

Reflections

Feminist arts and craftivism: Opening spaces for dialogue, respect and recognition in the museum

Introduction

An inclusive vision of the many arts and histories of art and visual cultures is not that we should tolerantly admit ‘other’ art to the pantheon of great art (put at risk by letting in works of merely social value), but that we should study the historical record for all that the many voices of those who make art might tell us about the histories, the situations and the perspectives of plurality that is the human condition. We, who look at ourselves and our histories through the prism of artistic representations and practices need to know the whole array of stories, in their difference, complexity, and varied modes of creativity.

Pollock, 2013, xxvi



Figure 1: *Kalyani Pramod Balakrishnan. Survival in daily life, 1995*

In 1995 in response to a request *Women in One World. Centre of Intercultural Women's Everyday Life and International Exchange*, sent to artists and collectives worldwide we received from textile designer Kalyani Pramod Balakrishnan a magnificent quilt which for her represented an interpretation of the meaning of what we were calling 'survival art' (Franger & Varadarajan, 1996). Her textile artwork (see Figure 1 above) captures her daily routines as a textile designer but more so as a mother and housewife who does everything for everyone around her before making time for herself. All the figures, save the dancer which symbols of inspiration, imagine her at work, home, showcase "how my days are: all activities are combined with each other" (Balakrishnan quoted in Wolf-Sampath, 1996, p. 28).

As an imagining of female specificity, this textile artwork by an Indian designer and small business owner, wife and mother, represents what Pollock (2020) calls an expression of feelings of being unique in the world, and the conditions common to many women in a patriarchal world. This complex gendered ordering of individuality and collectivity is central to the educational conversations we have with visitors to our museum as it easily crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. This quilt, and those like it, inspire visitors to talk about their own everyday lives, how their diverse activities fit together like a patchwork, no matter where they come from. Also, quilt they also the art of sewing. This discussions to the question work of art, and very notions of what art is (and most part these notions are modern art historiography (1989) acknowledged as between male and female

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when visitors look at this acknowledge and admire skill often turns our of whether the quilt is a quickly preconceived is not) emerge. For the shaped by stereotypes of and what Schade et al the distinction made creativity.

In this article, I speak to how our educational approaches in *Women's in One World* exhibitions challenge these preconceived notions of art and art histories by encouraging a different and informed view of women's art practices and, in particular, textile and collective art. I outline our pedagogical which aims to develop new knowledge and understandings – a greater awareness through 're-evaluation' – and a new sense of significance through a 'revaluation' of women's textile practices and expressions.

The recognition of 'female' art

Parker and Pollock (2013) define feminist art movements as achievements of women artists worldwide to produce art that reflects women's lives and experiences. Most specifically, they seek to change the basis of the perception of decorative arts which were viewed negatively as 'feminized', simply following patterns that are derivative, repetitive, and above all unoriginal. In the exhibitions in our museums, however, female art becomes an essential elixir for new, often surprising and important insights and understandings not just of art but of complex socio-critical and gender issues. Specifically, our feminist adult education goal in the museum is to make women visible in all areas of life and work by making the importance of the arts visible and relevant to life. We explore social constructions of gender, work to develop new memories by creating spaces for dialogue, and questions most specifically about equity, equality and difference. Our approaches enable, as noted above, cross-cultural communications about women's everyday lives, women's movements, women's art and gender justice. We present historical and contemporary objects from different women's realities, everyday objects and testimonies from women's lives, particularly importantly, place European

and non-European artworks by women artists and feminist activists side by side to give them equal merit (e.g., Franger, 2019). By doing this latter we question the division between so called Indigenous art, so-called folk art, so-called elite art or so-called applied art. For Lopez (2021/2023) this must be done in order to disrupt normative north-south (European and non) aesthetic heterogeneity so prevalent in our thoughts of art.



Figure 2: *Giving birth in a Shipibo Village. Cordelia Sanchez 2022*

An example of how we incorporate non-western arts is found in our exhibition titled *Birth Cultures: Giving birth and being born*. We invited three Shipibo artists, Cordelia Sanchez, Delia Pizarro and Olinda Silvano, to participate. Originally from a small rural Shipibo-Coniba community in Ucayali, Peru, these women now live in the newly founded Shipibo community of Cantagallo in the city of Lima. Cordelia Sanchez painted a scene of childbirth in a typical village house. The woman giving birth sits on the floor, supported in the back by a neighbour woman. In front of her, an experienced female birth attendant, wearing traditional skirts with Kené patterns, kneels to receive the child, whose small head is already visible a pool of blood (see Figure 2). The painting is very naturalistic in its depiction of the women, the house with its roof, and the trees. The walls of the house are covered with Kené in the colours green, tan, and pink. The moon and stars cover the sky. The space between earth, house and sky is covered with pink and white Kené, partly embroidered.

There are a number of ways we take up this type of painting in terms of new insights and learnings. Firstly, we draw attention to the ideas of culture and tradition inherent in the painting, in particular, how a birth traditionally took place in a Shipibo village on the Ucayali River, and possibly still does today, since health centers are often too far away for women living in the Amazon region. The second level of consideration for us is the composition of the work of art, the unifying structure of the Kené and the cultural background of this design. The painted and embroidered lines – Kené – are typical of the Shipibo worldview. They show varying perceptions of how Kené came to be and how it forms part of a complex system that includes cosmology, medicine, music and visual art, although the word ‘art’ does not exist in their language (Berger, 2023). One of the stories is the authority to represent the Kené was given to Shipibo women by the mythical Inca and his wife (Canayo & Del Àguila Rodriguez, 2019). All material cultural objects are decorated with Kené by the women, who pass it on to their daughters and granddaughters. In addition to the lines, the colors also have a meaning that is passed down through the family (Silvano & Vega, 2020; Sanchez 2023).

The third pedagogical element we address in the painting, although this is not often considered when viewing artworks is the living conditions of the Shipibo community. It is located near the presidential palace, but without any property titles and is absolutely marginalized. Yet this community tries to maintain and share its cultural practices so much so that the inhabitants continue to speak their own language. But they are highly discriminated against as Indigenous peoples, as noted by Olinda Silvano (2023), one of the artists and 'president' of the community noted during a talk the exhibition in Los Angeles. She noted that as an Indigenous person she is not considered a full citizen, although she is a Peruvian living in the metropolis. Rather, she is treated like an 'other' and often told she should go back to where she came from. Despite that fact that these Shipibo artists are partially recognized in the art world, that their paintings have been exhibited in art museums such as the Museo de Arte in Lima (MALI) or in Mexico at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, MUAC (UNAM, 2021), and that they have been invited along with a group of women muralists called *Soi Noma* to decorate the walls of museums in the USA, Canada and Europe (Silvano, 2023), there are still belittled in their own country. This marginalization of Indigenous artists is not, of course unique to Peru. As Wolf and Wolf (2015) remind us, Indigenous and folk artists are often excluded or located on the margins of the modern urban as well as 'art' world. Indigenous artists, even if they are recognized as masters remain outsiders "who are seldom invited to participate in dialogues around culture and representation" (p. 144). Building on this, objects collected and displayed in museum settings are systematically categorized as 'art' or 'craft'. As Svašek (2007) points out, according to this logic artifacts labeled 'art' are 'authentic' and those called 'craft' are 'inauthentic.' By this she means some are fine art objects and seen as the most valuable, whilst the others are piled into the lesser categories of decorative arts, folklore and finally, non-Western artifacts. These categorizations happen regardless of whether the Indigenous and women's art comes from Africa, Asia or Latin America and even if the artists are well known names (e.g., Bähr 2012). In our presentations of non-European - indigenous art by women -- we address the artificiality of these hierarchies to challenge norms of art knowledge and appreciation.

Textile Strategies: Artivism and Radical Crafting

The majority of the collections in our museum represent textile art by individual artists and collectives from all continents. The historical hierarchical division of the arts into fine art and craft has been a major force in the marginalization of women's work. Art and craft movements that sought to break down the barriers between different forms of creative expression began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. They wanted to end the division between fine and decorative arts and believed in the transformative power of the arts not only on society but also on the lives of practitioners (Callen 1979; Franger 2023, Mason et al. 2017).

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Feminist art movements combine activism and art in many ways, bringing into the spotlight neglected art forms that were historically considered inferior, often techniques such as basketry, pottery, or textile art. Other approaches run parallel to this discussion, the abolition of the separation between elite art and folk art (Bartra, 2003, 2011, 2019), the re-evaluation of art and applied art (Dunn, 2015), and the movements of 'artivism' and 'craftivism' (Greer, 2014; Lothian, 2018). However, these perceptions are being challenged. Textile art, in particular, is still often referred to disparagingly as "needlework," which evokes various associations of

resistance to a socialization of girls in which the sewing needle plays an important domesticating role. Since at least the sixteenth century, it has been assigned to all European

women as an ‘attribute’ and this view has spread worldwide with colonization and has been associated with women's destinies. Historically, through the centuries, embroidery has been both a weapon of resistance for women and a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to norms of female obedience and provided both psychological and practical means of independence (Parker, 2010).

In our feminist educational work in the museum, we see it as our task to convey these complex levels, situations, and stories. For example, the story of the Latin American art movement of arpilleras, embroideries and appliquéd tapestries that emerged in Chile in the 1970s against the dictatorship, and in Peru and other Latin American countries since the 1980s, can be told as the story of female individuals, artists, activists, feminists and collectives who initiated change. But it is also the story of many unnamed women who have tried to organize their environment, to enter markets with new ideas, and to escape economic misery (Franger, 2014). The history of this art is a history of intercultural exchange, an expression of hybrid cultures and an artistic expression that traces the relationship between creative practice, emancipation and social change. (López, 2021)

Collective Memory Art and Resistance



Figures 3 and 4: *Desplacamiento and Reubicación, Asociación Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños de los Montes de María, 2010*

These two appliquéd wall hangings –*tapices* in Spanish – by the women of Mampuján depict the destruction of their village, the expulsion of all the villagers, and their hope for their return. In 2000, the village of Mampuján was attacked by paramilitaries. It was burned to the ground and the inhabitants had to flee within 24 hours. They have been fighting for their right to return and reparations for almost two decades. The village of Mampujan is still in ruins. It took 17 years before it was officially recognized that the displaced peasant families did not belong to any of the armed groups and that their displacement was a result of the absence of the state to protect them. Part of the population has built a new settlement nearby, which they call Nuevo Mampujan. Paramilitary groups remain strong in the area.

The hardship of the displaced families was great, they could no longer farm. With the advice of an American Quaker volunteer, the women discovered and transformed the techniques of patchwork quilting. Initially intended as a means of generating income for the

women and their families the women developed their own forms of artistic expression, and in numerous wall hangings they depicted not only their current displacement, but also the history of the black communities, beginning with their enslavement and transport to the Americas, the flight of their ancestors from the ships, and the centuries of living in independent resistance communities in the rainforest. It was not until the late 20th century that they were caught between the fronts of Colombia's armed conflicts and the occupation of their territory for drug production and industrial projects.

The women developed real, impressive forms of expression for their stories in collective work and discussion processes. What also happened in the process, which they did not expect, was that in the collective work process they began to come to terms with their individual traumas; through pictorial representation they began to verbalize what they had never told themselves before.

The "discovery" of their works by human rights activists, urban artists, and collectors gave their works access to urban museum worlds, but they were also exhibited in community centers or libraries in the countryside, which led to their situation and the situation of Afro-Colombian communities being perceived by a largely indifferent society beyond the narrow group of human rights activists and lawyers. Their powerful testimonies have moved the country. Their call for justice has become a symbol for the fate of millions of displaced people throughout Colombia. In 2015, the group was awarded the National Peace Prize. The testimonial textile memory becomes a medium of far-reaching political protest, denunciation of human rights violations, and demand for justice. The presentation of such tapestries and their stories has the power to encourage visitors of our museum especially migrant and refugee women, to tell their stories and subtly demonstrate that a stand can be taken.

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Textile Crafting. Empowerment and participation



Figures 6, 7, 8: *"War socks and peacemaker women: 100 years of women movements for peace, Afghanian Rug and Quilt of the Forchheim Monday Café, 2015.*

An Afghan rug knotted by an unknown weaver during the Russian occupation with symbols of the invaders' weapons, which we exposed in the exhibition, inspired our team member Freyja Filipp, to initiate a creative process with refuged women, asylum seekers in Germany, who have no common language.

The first step of the reflection was to review the images of the rug together. Using an application technique, Freyja Filipp (2015) copied some of the weapons on the fabric and the women were asked to express their common "no" to war in their own language. Together they arranged the images, the final sewing and quilting was done by Freyja Filipp. She wrote the names of all the women who participated on the edge of the quilt.

The first effect on the refuged women who made the quilt was the joy of the creative process. Sharing their experiences and their rejection of the violent activities provides some kind of comfort. They began to try to talk to each other about what had happened to them, which even had a positive effect on their language skills. Presenting their work in the museum, visiting the museum together, for some of them for the first time in their lives, built self-esteem and pride that their product was worth exhibiting. They even tried to explain their work and their stories to the visitors.

It had different but always positive effects on the visitors, both on those who react with sympathy to asylum-seekers and on those who are more indifferent. It caused amazement at the work of art, recognition of the artistry of women, reflection on the situation of women, and identification with the message.



Figures 9,10,11: *We say 'yes', Quilt workshop in the museum, 2019*

Four years later we had lost contact with some of the former participants. However, but some of them, who were still connected to the community center and Freyja Filipp, still talk about what they have achieved since coming to Germany. In 2019 during our exhibition *Retrospective Back to the Future: 1989-2019-2030* our museum provided them and local visitors an opportunity to work together in a common process to express what they can value in their current situation, to say 'yes' to it. Once again, the process of the workshop, this time in our museum, allowed for poignant conversations and new insights to evolve and for the women to be proud and happy with the result, which we then displayed in the exhibition. Since then the quilts have been exhibited in various places and continue to spark lively discussions and new understandings of women and asylum seekers.

Final thoughts

Pitscheider-Soraperra (2022, p. 274) reminds us that "art is a means to conjure up new spaces for dialogue, to irritate, to establish relations of memory, and to ask questions about equality and difference." This captures our cross-cultural feminist educational approach in the museum. We use art to address and render visible the different as well as common experiences of women within patriarchal and unequal structures worldwide by presenting different realities and also, artworks. Our feminist educational work with the public also disrupts Eurocentric perspectives of art and craft encouraging people to not only see inequalities but to question certainties and assumptions which can be challenging. Feminist art and especially non-European art attracts our visitors. Yet as much as our visitors come to see what 'folk art' and to discuss gender and other social issues, there continues to be a belief that these works are simply 'handicrafts'. But we do make gains and will continue to use our feminist practices to interrupt deeply embedded and preconceived gendered and postcolonial

way of looking at art. We will continue to instill new understandings and respect in this area, which we hope will influence understandings of women and Indigenous woman toward a new future for all.

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