, and critical, that dissociate themselves from the insufficient state policies of democracy, neoliberal and patriarchal, through the renewed use of sensitive materials that they re-signify and through which they achieve the embodiment of affects as a critical path of knowledge and action.

In short, feminist textiles constitute a particular type of text, multi-sensory and multi-coded, capable of evoking images, expressions, and gestures linked to worlds in which women were subjected to inaction, pasts whose ideologies, however, have not been entirely eradicated and which therefore present an inconclusive remainder to be rectified. Sometimes they become itinerant epitaphs to continue the work of memory or are material extensions of the body for the creation of healing bonds. At other times, they are textures of meaning, coded messages in which to read the keys to the socio-political functioning of feminicide. Always, they are forms of activism, living testimonies and objects of political use for the claim and denunciation. These embroideries combine the three known aspects of testimony, precipitating their once opposing meanings in a utopian synthesis: they denounce feminicide violence without being pamphletary; they give body to the murdered women through weaving or embroidery that represents them vicariously, without falling into pitiful and reassuring illusions; and, finally, they construct stitch by stitch an affective, ethical and aesthetic work without getting lost in intimate or subjectivist labyrinths, nor in the sensationalism and banality of the media. These embroideries weave a story for the memory, they bring together, they have evocative and at the same time disruptive effects that make them a common cause for all.





Fig. 1. Fisgona Colectivo de Fotógrafas (Argentina). Photography exhibited in the traveling exhibition "Wir Kämpfen," for the first time in 2018 in Berlin, with the collective Karne Kunst, and also in Heidelberg in the framework of the exhibition "Reclaiming de Body feminism, community, and territory," organized by the collective Un curso propio and the Romanisches Seminar (Universität Heidelberg) in collaboration with Karne Kunst, November 2022.

Fisgona Colectivo de Fotógrafas was born in 2017. Their first work was about the "Tetazo", in February of that year, then the 8M (March 8), the first international women's strike, then followed the marches for the Ni Una Menos. In July of the same year they exhibited at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the UBA the exhibition "8M Empoderamiento en Marcha", and at the "Festival por más Derechos, Equidad y Paridad" on the 70th anniversary of women's suffrage the series *Presente en Lucha* (Present in Struggle), among other initiatives. One of the photos received a mention in the contest of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo to be part of the campaign to search for their grandchildren.





Fig. 2. Sorora. Itinerant feminist embroidery program (Mexico). Photography exhibited in the traveling exhibition “Wir Kämpfen,” for the first time in 2018 in Berlin, with the collective Karne Kunst, and also in Heidelberg in the framework of the exhibition “Reclaiming de Body feminism, community, and territory,” organized by the collective Un curso propio and the Romanisches Seminar (Universität Heidelberg) in collaboration with Karne Kunst, November 2022.

The Mexican collective Sorora has the purpose of generating sorority among young women and adolescents, taking feminism as a theory and embroidery as a practice. In addition, they seek to create community, reflect together, deconstruct and empower in different spaces, through a work that for years has been labeled as a domestic and unimportant activity. To that end, they intend to be subversive from the very act of taking embroidery out of the home, using it to express what it means to be a woman in a macho society. The second edition of Sorora, from which the photo comes from, took place during the Third IAGO Collaboration and Self-Publishing Day in May 2018 in Oaxaca City, Mexico.



Fig. 3. Collective work, *Proceso 1. Materia prima*, sculpture on women's work in the maquila industry. Museo de Arte de Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). In: Inbal Mexico, Boletín N° 1417-17 (September 2019). <https://inba.gob.mx/prensa/12985/el-museo-de-arte-de-ciudad-juarez-presenta-exposicion-sobre-el-trabajo-de-las-mujeres-en-la-maquila>.



Fig. 4. Older woman embroidering in a group with other young women, Collective Conejo clandestino, Mexico. Photography exhibited in the traveling exhibition "Wir Kämpfen," for the first time in 2018 in Berlin, with the collective Karne Kunst, and also in Heidelberg in the framework of the exhibition "Reclaiming de Body feminism, community, and territory," organized by the collective Un curso propio and the Romanisches Seminar (Universität Heidelberg) in collaboration with Karne Kunst, November 2022.

Conejo Clandestino is a collective that bets on culture as a tool for the empowerment of civil society. Since 2012, it has been carrying out cultural activities with political undertones to reflect on social issues. Due to the high rate of violence, which results in a high number of disappearances and femicides in the region of Orizaba, Veracruz, Mexico, Conejo Clandestino decides to carry out days of peaceful demonstration through embroidery, where the names of women murdered in the state of Veracruz are captured.

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