

# Feminizing the Archives of Digital Art: Recovering the Work of Female Artists Working in Mexico, 1960-1980

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### Abstract

Given the recent interest in developing archives to recover the contributions of Latin American pioneers in digital arts, in this paper I take issue with the lack of attention given to female artists born or working in Latin America. I argue that the process of recovery needed to build such archives needs to adopt a feminist lens that speaks to particular conditions of production and unpacks the local and international mechanisms of exclusion that have hindered the recognition of female artists. It should also consider debates on Latin American art and the recent contributions of media historians who have opened up art history to understand the shared histories of art, science, and technology. Finally, I give a brief overview of the work of three female artists working in Mexico who anticipated features of digital art by experimenting with publishing networks, broadcasting technology and kinetic art.

### Keywords

Latin American Art, Digital Art, Mexico, Female Artists, Publishing Networks, kinetic Art, Video Art, Mail Art, Archives.

### Feminizing the Archives of Digital Art

The lack of visibility of women in the histories of art, science, and technology extends geographical regions and time periods. This invisibility is the product of deep-rooted patriarchal structures that have historically defined intellectual and scientific fields of action as predominantly masculine spaces (Plant, 1997; Pollock, 1999). Female artists born or working in the region of Latin America have been double excluded from these histories due to their gender and the ambivalent position that the region occupies as neither entirely western nor fully modern. As Canclini has put it, Latin America is the region of the semis “semi-modern, semi-developed, semi-indigenous, semi-European” (Mosquera 1996, p. 231). This ambivalent context has not only complicated the definition of Latin American art but has, until recently, consigned the early histories of digital arts as out of reach for a semi-developed technological region.

How should an archive of Latin American digital art pioneers look like considering its uncertain position as neither wholly western nor fully developed? What does it mean to be a “pioneer” from this complex condition of imported references and cross-breedings? Should simply mapping Latin American artist’s contributions into the dominant cannon will suffice?

These are all important questions that need to be asked to define the limits of an archival endeavor. Given the limited scope of this paper and the inherent exclusionary characteristics of any archival endeavor one of the objectives is to pose suggestions on how to feminize this effort to undo a historically gendered and geopolitical position of subordination that have defined the cultural production of the region. Richard defines feminization as a process that breaks down the barriers of biological determinism and fixed symbolic roles, becoming thus a practice of continued contestation which is not only relevant to those who define themselves as women but also to a multitude of experiences that contest normative and fixed definitions of sex, race or ethnicity (Richard, 2004). Then, I propose that the process of feminizing an archive of Latin American digital art should entail questioning the relevance of the dominant structures of recognition imposed by the Western European-U.S. art cannon as well as the patriarchal configurations of the Latin American art milieu. It should make a point of recovering the work of artists that define themselves as female, but it does not propose to exclude those who not identify as such. It should aim to map out categories, networks, and experiences that speak to the ways in which people and ideas cross borders and art is produced as an interconnected lived experience and not in a vacuum.

This process of feminization should also build on significant contributions by scholars who, in the last few decades, have debated the usefulness of the category “Latin America” to describe the cultural production

of more than twenty-two nations (Mosquera, 1996; Ramírez, 2004, Camnitzer et al., 1999). How useful is then the category “Latin America” to build an archive that proposes to undo the dominant structures of recognition of the art world? For many, the solution resided in putting emphasis on networks of exchange rather than cultural identities and difference. And yet, others returned to a national model to argue for local conditions of production (Debroise, 2007). In *The Age of Discrepancies* (2007) Debroise and Medina turned their gaze to 1960s Mexico City to recover the works of artists born or working in the country at the time. The thematic structure of the exhibition, which prioritized local conditions of production, was a significant contribution. However, the minimal attention given to the ways in which technology and scientific discourses influenced art during the period and to female artists visà-vis well-known male counterparts signaled the project’s adherence to the national art cannon.

In contrast, feminist and media art historians have made important contributions to dismantling the dominant structures of the art world— whether national or global. Feminist scholars have recuperated the role of female artists across geographies and historical periods (Pollock, 1999; Butler 2007). But the ways in which female artists intervene within the broader fields of art, science, and technology remains relatively unexamined. For their part, media art historians have successfully shown how digital art did not develop in an art historical vacuum (Grau, 2010; Paul, 2015; Shanken, 2014). Several have pointed out the connections between algorithmic procedures and avant-garde and postwar art (Paul, 2015, p. 11; Weibel, 2010, p. 21). However, these narratives rarely account for artists working outside the Western Euro-U.S.-Canada matrix. Hence, a process of feminizing the archives should consider and expand on all the aforementioned contributions. Conversely, it should carefully scrutinize the ways in which dominant patterns of exclusion continue to surface in unexpected ways. As an initial effort of recovery in what follows I briefly describe the ways in which some of the work by Margaret Randall (b. 1936 New York City), Lorraine Pinto (b. 1933 New York) and Pola Weiss (Mexico City, 1947 - 1990) anticipate the arts of the digital era through their experiments with audience participation, movement, optical illusions, networks of communication and relations of self and technology.

### Female Artists Working in Mexico, 1960 -1980

The 1960s was a decade of unprecedented transformation in the field of media arts. Artists, scientists and technology enthusiasts experimented with new and old technologies leading to the development of interdisciplinary media practices. Magazines became important sites of artistic creation and exhibition. One such magazine was the bilingual (English and Spanish) magazine *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn* published in Mexico City from 1962 to 1969 by U.S. poet Margaret Randall, who moved to Mexico in 1961, and her husband, Mexican writer Sergio Mondragón.

*El Corno*, as its collaborators called it, emerged as a response to the ideological pressures of the Cold War. With a printing of 3000 magazines per quarterly issue and a distribution that extended across the Americas and to several cities in Europe and Australia, *El Corno* emphasized art’s potential to bridge barriers between nations and political ideologies. For Randall, *El Corno* “was never just a magazine; it was never just a collection of words and images put together by two people...*El Corno* was a network” (Randall, 1978, p. 412).

To create a network, *El Corno* adopted the spirit of mail art, using postal mail as a means of distribution and exchange. The letter section provided its readers with alternative information on important issues of the time. Ultimately, the letters constituted the basis of the magazine distribution. In publishing visual art along with the poetry, prose, and critical essays of both established and emergent artists, *El Corno* showcased artworks that would otherwise not have been seen together at the time (Aceves, 2017). By facilitating these encounters and conversations through their open editorial approach and their post mail distribution system, *El Corno* was in a parallel dialogue with Fluxus artists, whose aim was to create networks of artists outside the art establishment by making creative use of technologies of communication. *El Corno* spoke to the ways in which Fluxus endeavors challenged traditional notions of the artwork and used existing means of communication to distribute art and create networks (Aceves, 2017). *El Corno*’s use of mail art as a form of communication and distribution anticipates Ascott’s notion of Telematic Art and other works that began to experiment with slow-scan TV, fax and radio in the 1970s. Experiments with these broadcasting technologies, as Paul has noted, “represent early explorations of the connectivity that is an inherent characteristic of networked digital art” (Paul, 2015, p.21).

In the context of the celebration of the XIX Olympic Games in 1968, a year before *El Corno* come to an abrupt end, the international movement of kinetic and op art took root in Mexico City. The games adopted the aesthetics of op art to develop an image of Mexico that would position the country as a modern and developed nation. Due to the political turmoil experienced in the country, which resulted in the massacre of students on October 2<sup>nd</sup> a couple of days before the inauguration of the games, art critics in Mexico have tended to disregard the categories of Kinetic and Op art because of their connection with the government and the games. For example, in the *Age of Discrepancy* the category “Systems Beyond (the so-called Mexican Geometrism)” is used to describe the experiments of Siqueiros, Felguerez, Cueto, Goertiz, Sakai, Hersúa, and Sebastian with optical illusions, illusory or mechanical movement and audience participation rather than Kinetic or Op art.

In contrast, for Lorraine Pinto, an artist working in Mexico City since 1959 and not included in the *Age of Discrepancy*, the category of Kinetic art has always defined her practice. In 1964 she established the experimental lab of kinetic art along with the electrical engineer Leonardo Viskin and the physicist Roberto Domínguez to integrate light movement and sound to her sculptural practice. The establishment of this lab represents one of the first deliberate efforts to work collaboratively across disciplines integrating science, technology, and art in the country. In 1968 she participated in the *Solar Exhibition* organized as part of the XIX Olympic Games cultural program with the work *Quinta Dimension*, a futuristic model of an urban environment. Made up of two modular city prototypes encapsulated in two plexiglass bubbles, *Quinta Dimension* incorporated sound and light. Viewers were invited to walk around and experience it from different perspectives. As Garza notes Pinto’s use of light and sound emphasized the temporal nature of art and opposed the ocular regime that dominated the postwar painting canon (Garza, 2011). After winning a prize with *Quinta Dimension*, Pinto continued to paint and create kinetic sculptures and large-scale public works that incorporated movement and sound. However, it was only in 2012 in the context of Garza’s revision of kinetic art in Mexico when Pinto’s early experiments were recognized more fully in the company of the male artists mentioned above (Garza, et al., 2012). As Pinto recently acknowledged “it took almost 40 years for her kinetic

artworks to be recognized and understood” (XGusto, 2016).

Like Pinto, Pola Weiss also stepped out of the boundaries of traditional artistic disciplines and turned to technology as the basis for her art practice. Weiss began to experiment with video in the early 1970s to propose new ways of thinking about televisual images and broadcasting. After collaborating with both private and state television broad-casters in 1978 she declared herself to be a *teleasta*, a producer of experimental televisual images. From then until she took her life in 1990, she produced a series of television programs and videos in which she experimented with live performance, visual poetry, music, and visual effects.

As one of the first artists in the country to experiment with video, Weiss developed a unique approach. She conceived each of her videos as an act of giving birth, and her camera was at times her daughter or an extension of her body. By using the video camera in this manner and adopting television broadcasting as a conceptual model to reach audiences outside of the art world circuits, Weiss sought to break with the media border to interpellate critical and embodied viewers (Aceves, 2015). Her work was also in dialogue with Telematic Art’s emphasis on networked communications and anticipated notions of hybrid constructions of self and technology. For instance, her *videodanzas*, which consisted of live events in public spaces in which she combined performance and video, Weiss transformed her video camera into an eye or a limb as she danced with it in her hand, filming her movements. Simultaneously, her camera broadcasted her movements through video signals transmitted to monitors and reflected through mirrors. At the same time, through visual effects and the incorporation of live feedback, she merged her body with that of the spectator. In doing so, she developed an analog virtual screen space in which the object and subject of representation could co-exist and be merged into one through analog visual effects (Aceves, 2015). In this manner, Weiss’s experiments with televisual images challenged passive relations between self and technology

### Conclusion

The process of feminizing the archives of digital art involves much more than mere acts of recovery. Critical questions about which artists make into the archive and what categories should the archive consider cannot be taken lightly. As an initial step, I’ve discussed how

## Panels

the work of three self-identified female artists working in Latin America was in meaningful dialogue with local and international experiments, and hence, offer different pathways into the histories of art, science, and technology.

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