

Reflections on a Feminist Model for the Field of Art: Montehermoso, 2008–2011

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This chapter sets out the conceptual underpinning of the project of production, exhibition, and diffusion of contemporary art and thought that was carried out at the Cultural Center Montehermoso Kulturunea in the Spanish Basque city of Vitoria-Gasteiz during the four years from 2008 to 2011. For the first time in the Basque Autonomous Community and the rest of the Spanish state, women were incorporated into all the project's programs and activities equal to men. The project considered feminist thought as a crucial source of knowledge for understanding contemporary artistic practices and the societies that produce them. In fact, Montehermoso was the result of taking up the principal critical contributions made by feminism in the field of contemporary art since women had become massively and continuously involved in art practice and theory in the third wave of feminism, just forty years ago.

The ARCO Manifesto 2005

In February 2005, I invited a group of scholars, artists, curators, and institutional representatives of different generations and nationalities to a discussion forum on the intersection between art and feminism that I was directing for the second year running at the ARCO art fair, in Madrid. I did this with the awareness that in spite of possessing disciplinary and cultural specificities, the problem of sexism in art exceeds the field of art itself and also extends beyond

national frameworks. In that edition, I proposed the title “Equality policies between men and women within the art world: Designing strategies,” with the intention of promoting specific actions that went beyond the usual, though necessary, statistical elaborations that confirm the overwhelming evidence that women continue to undergo discrimination in the field of art even in the twenty-first century, or the equally usual, and necessary, task of recovering female artists forgotten by official Art History. For this, I invited speakers who would address the political dimensions from a feminist perspective. My proposal was initially based on two data: one being that women were (and are) a majority in Fine Arts Faculties and two, that in spite of this, the presence of female artists in the programs and collections of art centers and museums continued (and still continues) to be minimal. Moreover, I related these data to two other issues: firstly, that supranational bodies such as the EU and UN had been recommending member states to adopt measures aimed at correcting “gender” inequality for years—measures such as the application of gender quota policies that were producing positive results both in the political and business realms; and secondly, the fact that these measures were not being implemented in the field of art and did not even seem to affect it.

Both the speakers and the audience took part in a debate that soon polarized into two positions: On the one hand, the stance backing the idea implicit in the organizational proposal of the debate, demanding that public administrations establish policies such as gender quotas in programs and acquisitions of art works from art centers and museums as an adequate tool of ensuring equal opportunities for women in the field of art. It was alleged that most structures in charge of the production, exhibition, and diffusion of art in Spain are financed with public funds, and therefore those structures could be permeable to measures such as the application of gender quotas that had proven to be successful in other areas of activity. On the other hand, there were those positions insisting on the idea that quota policies would not solve the problem of women’s discrimination in the art field, as this is a broader structural matter that requires a complete transformation of social and art institutions in order to eliminate their sex bias. The discussion was tough, mainly because a certain sector of feminism was highly critical of what some years earlier had been called the “institutionalization of feminism”. In fact, the so-called gender public policies that had been implemented in the mid-1980s in Spain and in other countries were starting to be unfavorably evaluated. Certain non-English-speaking feminist theorists openly questioned the gender category itself as a

valid analytical category within its own cultural contexts. Among the latter was the feminist anthropologist Lourdes Méndez who, in a work she published the same year, “Una connivencia implícita” (An implicit connivance), denounced how the “gender” category had been adopted by public institutions without further consideration, and how this was generating a number of “gender” studies and analyses that she considers were subjected to an “institutional reflexivity,” unable to overcome the institutional framework in which they are produced and therefore incapable of eliminating the sexism that structures those same institutions. Méndez points out that in order to do so, the question should be approached from a standpoint of “epistemic reflexivity” in the same way some feminist studies do which enables them to analyze the issue of sexual difference in its real dimension. Méndez observes that “the illusion that the thorny problems regarding the difference/hierarchy between sexes and sexualities can be solved legally has become so deeply rooted that we tend to forget that the inequality which affects us as ‘social’ women—the same as that affecting gays and lesbians—is a basic pillar of a social, economic, and symbolic order reproduced by states, the laws they produce, and the scientific and social theorizations related to these issues, all of which are institutionally retained.”¹ In this sense, Méndez gathers in her text the voices of different feminist authors such as Françoise Héritier who reminded us in 1996 that “inequality between the sexes is structured by a sexual order that laws are unable to combat because it refers to a ‘differential valence between the sexes’ that interconnects and explains the functioning of the ‘three pillars of the social tripod’, which according to Levi-Strauss were the prohibition of incest, the sexual distribution of domestic work, and a recognized form of sexual union;”² or others like Mary Douglas who stated in 1999 that “anti-discrimination laws are no use. . . campaigns dealing with battered women. . . [and] have no possibility of being effective. . . We need to change the institutions;”³ or yet another author who participated in the ARCO Forum, Françoise Duroux, who pointed out in 2004 that “equalizing measures or even affirmative actions will not prevent the ‘odor di femina’ from perfuming working and hiring places, premises of political parties, schools.”⁴ (id: 211). On the other side of the feminist

1. Méndez, “Una connivencia implícita,” 209. Note: I have translated the quotations to English from the original text in Spanish.

2. Quoted in *ibid.*

3. Quoted in *ibid.*, 210.

4. Quoted in *ibid.*, 211.

spectrum, among those who clearly stood for demanding that public administrations establish corrective measures and more specifically the implementation of gender quotas, was the feminist philosopher Amelia Valcárcel, who stated that, “It is necessary to illuminate the qualitative deficits. . . beyond the accumulation of skills and exceeding the quantitative margins of affirmative actions. It intervenes in the accumulation of authority and respect for the collective of women as an input with a value in itself. Nevertheless it must be illuminated in a quantitative manner. Quantity is closely related to quality. Parity means half . . . also regarding excellence which occurs for a good reason, i.e. the fact that women also possess it.”⁵ Although, as this author had already reminded us back in her emblematic article “El derecho al mal” (“The right to evil”), published in the September 1980 issue of the journal *Viejo Topo*, true equality for women actually means having both rights, the right to excellence and the right not to be excellent: “We do not then assert our own evil -according to which we have been defined- or assert, either, the good which has been attributed to us. It is precisely your evil that we assert. This is a truly universal feminist moral discourse, which does not intend to show excellence but to assert the right not to be excellent. Just as your moral Logos has always operated.”⁶ From this position, it was argued that, historically, institutions are pressured in a quantitative manner to achieve their subsequent qualitative transformation, and that the advances in women’s living conditions, and those of other marginalized collectives in certain parts of the world achieved in the last century, responded partly to these dynamics. A distinction was also made between the terms “affirmative action” and “parity.” The former refers to promoting people for the common good who lack the same skills and achievements they have been unable to acquire due to an unfavorable starting point, and the latter to the promotion of those who, possessing the same skills and achievements, cannot access certain areas due to ideological reasons—as is currently the case, for example, with women. And finally, according to this position the proposal was to write a manifesto—and it was done thus—which included the assumptions of the forum organizers as a gesture, which expressed existing discomfort, and denounced the situation before public authorities.

I should mention here that by the time the manifesto was finally signed, the debate had stagnated. The curator Ute Meta Bauer, however, managed to ease the situation by calling for “feminist soli-

5. Valcárcel, *Feminismo en el mundo global*, 330.

6. Valcárcel, “El derecho al mal,” 165.

darity”: “Approving this text, let’s say 40% of it, I recognize the work accomplished by its promoters and I support it for the sake of feminist solidarity, and whenever I develop my disagreements in my own proposals I shall appeal to your feminist solidarity in order to get recognition for my work.” Thanks to her invocation to feminist solidarity, and to the backing of participants such as Lourdes Méndez, who agreed to sign the manifesto as a “circumstantial strategy,” the ARCO 2005 Manifesto was finally approved and signed by both the speakers and the majority of those attending the discussion on February 11, 2005. At the time, I considered that the three days of hard, intense discussion had resulted in various important conclusions, two of which I would like to highlight. First, it did not seem incompatible to work on two fronts at the same time, that is, institutional critique and internal reforms. Second, that establishing gender quotas was compatible with other feminist strategies.

The Nochlin and Pollock Perspectives

The complex political debate at ARCO 2005 referred to, ignored, and even contributed to the debate that has been developing at the core of feminist art history discipline since the early 1970s, when what was known in Europe as the third wave of feminism made it possible for the first time for women to become continuously and massively involved in art theory and practice. It was, in fact, another speaker at ARCO 2005, the art historian from the United States Linda Nochlin who, following the proposal about women and literature initiated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, inaugurated in 1971 the feminist perspective in Art History with her now legendary article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published in the journal *Artnews*. The question posed by her article, she said, “has led us to the conclusion, so far, that art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, ‘influenced’ by previous artists, and, more vaguely and superficially, by ‘social forces’, but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.”⁷

7. Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 158.

Nochlin's article revealed that art is one of the institutions that reproduce the long-lasting socio-sexual order that maintains and perpetuates the masculine hierarchy, which in those years was coined as patriarchy. Nochlin's article inspired a series of studies, publications, and exhibitions devoted to rescuing female artists who had been ignored or undervalued by the official art history, and was interpreted as the basis for a new model of historiographical and curatorial practice that, at the risk of excessive simplification, we could say consists of proposing a change of paradigm to include women and their work in the discipline, which has been seen from some sectors as ill-equipped to transform the history of art if we want it to include the knowledge and political and social agenda of feminism.

In fact, a decade later, in 1981, the British art historian Griselda Pollock, together with Rozsika Parker, published *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, in which they affirm that contrary to current popular belief, women have always made art, and that "it is only in the twentieth century that women artists have been systematically effaced from the history of art."⁸ Moreover, they add that art made by women has been categorized as minor through a stereotype in which women are negatively presented "as lacking creativity, with nothing significant to contribute, and as having had no influence on the course of art";⁹ and that although this female stereotype seems just to be a way of excluding women from cultural history, "it is in fact a crucial element in the construction of the current view of the history of art. . . [and] . . . art history as a structuring category in its ideology."¹⁰ Therefore, they reject presenting the history of women in art merely as a struggle for inclusion in institutions such as art academies. To them, "such an approach fails to convey the specific ways that women have made art under different constraints at different periods, affected as much by factors of class as by their sex." Moreover, they emphasize that if we only see women's history as a progressive struggle against great odds, we are falling into the trap of unconsciously reasserting the established male standards as the suitable norm. "If women's history is simply judged against the norms of male history, women are once more again set apart, outside the historical processes of which both men and women are indissolubly part."¹¹

8. Pollock and Parker, *Old Mistresses*, xxvii.

9. *Ibid.*, 169.

10. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

11. *Ibid.*, xviii–xix.

Finally, Parker and Pollock openly question the belief that women should fight to enter into the existing male-dominated field of art in search of recognition.¹² In *Old Mistresses*, they set the basis of the question that Pollock would formulate alone in 1994, namely: Can Art History survive feminism? “To attempt to understand the nature and effects of feminist intervention, I cannot bend to the strict dominion of the history of art and its discourse in the context of Art History. The understanding of feminist effects lies beyond their critical and interpretation schemes. Knowledge is in fact a political issue, regarding positions, interests, perspectives and power. The history of art, inasmuch as it is a discourse and institution, maintains an order invested by male desire. We must destroy this order if we are to speak about the interests of women.”¹³ In turn, Pollock’s perspective has also inspired another historiographical and curatorial practice, which has exhibited and explained the work of women artists from positions and terms different from those of hegemonic art criticism. Pollock herself has continually developed this practice, to which it could be objected that the process of re-valuing artworks made by women may in some instances lead to a lack of critical observation of such works as a product of specific patriarchal power relations. In addition, although such practices may aim to destabilize the existing structural relationship between the valuation of art produced by women, and art produced by men (to date, with little success), it often appears not to have overcome the (essentialist) narrative of the feminine constructed by the patriarchy.

Montehermoso

The design of the project for the Cultural Center of Montehermoso came about as a result of the heated debate between feminists at ARCO 2005—as a need to test the possibility of bringing together the perspectives of Nochlin and Pollock in a single project, and has a specific meaning as a contribution to that debate. There is no doubt, however, that the legal umbrella offered by the new laws on gender equality, initially in the Basque Autonomous Community, and subsequently in Spain, made Montehermoso possible.

It was noteworthy that the Basque law of equality was passed by the Basque parliament five days after the signing of the ARCO 2005 Manifesto. This law only deals with culture in twelve lines in Article

12. *Ibid.*, 169.

13. Pollock, “Histoire et politique,” 69.

25, which merely refers explicitly to artistic activities in forbidding funding if there is discrimination on the basis of gender, with no further specifications. More remarkable was that a few months later, the manifesto was received by the Spanish Socialist party that was working on the Constitutional Law of January 2007 for the effective equality between men and women, and was mainly included in Article 26, in which the law deals with culture and art. Considerably longer than its Basque counterpart, this article suffers from the same main problem: it is merely a recommendation, thereby allowing its systematic violation.

Even so, the symbolic impact of the laws facilitated my winning a public competition for the launching of a cultural center whose programs would ensure the inclusion of women on equal terms to men, and include in its conceptual framework the “gender perspective” that, unlike the “feminist perspective,” had been accepted by other EU member states. This competition also furthered the possibility of developing a specific project of a center for art and thought—Montehermoso—in the context of Vitoria-Gasteiz and the Basque Autonomous Community.

Thus in my application for the directorship of Montehermoso in 2006, I presented a project that retained three conclusions from the ARCO debate as well as my previous experience as a feminist curator: first, from my point of view, Nochlin and Pollock’s positions, far from being obsolete, present two entirely relevant models for feminist intervention in the art world that, additionally, and as we will see below in the case of Montehermoso, can complement each other in one project. Second, the celebrations of isolated feminist events at institutions are still anecdotal, and fail to transform both the institutions that host them and the prevalent canons. And third, exhibitions that only show the work of female artists fail to avoid being seen as a subcategory within the art discipline, a subcategory that defines both the event itself and the artists it includes.

The project that I developed along with my colleague Beatriz Herraez for the Cultural Center of Montehermoso between 2008 and 2011 transformed the previous cultural center into a center for the production, exhibition, and distribution of contemporary art and thought. At the same time, it continued to be part of the Department of Culture of the city council of Vitoria-Gasteiz but was rearranged on the basis of the definition of culture stated in the Mexico Declaration of 1982 by UNESCO. Following this declaration, the center perceived art and culture as spaces for critical reflection in contemporary societies, and as stages and driving forces for the production of knowledge and processes for social and political transformations.

The project was originally devised around what has been defined in various realms as international contemporary art and/or a restricted field of art. In other words, it made up a series of art practices, which are produced, circulated, and consumed on an international circuit, which also generates and transmits the dominant art trends. However, our adoption of critical perspectives for analyzing and acting in the field of international contemporary art favored the study of systems of representation and their role in the construction and reproduction of symbolic imagery. This work made it possible on the one hand to examine issues such as the review of social values from the perspective of coexistence and, in a special way, perspectives referring to equality between the sexes. On the other hand, this work also enables the recovery of historic memory, lending visibility to the contributions by women in the territory of art and thought. With these aims the general project of the center was structured by applying policies of equality and seeing feminist thought as a crucial source of knowledge for understanding the current world. In fact, the feminist reinterpretation of the history of art, as well as that of the artistic practices of today and their analyses imply, as Pollock has pointed out “recognizing the hierarchies of power which rule the relationships between the sexes, lending visibility to the mechanisms on which male hegemony is founded, untangling the process of social construction of sexual difference and examining the role played by representation in that articulation of difference.”¹⁴

The development of these policies and perspectives turned Montehermoso into the first center for contemporary art, culture, and thought to apply the references to art and culture as defined under the current equality laws of the Basque Autonomous Community. The center followed two strategies to guarantee the participation of women in parity without isolating them and their work as specific categories in the realm of art and intellectual activity: The first was to apply gender quotas in every activity and program to ensure that half of those taking part in the program were women; and to distribute the public budget on the basis of gender, and to lend visibility and promote the work of women. The feminist intervention upon the budget of the institution also included a consideration of the material conditions of artistic and intellectual production that generated a table of fees related to the salaries that we ourselves were receiving at the institution. The second strategy sought to apply feminist quotas, that is, to develop lines of artistic production and exhibition that promote feminist thought, focusing on the promo-

14. Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 32.

tion of values such as equality, as well as the deconstruction of sex, gender, and sexual stereotypes.

Following the Nochlin and Pollock perspectives, the program of the center could be divided into two groups: First, the general program, which produced exhibitions that were inscribed within different international contemporary art currents, in which we applied gender quotas, and, at a different level, included the feminist perspective as one more among the perspectives that were informing the projects. In this sense, Montehermoso was a territory of possibility between two spheres/relational networks of the field of art that very rarely come into contact and almost never do continuously. The second group consisted of specifically feminist programs, like the curatorial and exhibition project *Contraseñas/Passwords* in which different feminist curators were invited from different cultural contexts to make a selection of “feminist art” pieces. The project was therefore produced and judged according to the criteria of different feminist discourses. Another example on this side was the course on feminist perspectives on art practice and theory that the feminist anthropologist Lourdes Méndez and myself codirected, in which we invited theoreticians from different disciplines and nationalities to insist on the social character of the production of art and to disseminate and continue to write a feminist art history.

The general program was structured around the “Art and Research” program, one of the central features of the center, which manifested and condensed a series of preoccupations/goals that, in a systematic, interconnected way, defined the cultural policy developed at Montehermoso. The open call for the projects, as well as their selection, exhibition, and dissemination, developed an art-research relationship focusing on art practices as a complex methodology for producing knowledge. Every year, eight artistic projects, one curatorial and three research projects, among which at least one was dedicated to the writing of the history of the relations between art and feminism in Spain, were produced and exhibited at the center as part of the “Art and Research” program. This and other programs connected a series of agents from the realms of education, criticism, art centers, and curatorial and art practice that wove a complex relational net.

The project of production, exhibition, and diffusion of contemporary art and thought carried out at the Cultural Center of Montehermoso during the four years from 2008 to 2011 was the result of taking up the principal critical contributions made by feminism in the field of contemporary art and was also the result of many years of my own and my colleagues’ feminist work in this field. It was a

contribution to feminist debates on art, but overall, Montehermoso proved that including women in parity in artistic and cultural programs is not only possible but also increases the quality of those programs. In this regard, the success of the project made it possible to place the Cultural Center Montehermoso within a network of renowned national and international institutions, at the same time as it broadened the relationships and strengthened the imbrication of the center with the local context, bringing contemporary art and culture closer to users. The project achieved a noteworthy popularity abroad. However, the institutional dimension of it has been ignored completely. This has particularly been the case in the Basque Country and the rest of the Spanish state.

I would like to conclude by stressing that Montehermoso was a project designed for a public institution, and that it was conceived as a means of applying the recommendations in the articles dealing with art and culture in current laws of equality in the Basque Country and Spain. Montehermoso was, and still is, a valid blueprint for transforming public institutions for art and culture from the inside so that they incorporate women in parity. It was this dimension of the project that was clearly obvious to the Socialist government of the city, and particularly appealed to Maite Berrocal, the city's councilor for culture, also a feminist who personally supported the project because she understood that cultural policies should also scrupulously respect one of the main horizons of contemporary democracy: equality between the sexes.

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