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CAUGHT BY SURPRISE:
AFFECT AND FEMINIST POLITICS IN THE ART OF MAGALI LARA

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Table of Contents

List of Figures………………………………………………………………………………... iii

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………….. xi

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………. xiv

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………….. 1

CHAPTER 1. "To Turn Your Private Life into Something that's Shared": Engendering Intimacy………………………………………………………………………………… 26

CHAPTER 2. Looking Slowly: Text, Image, and Affect………………………………… 68

CHAPTER 3. "El cuerpo de verdad": Unpictured Bodies, the Bodily, and the Feminist Body Politic……………………………………………………………………………….. 112

CHAPTER 4. Flower Pictures, or: "The Most Conventional Thing in the World"………. 145

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………… 188

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………………… 193

List of Figures

Please note that figures have not been included.

0.1 Magali Lara, *Animaciones* (Animations), 1988, from the series *El azar y la fe* (Chance and faith), acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150cm. Private collection (image provided by the artist).

0.2 Magali Lara, *Untitled,* 1988, from the series *El azar y la fe* (Chance and faith), pastel on paper, 70 x 50cm. Collection of the artist (image provided by the artist).

0.3 Documentation of one of Grupo Março's *Poemas urbanos* (Urban poems), c. 1979 (image provided by the artist).

0.4 Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads,* 1932–33, fresco. Work in progress at Rockefeller Center, New York City, now destroyed (image provided by the University of Texas at Austin).

0.5 Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934, fresco on portable metal framework, 4.8 x 11.5m. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.

0.6 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *América Tropical* (Tropical America), 1932, fresco, 24.4 x 5.5m. Rooftop view of the Italian Hall, Olvera Street, Los Angeles (photograph from the Getty Research Institute).

0.7 View of *América Tropical* and Olvera Street c. 1934 showing the part that was visible from street level whitewashed (photo by the Los Angeles Times).

1.1 Magali Lara, *Untitled*, 1983, ink on paper. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

1.2 Magali Lara, *La Noche* (The night), 1985, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120cm. Collection Rogelio Cuellar.

1.3 Magali Lara, photocopy of drawing, c. 1986, 33 x 21.6cm. Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (photograph by author).

1.4 Magali Lara, from the series *Insomnio* (Insomnia), 1986, mixed media on paper, from José María Espinasa, *Insomnio: Magali Lara* (Mexico City: Rafael Matos Galería de Arte, 1986) (photograph by Gerardo Suter).

1.5 Magali Lara, from the series *Insomnio* (Insomnia), 1986, mixed media on paper, from Espinasa, *Insomnio* (photograph by Gerardo Suter).

1.6 Magali Lara, *Cama, New York* (Bed, New York), 1985, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 80cm. Collection Robert Littman.

1.7 Magali Lara, *Me quiero ir* (I want to leave), 1985, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180cm. Collection Dalma Family (image provided by the artist).

1.8 Tracey Emin, *My Bed,* 1998, mattress, linens, pillows and objects, 79 x 211 x 234cm, installation view from Turner Prize Exhibition, Tate Gallery, London in 1999. Private collection.

1.9 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "*Untitled,*" 1991, billboard, dimensions variable, installed in New York in 1992.

1.10 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "*Untitled,*" 1991, billboard, dimensions variable.

1.11 Mónica Mayer, *Lo normal (Quiero hacer el amor)* (On normality [I want to make love]), 1978, series of ten postcards with stamps, 81 × 60cm. Collection Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

1.12 Maris Bustamante, *La patente del taco* (The taco patent), 1979. Fondo No-Grupo, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (photograph by author).

1.13 Magali Lara, *Ventana* (Window), 1977–78, mixed media collage, 31 × 28.5 × 5.1cm (framed). Collection Museo de Arte Moderno, INBA-Secretaria de Cultura, Mexico City (image provided by the artist).

1.14 Magali Lara, *Ventana* (Window), 1977–78, mixed media collage, 31 × 28.5 × 5.1cm (framed) (image provided by the artist).

1.15 Photograph of Magali Lara's *Ventana* (Window), 1977–78, from Sebastián, ed., *Bienal de Febrero: Nuevas Tendencias: Salon 1977–1978* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno / Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1978), mixed media collage. Original lost.

1.16 Anonymous photograph of Diego Rivera in his studio in San Ángel, c. 1940, with Frida Kahlo's lipstick print. Collection Museo Frida Kahlo.

1.17 Letter from Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray, January 12, 1939. Nickolas Muray papers, 1910–1992, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

1.18 Magali Lara, from the series *Frida,* c. 1978, photostat on paper. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

1.19 Magali Lara*, Infancia* (Childhood), 1980, from the series *Infancia y eso* (Childhood and such), collage, 56 x 76cm (image provided by the artist).

1.20 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life of Bottles and Pitcher,* 1946, oil on canvas, 25.1 x 45.1cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tompkins Collection.

1.21 Magali Lara, *Sabor* (Taste), 1985, artist's book published by Sabana Ediciones, run of 500. Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (photographs by author).

1.22 Magali Lara and Carmen Boullosa, page from *Lealtad* (Loyalty), 1980, artist's book published by Taller Martín Pescador (image provided by the artist).

1.23 Magali Lara and Carmen Boullosa, page from *Lealtad* (image provided by the artist).

1.24 Magali Lara, etching from the series *Historias de Casa* (Stories of home), c. 1983, paper: 39 x 27cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

1.25 Magali Lara, *19 de abril* (April 19th), 1986, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120cm. Collection Lara Molina.

1.26 Photograph of Magali Lara with *Me quiero ir* installed at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, in 1986 (image provided by the artist).

1.27 Cy Twombly, *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus,* 1961, wax crayon, lead pencil, oil paint, colored pencil on canvas, 200 x 260.5cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

1.28 Magali Lara, *Tijeras* (Scissors), 1977, page from artist's book, drawing and collage on paper, 49 x 33.5cm. Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (image provided by the artist).

1.29 Magali Lara, *Tijeras,* 1977 (image provided by the artist).

1.30 Magali Lara, *Tijeras,* 1977 (image provided by the artist).

1.31 Magali Lara, *Tijeras,* 1977 (image provided by the artist).

1.32 Magali Lara, *Tijeras,* 1977 (image provided by the artist).

1.33 Magali Lara, *Tijeras,* 1977 (image provided by the artist).

1.34 Mónica Mayer, *A veces me espantan mis propios sentimientos, mis fantasías* (Sometimes I'm frightened by my own feelings, my fantasies), 1977, mixed media on canvas, 81 × 60 cm. Collection of Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma.

1.35 Reproduction of Magali Lara, *Tijeras* (Scissors), 1977, drawing on paper, from Magali Lara and Juana Gutiérrez, "Tijeras: dibujos y collages de Magali Lara" (Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, UNAM, 1977) (image provided by the artist).

2.1 Magali Lara, *Leo y no entiendo* (I read and I don't understand), 2008, from the series *Leer* (To read), handwoven tapestry, 100% wool, 90 x 128cm (image provided by the artist).

2.2 Magali Lara, from the series *Sielo,* 1978, collage on paper (image provided by the artist).

2.3 Magali Lara, from the series *Autorretrato* (Self-portrait), c. 1979, mixed media on index card (image provided by the artist).

2.4 Magali Lara, *pero… se derrama* (but… it spills), May 1982, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), ink, charcoal and pencil on paper, 70 x 100cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

2.5 Magali Lara, *Delegar culpas* (Delegating blame), 1982, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on paper, 70 x 100cm (image provided by the artist).

2.6 Magali Lara, *De la limpieza y lo inútil de ciertos rencores* (On cleaning and the uselessness of certain resentments), 1982, from the series *Historias de Casa* (Stories of home), ink, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 70 x 100cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

2.7 Magali Lara, *Todos los días otro punto de vista* (Everyday another point of view), May 1982, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), ink and charcoal on paper, 70 x 100cm. Collection of the artist (image provided by the artist).

2.8 Magali Lara, *Si la luna se sonriera* (If the moon were to smile), May 1982, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), ink, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 70 x 100cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

2.9 Cover of *Fem,* vol. IX, no. 33 (April–May 1984) featuring illustration by Magali Lara. Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (photograph by author).

2.10 Cover of *Fem,* año 8, no. 36 (October–November 1984) featuring illustration by Magali Lara. Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (photograph by author).

2.11 Magali Lara, *Plancha* (Iron), 1983, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), etching, 39.2 x 27.5cm (image provided by the artist).

2.12 Magali Lara, *Ombligo de lo mismo* (Belly button of the same), 1984, etching, 27 x 39.5cm. Collection of the artist (image provided by the artist).

2.13 Magali Lara, *Botones* (Buttons), 1983, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), etching, 39 x 27cm (image provided by the artist).

2.14 Ana Victoria Jiménez, photographs from the series *Cuaderno de tareas* (Assignment book), 1978–81, sets of ten black and white photographs.

2.15 Magali Lara, *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), 1982, from the series *Historias de casa,* ink, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 70 x 100cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

2.16 Magali Lara, *A diario* (Daily), 1984, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm (image provided by the artist).

2.17 Magali Lara, *Enganchar* (To hook), 1984, from the series *Dibujos sucios del mes de julio* (Dirty drawings from the month of July), pencil and pastel on paper, 44.5 x 58cm (image provided by the artist).

2.18 Magali Lara, *Devestir* (To undress), 1984, from the series *Dibujos sucios del mes de julio* (Dirty drawings from the month of July), pencil and pastel on paper, 44.5 x 58cm (image provided by the artist).

2.19 Installation view of Magali Lara's exhibition *Del verbo estar* (About being present), Museo de Arte de Sinaloa, 2018 (image provided by Museo de Arte de Sinaloa).

2.20 Magali Lara, *Guardé mi infancia* (I kept my childhood), 1984, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm (image provided by the artist).

2.21 Magali Lara, *Luego lo lavo* (Then I wash it), 1984, from the series *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm (image provided by the artist).

2.22 Jenny Holzer, *Truisms,* 1977–79, offset lithograph on paper, 43.9 x 34.9cm. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

2.23 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face),* 1981, photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 139.7 x 104.1cm. Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

3.1 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación I* (Of the same, the same room I), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.2 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación II* (Of the same, the same room II), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.3 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación III* (Of the same, the same room III), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.4 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación IV* (Of the same, the same room IV), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.5 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación V* (Of the same, the same room V), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.6 Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación VI* (Of the same, the same room VI), 1984, etching, paper: 31.5 x 48cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.7 Magali Lara, *Tarda en llegar* (Arriving late), 1983, India ink on paper, 51.5 x 65.5cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.8 Magali Lara, *Se aproxima* (It approaches), 1983, India ink on paper, 51.5 x 65.5cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.9 Magali Lara, unknown title, 1983, India ink on paper. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

3.10 Magali Lara and Rowena Morales at the MUNAL, Mexico City, November 1983, from Magali Lara, "Un comentario sobre el arte y las mujeres," *Fem* IX, No. 33 (April–May 1984): 33.

3.11 Magali Lara, Rowena Morales, and Hebe Rosell, *Instrucciones para manejo de esquema de identidad* (Instructions for identity scheme management), 1983, artist's book, installation view from *Magali Lara. El agua no me basta para beberme la vida* at Laguna, Mexico City in 2021.

3.12 View of print portfolio *De la misma, la misma habitación* (Of the same, the same room), 1984. Collection of the artist (image provided by the artist).

3.13 Lourdes Grobet and Magali Lara, page from *Se escoge el tiempo* (Time is chosen), 1983, artist's book published by Los Talleres Editores (image provided by the artist).

3.14 Lourdes Grobet and Magali Lara, page from *Se escoge el tiempo* (image provided by the artist).

4.1 Irving Penn, *Duke of Windsor,* from *Vogue* 158, no. 10 (December 1971): 154–55.

4.2 Irving Penn, *Rose Triumphant,* from *Vogue* 158, no. 10 (December 1971): 150–51.

4.3 Irving Penn, *Royal Robe,* 1968, from *Vogue* 154, no. 10 (December 1969): 204.

4.4 Magali Lara, *Tuve* (I had), 1985, pastel on paper, 77 x 112cm, from *La infiel: obra reciente* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil / Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1986).

4.5 Magali Lara, *Regresa a casa* (Go home), 1987, mixed media collage, 81 x 60cm (image provided by the artist).

4.6 Magali Lara, *Así se dijo* (So they said), 1987, mixed media collage, 80.5 x 60.5cm (image provided by the artist).

4.7 Magali Lara, *Aún* (Still), c. 1987, silkscreen, 50 x 70cm (image provided by the artist).

4.8 Irving Penn, *Blushing Bride* and *Greenland,* from *Flowers: Photographs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).

4.9 Magali Lara, *Orquídea* (Orchid), 1985, pastel on paper, 77 x 112cm (image provided by the artist).

4.10 Irving Penn, *Brassavola nodosa,* from *Flowers: Photographs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).

4.11 Irving Penn, *Fath Detail*, Paris, 1950 (printed 1990), gelatin silver print, 28.4 x 25.8cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

4.12 Irving Penn, *Cottage Tulip: Sorbet,* New York, 1967 (printed 1986), dye imbibition print, 45.5 x 46.3cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

4.13 Irving Penn, *Balenciaga Sleeve (Régine)*, Paris, 1950 (printed 1984), gelatin silver print, 22.9 x 22.9cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

4.14 Irving Penn, *Single Oriental Poppy (A),* New York, 1968 (printed 1987), platinum-palladium print, 44 x 53cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

4.15 Frida Kahlo, *Tunas* (Cactus Fruits), 1937, oil on metal, 20 x 24cm. Robert Holmes Collection, Perth, Australia.

4.16 Frida Kahlo, *Recuerdo* (Memory), 1937, oil on canvas, 40 x 279cm. Collection of Michel Petitjean, Paris, France.

4.17 Magali Lara, unknown title, from the series *Frida,* c. 1978, photostat on paper. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

4.18 Frida Kahlo, *Las dos Fridas* (The Two Fridas), 1939, oil on canvas, 173 x 173cm. Collection Museo de Arte Moderno, INBA-Secretaria de Cultura, Mexico City (photograph by Bob Schalkwijk).

4.19 Frida Kahlo, *Las dos Fridas,* 1939. Detail of white skirt (photograph by author).

4.20 Frida Kahlo, *Naturaleza muerta* (Still Life), 1942, oil on copper, diameter: 63cm. Collection Museo Frida Kahlo (photograph by Bob Schalkwijk).

4.21 Frida Kahlo, *La flor de la vida* (Flower of Life), 1944, oil on masonite, 27.9 x 19.7cm. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Xochimilco, Mexico City.

4.22 Magali Lara, *Irse* (To leave), 1985, from the series *La infiel* (The unfaithful), pastel and pencil on paper, 70.5 x 50cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

4.23 Installation view of *La infiel* (The unfaithful), Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, 1986 (image provided by the artist).

4.24 Rubén Ortiz Torres, *El fin del modernism* (The end of modernism),1986, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 120 cm. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo No. 8, Instituto Cultural Aguascalientes (photograph by author).

4.25 Gabriel Orozco, Mauricio Rocha, and Mauricio Maillé, *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas* (Propping up our modern ruins), 1987. Installation view at the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.

4.26 Marco Antonio Cruz, *Edificio Nuevo Léon, Unidad habitacional de Nonoalco Tlatelolco,* (Nuevo León Building, Housing unit of Nonoalco Tlatelolco), September 19, 1985.

5.1 Magali Lara, *El Futuro 1* (The Future 1), 2014, from the series *El Futuro* (The Future), oil on linen, 250 x 180cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

5.2 Magali Lara, page-spread from *La Luz* (The Light), 2014, from the series *El Futuro* (The Future), 20 page artist's book, gouache and ink on paper, 29.7 x 21cm (closed). Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

5.3 Magali Lara, *El Futuro 7* (The Future 7), 2014, from the series *El Futuro* (The Future), oil on linen, 250 x 180cm. Collection of the artist (photograph by author).

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the vibrant feminist art scene of 1970s and 80s Mexico City, centering upon the artistic practice of Magali Lara (b. Mexico City, 1956). I examine feminist practices during this period in conversation with broader understandings of what has constituted "political art" in twentieth-century Mexico, asking: What does a theory of political art that accounts for art's affective power look like? And, how might the affective aspects of art allow for a type of political communication that reaches across cultural, experiential, and ideological divides?

Lara's images illustrate domestic interiors—kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms—that are populated with strangely animate household objects—coffee pots, ironing boards, pairs of scissors—and that are punctuated with ambiguous fragments of text. Her artworks are neither didactic in their political commentary (as, for example, the social realism of the Mexican muralists often was), nor do they toe the line between art and protest (as the ephemeral, urban interventions of *los grupos,* the art collectives that dominated the avant-garde art scene of 1970s and 80s Mexico City, often did). Nevertheless, they do political work. Organized around a set of formal tactics that I have identified in Lara's artwork including seriality, ambiguous juxtapositions of text and image, the evacuation of specific bodies, and the blurring between still life and portraiture, this project proposes that those tactics engender political communication.

Since the beginning of her practice in the late 1970s, Lara's artwork has delved into issues of women's experience in Mexico, and she has been and remains deeply involved in the Mexican feminist art movement. Her images have been included in expressly feminist art exhibitions, used to illustrate militant feminist publications, and, on occasion, provoked vehement reactions in response to their ideological content. Yet the scholarly work surrounding

her practice largely leaves the role of politics in her artwork untouched. I approach Lara's work with the same themes in mind as writers before me—self-representation and subjectivity; interiority and eroticism; the everyday and the ordinary—but from a position that takes those themes as a site of politics. In so doing, this dissertation not only asserts that Magali Lara's artwork is political, but invites reanalysis of the political impact of other artworks, including the work of women artists active in Mexico in the earlier twentieth century.

Introduction

In an article published in a Mexico City newspaper in 1988, art critic Graciela Kartofel wrote the following about the latest exhibition of work by Mexican artist Magali Lara: "Almost as if she were painting murals, her voice comes through powerfully, creating a new way of speaking that affects the community."[1] Lara's exhibition, entitled *El azar y la fe* (Chance and faith), featured a series of whirling, domestic interiors (e.g., figure 0.1). Paintings and drawings offered views onto spaces populated with a jumble of electric fans, sharp-leaved plants, looming shadows, and vases spilling striated swirls of water. Lara created these images while living in Havana, Cuba for six months with her first husband, the Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso Padilla.[2] During Lara's stay in Cuba, Elso was suffering from and undergoing treatments for leukemia, which he was diagnosed with in March of 1988 and died from in November of that same year.[3] The series seems to bubble with Lara's emotional turmoil: a cacophony of erratic angles and unpredictable gravity combine with bold colors and slippages in scale—where scissor blades slide into plant leaves (figure 0.2); thin washes of dripping paint, smears of pastel, and smudgy fingerprints distort the already illogical spaces. Kartofel's comment, loaded with the weight of decades of dominance of the Mexican mural movement within Mexican art and

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Graciela Kartofel, "Artimundo: ¿Dónde aprendió Magali a pintar de esa manera?," *Novedades*, October 11, 1988, sec. C, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Casi como si pintara murales, su voz se oye poderosa creando una nueva manera de decir que afecta a la comunidad."

[2] Conversation with author on January 17, 2022. Elsewhere, Lara has mentioned that Ana María Pecanins invited her to put this exhibition together in order to encourage her to keep working during Elso's illness. Olga María Rodríguez Bolufé, "Magali Lara y Juan Francisco Elso Padilla: El hallazgo compartido," in *Codo a codo: parejas de artistas en México*, ed. Dina Comisarenco Mirkin (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2013), 346.

[3] Luis Camnitzer, "Juan Francisco Elso Padilla," *ArtNexus*, September 1989, https://www.artnexus.com/en/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5f3dae2e478dac6f899b137f/-41/juan-francisco-elso-padilla.

culture, is difficult to map onto this series of Lara's artworks. What might these abstracted views onto private spaces have to do with the social-realist agenda and the monumental, public-facing projects of the Mexican muralists? Where might Lara's intimate, emotional, and highly ambiguous imagery overlap with the didacticism of the muralists' Revolutionary rhetoric?[4]

Embedded within Kartofel's comment is a suggestion of the potency of this artist's work, and more particularly, the socio-political potency. These often confusing images that address mundane objects and spaces deliver a form of communication "that affects the community."[5] This dissertation asks: how? How do Magali Lara's artworks communicate politically? How do they affect their viewers?

Intimate and personal rather than collectively made and publicly displayed, ambivalent and difficult to decipher rather than explicit and clearly legible, made up of still lifes and genre scenes rather than sweeping historical narratives, Lara's artistic practice has little in common with the practices of the Mexican muralists. Her images illustrate domestic interiors—kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms—that are populated with strangely animate household objects—coffee pots, vases, ironing boards, pairs of scissors—and that are punctuated with ambiguous fragments of text. They are concerned with the repetitive tasks of everyday life: cooking and cleaning,

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[4] The Mexican mural movement, launched in the early 1920s under the administration of Álvaro Obregón, is most closely associated with *los tres grandes:* Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. These artists received the vast majority of the State's mural commissions (as well as private commissions in both Mexico and abroad). While their projects can be grouped under a general rubric of social realism and connected by their attempts to draw parallels between the heroes of the Mexican Revolution and those of Mexico's pre-conquest history, they repeatedly clashed over both ideological and stylistic approaches to muralism. Beyond *los tres grandes,* a wide range of artists participated in the movement, profoundly complicating any unified political or artistic agenda. Furthermore, the State's motivations for supporting mural projects shifted dramatically in the decades following the movement's birth, which had profound effects upon the murals that were realized. For an investigation of the mural movement's diversity and complexity, see: Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley, eds., *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
[5] Kartofel, "Artimundo: ¿Dónde aprendió Magali a pintar de esa manera?"

making coffee, watching TV, watering plants. They are not monumental, heroic, spectacular, or theatrical—attributes that muralism depended upon.[6] They are not propagandistic, nor do they toe the line between art and activism. If the elements that have been typical of twentieth-century political art are not operative, do the formal strategies that *are* operating in Magali Lara's artworks offer a way of theorizing an alternate form of political art?

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Born in Mexico City in 1956, Magali Lara entered the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, known as the Academia de San Carlos, in 1976 and began to exhibit her artwork the following year. At San Carlos, she was part of an energetic community of students and young instructors that embarked upon highly collaborative and experimental artistic practices. These artists formed a series of collectives that became known as *los grupos* (the groups), and quickly came to define the Mexico City art scene of the 1970s and 80s. Many of these artists had either participated in the 1968 student movement or came of age in its wake, and the events that took place in Mexico that year were undoubtedly generation-defining. Working across a wide variety of experimental mediums, what brought *los grupos* together as a "phenomenon" was their desire to connect with a broader public and their investment in finding fiercely independent means of doing so.[7]

Between 1978 and 80, Lara participated in Grupo Março, an artist collective devoted to

[6] David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution*, trans. Sylvia Calles (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 12, 44.
[7] The trend of collective practices began around 1973. It was recognized as a substantial "phenomenon" by 1977, when artist and curator Helen Escobedo chose to invite several of *los grupos* to contribute work to the Paris Biennial to represent Mexico, rather than inviting individual artists. And by 1985, *los grupos* had already begun to be historicized, as evidenced by an exhibition curated by Dominique Liquois at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil that year, *De los grupos los individuos: artistas plásticos de los grupos metropolitanos.*

the investigation of language and poetics within urban space. The group relied upon interventions into systems of urban infrastructure with the aim of communicating with a heterogeneous public.[8] For instance, in Març̧o's *Poema topográfico* (Topographic poem, 1980), words and phrases were scattered across features of the urban landscape such as benches, streetlights, and manhole covers.[9] In their series of *Poemas urbanos* (Urban poems, c. 1979–81), the artists engaged directly with passersby in public plazas, inviting them to participate in the composition of collective poetry created from political buzzwords the artists had drawn from current newspapers (figure 0.3).[10] And in their *Poema telegráfico-urbano* (Telegraphic-urban poem, 1979), the group members appropriated the national telegraph service as their artistic medium, sending a series of telegraphs to one another over the course of several weeks and slowly developing a poetic dialogue.[11]

After leaving Grupo Março, Lara devoted energy to her individual artistic practice. But she also began to collaborate with a vibrant group of female-identifying makers including other visual artists, poets, playwrights, musicians, and feminist activists. Although she remained hesitant to identify her own work as "feminist art," through these friendships and collaborations, she played a fundamental role in Mexico City's burgeoning feminist art scene.[12] Indeed, Lara has reflected upon the ways that these collaborative endeavors helped to mold feminist vocabularies,

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[8] "Grupos: Autodefiniciones," *Artes Visuales*, no. 23 (January 1980): 20.
[9] Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina, eds., *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México: 1968-1997 (The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico: 1968-1997)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Turner, 2006), 232.
[10] Grupo Março, *Poema urbano*, transfer to DVD (Mexico City, 1979); Álvaro Vázquez and Manuel Marín, "Entrevista a Manuel Marín por Álvaro Vázquez (transcript)," n.d., 49, B92 076, Fondo La era de la discrepancia, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM.
[11] Mauricio Marcin, ed., *Artecorreo* (Mexico City: Museo de la Ciudad de México, 2011), 140–44.
[12] In an interview in 1984, Lara described her investment in feminist issues, but claimed, "I don't intend to make feminist art." Javier Cadena, "Charla con Magali Lara," in *De la misma, la misma habitación*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Galería Los Talleres, 1984). "No intento hacer arte feminista."

open up truths around women's lived experiences, and reimagine how collective making processes could be organized.[13] Whereas her departure from Março was principally motivated by frustrations with the hierarchical structure and the machismo that infused many of *los grupos,* she described her collaborations with other women as organized organically and horizontally.[14] Further, while she remained invested in aspects that motivated Março's activities such as artistic explorations of urban experience and finding independent means of dissemination, she saw value in turning away from projects that operated on exclusively macropolitical levels.[15] By focusing instead upon a micropolitical approach, she could examine aspects of women's experience that were overlooked and dismissed, including within the context of the avant-garde art scene dominated by *los grupos.*[16]

But Lara understood such a turn as extending beyond issues of gender; she saw micropolitical interventions as a route towards pushing against the dominant culture more broadly.[17] "We have to stop thinking about the monumental and return to the human scale," Lara wrote in 1981, urging her compatriots to reconsider what "an art of the city" might look like.[18] She advocated for artworks that were able "to express problems and demands" rather than those

[13] Magali Lara, "La memoria es como una piedra pulida," in *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, ed. Karen Cordero and Inda Sáenz (México, D. F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007), 420.
[14] Olivier Debroise and Magali Lara, "Entrevista a Magali Lara (transcript)," n.d., 30, B87 069, Fondo La era de la discrepancia, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Lara, "La memoria es como una piedra pulida," 420.
[15] Magali Lara, "De la ciudad: Formas de intervención," *La semana de bellas artes: artes visuales e identidad en América Latina*, November 4, 1981, Hemeroteca Nacional.
[16] For a discussion of the challenges and frustrations of addressing women's experience and feminist issues in the context of *los grupos,* see: Edward J. McCaughan, "Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence: Feminist Artists in Mexico," *Social Justice* 34, no. 1 (2007): 44–62.
[17] This and the following three quotes from Lara, "De la ciudad: Formas de intervención."
[18] "Tendríamos que dejar de pensar en lo monumental y volver a la escala humana"; "un arte de la ciudad."

which simply "glorif[ied] the spectacle" of urban life as it existed.[19] In other words, Lara was seeking an art that had the potential to effect change in the real world.

"Almost as if she were painting murals..."

Monumental, spectacular, glorifying—it isn't hard to deduce from Lara's description what sort of art continued to define the status quo in 1970s and 80s Mexico City. The Mexican mural movement had reigned supreme in the Mexican art world for decades, and while its dominance had waned significantly by the time Lara was writing in 1981, it continued to assert a profound influence upon understandings of what political art could and should be.[20]

In the 1920s and 30s, the period immediately following the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), muralism's articulation of a post-Revolutionary agenda appeared radical. The artists depicted ambitious themes: they catalogued the heterogeneity of the nation, they traced the roots of Mexico's mestizo identity, and they advanced biting criticisms of capitalist elites.[21] Through vivid narratives that could quickly and clearly communicate with viewers, muralism sought to educate the masses about Mexican history, identity, and the political aims of the Revolutionary party. By the 1950s, the mural movement had grown stifling and a new generation of young

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[19] "Cuando hablamos de un arte de la ciudad, pensamos en obras que glorifiquen su espectáculo, pero nunca se piensa en los muros como lugares aptos para expresar problemas y exigencias."
[20] In a longer, unpublished version of her essay "De la ciudad," Lara specifically called for "a committed art that doesn't resort to the stereotypes of socialist realism," making her reference to the muralists even clearer. Magali Lara, "De la ciudad," 1981, 10, Centro de Documentación de Juan Acha, Centro Cultural Universitario de Tlatelolco. "Un arte comprometido que no recurre en los estereotipos del realismo socialista."
[21] For an example of a mural program depicting the heterogeneity of Mexico, see Diego Rivera's murals at the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) (1923–28). For examples of murals depicting the roots of Mexico's mestizo identity, see Rivera's National Palace mural (1929–35) or José Clemente Orozco's mural program at the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara (1938–39). And for examples of murals displaying biting criticism of capitalist elites, see Rivera's *Man, Controller of the Universe* (1934) or David Alfaro Siqueiros's *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (1939–40).

artists advocated for alternate paths forward, emphasizing abstraction and internationalism rather than the nationalistic isolation that the so-called Mexican School of painting continued to espouse. This *generación de la ruptura* (breakaway generation), as these artists came to be known, participated in a growing independent gallery scene that, over the course of the late 50s and 60s, led to a gradual embrace of their eclectic, experimental practices.[22] But the events of 1968 exploded the *ruptura* agenda. In the face of staggering displays of State-sponsored violence and reflecting upon the creative forms of collective organization that had defined the student movement, artists sought out emphatically public and collaborative approaches to art-making. While their strategies were aggressively autonomous as compared to the frescoed walls in hallowed halls of the post-Revolutionary period, the aims of this post-68 generation of artists ultimately resulted in a return to certain aspects of muralism.

In Mexico, the year 1968 brought extensive social unrest, primarily in Mexico City as the metropolis prepared to host the Olympics that fall. A coalition of students from across the city led marches, protests, rallies, and creative co-optations of urban infrastructure and symbolic spaces over the summer of 1968 in response to the State's violent interventions on university campuses and broad suppression of political expression. Unwilling to consider the students' demands, and growing increasingly desperate to end the movement as the Olympics approached, the State steadily increased the level of violence that they were willing to inflict on the protestors. The turbulence culminated on October 2nd when armed forces blocked egresses and opened fire on students and activists gathered for a rally on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing complex, killing a still uncertain number of unarmed protesters but

[22] For a discussion of the relationship between the growing gallery scene and the *ruptura* generation see Pilar García, "The Zona Rosa, University Spaces, and the Creation of New Museums," in *Desafío a la estabilidad: procesos artísticos en México 1952-1967 (Defying Stability: Artistic Processes in Mexico 1952-1967)*, ed. Rita Eder (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014), 495–503.

with estimates generally converging around 300, and injuring many more.[23] Whatever threads of trust between the State and the Mexican people had not completely frayed by October were severed then, leaving the country reeling for the years that followed.

While she was too young in 1968 to have participated in the movement herself, Magali Lara's older siblings took part.[24] She and her peers were the direct inheritors of the movement. They were part of a generation of artists that spanned those that had participated in the movement themselves and those that had witnessed it from just outside. While artists throughout the twentieth century had treated the State with some suspicion, the outright violence and brutal force with which the State responded to the student movement, as well as the State's repeated lack of acknowledgement (a lack of acknowledgement that continued through the end of the twentieth century), opened a new chapter. The generation of artists that came of age in the wake of the events of 1968 enacted their loss of faith in systems of State power by taking aggressively further the anti-institutionality that earlier generations had proposed;[25] they formed *los grupos.*

In contradistinction to the muralists, these artists sought to either operate outside of State-sponsored cultural institutions and circuits of communication, or to co-opt them for their own purposes. Yet, one of their chief aims was one that they shared with the muralists: to communicate with a non-elite public.[26] Thus, even as their work had little to do with social realism or Revolutionary rhetoric, the model of a public and political art set forth by the Mexican mural movement some fifty years prior continued to have an outsized role in determining how

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[23] For a detailed account of the 1968 student movement, see: Sergio Zermeño, *México, una democracia utópica: el movimiento estudiantil del 68*, Sociología y política (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978).
[24] Magali Lara, Interview with author, July 30, 2018.
[25] See more about anti-institutional propositions of the generation preceding *los grupos* in: Arden Decker, "Los Grupos and the Art of Intervention in 1960s and 1970s Mexico" (Ph.D., New York, City University of New York, 2015).
[26] For more on the aims of *los grupos* see: "Grupos: Autodefiniciones."

this new generation's art developed. In fact, various of *los grupos* developed practices that reimagined muralism. Grupo Suma brought murals directly out onto the street, painting exterior walls in highly trafficked areas.[27] The group Taller de Investigación Plástica brought murals to rural communities, working with members of those communities to develop programs of images that presented locally relevant content and relied upon local techniques of production, including artisanal and indigenous traditions.[28] Grupo Germinal created "murals with legs"[29]—*mantas,* or banners that, according to the artists, did not have to "wait, like the mural, for the public to come to it," but could instead intervene nimbly and directly in the public's space.[30] Germinal built directly upon David Alfaro Siqueiros's theorizations of muralism's potential to activate the viewer, best represented by the artist's collaboration with Josep Renau from 1939, *Retrato de la burguesía* (Portrait of the Bourgeoisie).[31] And the group Tepito Arte Acá weaponized muralism's cultural patrimony, taking advantage of a newly instated Mexican law that protected murals from destruction. The artists disrupted a planned demolition in their neighborhood, preserving condemned buildings by painting their walls.[32] These groups sought to achieve what the mural movement had ultimately failed to do: icrct directly with a broad public. But they did so by holding on to the mural as form. Even the attempts to radically reimagine art-making

[27] See a detailed discussion of several of Suma's exterior murals in: Mya Dosch, "Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, and the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement" (Ph.D., New York, City University of New York, 2018), 129–31.
[28] Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta*, Testimonios y documentos (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco, 2008), 135, 146.
[29] Híjar, 44. "Murales con patas."
[30] Grupo Germinal, "Grupo Germinal," in *Muros frente a muros: Confrontación de arte público* (Morelia, Mexico: Casa de la Cultura de Michoacán, 1978), cited in and translated by Mya Dosch in "Creating 1968," 122. Also see Dosch's broader discussion of Germinal's *mantas* on pages 122–26.
[31] Dosch, 123–24.
[32] For a detailed discussion of Tepito Arte Acá's projects, see: Leonard Folgarait, "Murals and Marginality in Mexico City: The Case of Tepito Arte Acá," *Art History* 9, no. 1 (March 1986): 55–72, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1986.tb00228.x.

processes as collective endeavors resulted in echoes of the muralist movement's hierarchical organization where there was a single (always male) leader accompanied by "his followers" or "disciples."[33] With *los grupos,* for the first time since the Revolution—at least for the first time on a large scale—political art was being produced completely outside of any official or national institutional space, and was able to exist separately from social realism. Nevertheless, understandings of political art that had coalesced during the post-Revolutionary period remained encrusted in this experimental movement.

As art historian Leonard Folgarait has argued, a crucial aspect of political art from the post-Revolutionary period was the era's culture of stasis. In spite of their politicized content, the murals did not, could not, and in fact were never meant to effect social or political change. Folgarait writes:

> It must also be said very clearly that the murals did not cause or bring about political change, because they were created only during the post-Revolution, a time when political change was the *least* desired of all possible social activity, from the government's point of view. In a time of deliberate maintenance of the status quo, no one was to feel politicized or excited or provoked in any manner. Mexican citizens were to ingest Revolutionary rhetoric in a passive and unaggressive manner, and thereby be transformed in profound, yes, but subtle and undramatic ways.[34]

The murals were painted within an echo chamber. They did not seek to sway or convince, but rather to consolidate and affirm the achievements of the Revolution—to suggest that the varying political aims that had motivated the complex, decade-long conflict had been obtained.[35] The murals were not meant to communicate with viewers that disagreed with them. In fact, their political messages were far too explicit and confrontational to ever manage to do so. For

[33] This is how Lara described the structure of *los grupos* in an interview with Edward J. McCaughan quoted in his "Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence," 52–53.
[34] Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 197. Emphasis original.
[35] Folgarait, 198.

instance, in the early 1930s, both Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros were commissioned to create murals for a U.S.-American audience. Each artist accepted his commission with the understanding that the elite, capitalist patrons were seeking heroic, romantic, hopeful images.[36] These commissions could have been opportunities to find a compromise between the artists' own political agendas and those of their patrons in order to espouse the merits of muralism and share Mexican history and culture with expansive new audiences. Instead, each artist's confrontational approach resulted in the almost immediate destruction of his mural. In Rivera's case, he was commissioned to paint a mural on the walls of Rockefeller Center in New York City. He painted *Man at the Crossroads* (1932–33), refused to remove the portrait of Lenin that the composition contained, and his mural was chipped off the wall before it was even completed (figures 0.4–5).[37] As Rivera explained while he was in New York, for him, "Art which is not propaganda is not art at all."[38] In Siqueiros's case, he was commissioned to paint a mural in a popular pedestrian area of Los Angeles in 1932. He created *América Tropical* (Tropical America), which featured an unequivocal condemnation of U.S. imperialism, and it was whitewashed within months of completion (figures 0.6–7).[39] For Siqueiros, art could and should operate as a weapon that "attacks through the eyes, and ears."[40]

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[36] Rivera was commissioned to paint the following theme: "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future." Siqueiros understood that what his patrons were looking for in his painting was "a continent of happy men, surrounded by palms and parrots, where the fruit voluntarily detached itself to fall into the mouths of the happy mortals." Robert Linsley, "Utopia Will Not Be Televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 2 (1994): 48; David Alfaro Siqueiros, *La historia de una insidia: Mi respuesta* (Mexico City: Ediciones de "Arte Público," 1960), 31–32; translated in: Shifra M. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974): 324, https://doi.org/10.2307/775970.
[37] For a contemporary account of the controversy surrounding *Man at the Crossroads,* see: "Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1933.
[38] "Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera," 3.
[39] Leslie Rainer, "Preserving América Tropical: From Original Technique to Conservation Treatment," in *The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals*, ed. Leslie Rainer and Luann Manning (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013), 10–11.
[40] Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution*, 54.

In Mexico, supported by the State's eager attempts to establish stability, the murals helped to rewrite the confusion of ten years of civil conflict into a triumphant, social revolution of the Mexican people; the images were "passive and unaggressive" because their aims were to assure and assuage.[41] In the U.S., elite, capitalist patrons were similarly uninterested in provoking or inciting their publics, but the stability they sought was of a completely different ilk. The murals that Rivera and Siqueiros produced were far too likely to "very easily and seriously offend a great many people" and far too close to "Communist propaganda" to remain under the auspices of those patrons.[42] Neither artist truly seems to have expected that his mural would survive, as each had carefully withheld the most provoking aspects of his composition until late into his process.[43] In short, regardless of where these artists were painting, effecting political change was off the table.

This was the model of political art that remade the Mexican art world. This was the model that put Mexican modernism on the map. This was the model that maintained its monopoly upon Mexican culture for almost half a century. And this was the model that Lara pushed back against when she called for an art that would leave the monumental behind in favor

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[41] Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*, 197–98.
[42] "Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera," 3; *Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 1935, cited in Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 325.
[43] Luicenne Bloch, "On Location with Diego Rivera," *Art in America* 74 (February 1986); Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 324.
Art historian Anna Indych-López has pointed to the complexity of Rivera's inclusion of the portrait of Lenin in his mural. She notes that, while the original sketch for the mural didn't include the portrait, it included other imagery that clearly suggested communist principles. She also argues that Rivera was reacting to the criticism he received from both the right and the left for his mural program *Detroit Industry* (1932–33), which he completed just prior to arriving in New York. Perhaps responding to the differences in U.S.-American viewers' understandings of what constituted socialist iconography, he turned to the extremely explicit tactic of Lenin's portrait to avoid any possible misreadings of his political intent. Anna Indych-López, "Mexican Muralism in the United States: Controversies, Paradoxes, and Publics," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 208–26.

of “the human scale” and would “express problems and demands.”[44] Such a call suggests an art that would do more than simply reflect upon the present, but could expose contemporary issues and envision a different future. It suggests an art that could operate beyond the hothouse of official Mexican politics and communicate with viewers that did not necessarily already agree with the politics in play.

“…her voice comes through powerfully, creating a new way of speaking…”

It is from here that I would like to elaborate what political art means in the context of this study. I begin with an understanding that art need not maintain the status quo—that art can and does effect social and political change in the real world. In fact, in my understanding, it is the effects that an artwork has in the world that make an artwork political as opposed to anything inherent in the content or the form of the work itself. Those effects can be small or they can be large, but they are always just one part of a broader conversation, and art’s political effects almost always operate in support of an already defined political project. In other words, in this study, political art is art that contributes to an established political project—a project that seeks to emancipate or to dominate.[45] Following philosopher Jacques Rancière, I understand art’s manner of contribution to political projects to be finite and relatively modest; any given artwork is limited to its capacity to act *as art.*[46] For example, art can make things visible or perceptible, it can document, enunciate, or clarify, and it can envision or imagine. Art cannot supplant the role of other political tools, e.g., legislation and other forms of policy implementation; demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of dissent. And a work of art cannot effect change in

[44] Lara, “De la ciudad: Formas de intervención.”
[45] My definition of a “political project” follows that of Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006), 14.
[46] Rancière, 14.

isolation.[47] But that does not mean that the contributions that art makes to political projects are not powerful.

Art's ability to make visible is of primary concern in this project, which principally focuses upon static, two-dimensional images such as drawings, prints, and paintings. And art's ability to make visible can play a powerful part in political projects. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe suggests that visibility is critical in distinguishing that which is "political" from that which is "social." She explains that "the social" consists of "practices that *conceal* the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded."[48] "The social" appears natural, static, unchangeable. The mechanisms by which social mores are established are invisible, making intervention seemingly impossible. "The political," in contrast, "involves the *visibility* of the acts of social institution."[49] "The political" is not taken for granted but understood to lie within a contested terrain that is potentially malleable. Art is quite good at visually manifesting content. Thus, by making visible aspects of "the social" which are usually invisible, art can contribute to pushing those aspects into the realm of "the political" and transform them into something contestable.

Magali Lara's images expose realities of women's lived experience. They depict female eroticism, interiority, and inner life; they document domestic spaces, objects, and labor; and they display women's bodily realities. Further, her images raise awareness of social structures that perpetuate gender inequality. They make visible aspects of women's lives that have been elided and erased as a result of social mores, governmental policies, and late-capitalist systems of value.

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[47] For a compelling discussion of a single work of art's inability to effect change on its own see: Marcelo Expósito, "La potencia de la cooperación. Diez tesis sobre el arte politizado en la nueva onda global de movimientos," *Errata#: revista de artes visuales*, no. 7 (Abril 2012): 19.
[48] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 17. My emphasis.
[49] Mouffe, 17. My emphasis.

They point to assumptions surrounding what is "normal" or reasonable to discuss in public, how women are expected and permitted to contribute as citizens, and the limits placed upon women's bodily autonomy. They highlight the ways in which what society deems as "productive" and the relationship between productivity and power under capitalism depreciate activities and labor primarily performed by women. By drawing attention to the structures that undergird expectations regarding women's behavior and how certain activities are categorized or valued, her images contribute to reclassifying those expectations and activities from the realm of "the social" to that of "the political." Her images reconfigure the dominant political and cultural regimes' allocation of that which is visible and that which is concealed or made to seem natural and unchangeable.[50] In so doing, they contribute to a political project—a feminist project that ultimately seeks to emancipate humanity from the constant reproduction of the categories of sex and gender. Compelling viewers to attend to experiences that have been rendered invisible and stories that have been silenced by both formal and informal social structures constitutes a form of political resistance.

Lara's artworks contributed towards broader, ongoing efforts to enact change around key feminist issues of the 1970s and 80s, such as the devaluation of domestic labor, women's access to physical and mental healthcare, sexual freedom and the recognition of sexual diversity, and the fight for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. Her images participated in counter-informational circuits, inserting accounts and evidence of women's lived experiences that had been omitted from mainstream discussion. Further, they engaged in an approach to artmaking that was infused with feminist thought. As feminist artist and activist Mónica Mayer wrote in 1984 in her "Proposal for a feminist art in Mexico," feminist art depended upon "collaboration

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[50] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 14.

and the desire to share women's experience that…converts the voices of individuals into a collective proposal."[51] For Mayer, feminist art didn't depend upon "the militancy of the artist," but rather a weaving together of feminist thought and artistic production.[52] Feminist politics, Mayer suggested, inhere neither in the art object or the artist themselves, but in the ways that the object resonates alongside other objects and conversations in the world.

Feminist political projects both account for and depend upon micropolitical experience. Micropolitics recognize the ways in which individual, everyday interactions and decisions are affected by policies determined at the macro level, i.e., on the scale of a nation-state. They also recognize the ways in which individual, everyday interactions and decisions can accumulate in order to intervene on a macro level, i.e., to shift the cultural imaginary, even when those interactions and decisions are not performed with larger political aims in mind.[53]

This sort of political efficacy is different than the type of political efficacy that was recognized in artworks produced in Mexico, both earlier in the twentieth century and in the post-1968 period. The work of *los grupos,* for instance, can be understood to operate at a macro level, addressing political issues motivated by questions of class on a national scale. Even though many of the projects produced by *los grupos* relied upon interpersonal exchanges with passersby on the street, the metrics that participating artists used to evaluate their projects' success depended upon effects on a macro scale, such as reactions by the Mexican State. In reflecting upon their projects, members of Grupo Março have recounted multiple interventions on the part of the State, including when the State intelligence agency contacted members of the group regarding

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[51] Mónica Mayer, "Propuesta para un arte feminista en México," *Fem* 9, no. 33 (1984): 13. "La colaboración y el afán de compartir la experiencia de las mujeres que…convierten las voces individuales en una propuesta colectiva."
[52] Mayer, 13.
[53] Patricia S. Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31.

the contents of telegrams that they had sent as part of *Poema telgráfico-urbano,* presuming that they were encoded messages, and when armed police officers broke up one of their *Poemas urbanos.*[54] From early on, Grupo Suma reported the State's reactions alongside descriptions of their projects, suggesting that those reactions were integral to their practice. They noted which of their guerrilla murals painted on public walls around the city were rapidly whitewashed as the State enforced its policy of official propaganda's exclusive right to that wall space.[55] Such efforts on the part of the State indicate that these projects had real stakes—that they had the potential to threaten the status quo. But politics that operate on a macro scale are not the only politics that should be taken seriously.

In Mexico, artistic endeavors that dealt in the micropolitical were difficult to assimilate as such. Public art had maintained a stranglehold on the political. From the post-Revolutionary idealism of the muralists of the 1920s and 30s, to the fast-paced practices of the Taller Gráfica Popular of the 30s and 40s, a printmaking collective whose linocuts and lithographs were pasted on exterior walls around the city or distributed hand-to-hand, to the disenchanted but still decidedly public interventions of *los grupos* of the 70s and 80s, political art had occurred in public spaces and addressed issues that concerned the public at large.[56] I want to untangle these two ideas—the public and the political—in order to develop an understanding of political art that allows for the efficacy of private, intimate, and inward-facing practices. For it is embedded

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[54] Daniel Garza Usabiaga, "¿Es el buzón un museo? Mauricio Guerrero y el Arte Correo," in *Artecorreo*, ed. Mauricio Marcin (Mexico City: Museo de la Ciudad de México, 2011), 111; Vázquez and Marín, "Entrevista a Manuel Marín por Álvaro Vázquez (transcript)."
[55] Dosch, "Creating 1968," 130; Debroise and Medina, *La era de la discrepancia*, 221.
[56] Francisco Reyes Palma, "Utopias of Disenchantment," in *Gritos desde el archivo: grabado político del Taller de Gráfica Popular (Shouts from the archive: political prints from the Taller de Gráfica Popular)*, by Pilar García and James Oles (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008), 34.

within these aspects that I argue art's capacity to communicate across cultural, experiential, and ideological divides lies.

Untangling the public and the political will enable me to recuperate the potency of the micropolitical gestures that make up Magali Lara's art practice. It will allow me to explore many of the same themes that have driven the writing and criticism surrounding Lara's practice from the late 70s to the present—themes such as self-representation and subjectivity, interiority and eroticism, and the everyday and the ordinary—but to do so from a position that takes those themes as a site of politics. But untangling the public and the political has implications that reach beyond Lara's practice, prolific as it is. Doing so allows for rethinking political art across the history of twentieth-century Mexico. It makes space for reconsiderations of the art practices of earlier generations of women artists working in Mexico, including Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, Olga Costa, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Remedios Varo, and Leonora Carrington. These artists' explorations of personal experiences, private spaces, and surreal visions resulted in their work being held apart from the sweeping narratives and political posturing of the muralists, and thereby relegated to the apolitical sphere.[57] If political art were inclusive of such themes rather

[57] It is worth noting that both María Izquierdo and Leonora Carrington were commissioned to paint public murals. In Izquierdo's case, her mural project became embroiled in controversy—specifically, controversy with muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros—and she was never permitted to complete it. As art historian Nancy Deffebach has argued, part of the controversy was rooted in her choices in subject matter. In Carrington's case, her commission was relatively late in the arc of muralism's history, by which point the State was willing to accept abstract and Surrealist approaches to mural-making. Between 1963 and 64, she completed *El mundo mágico de los mayas* (The magical world of the Maya) as part of a large program of mural commissions at the Museo Nacional de Antropología. See more about Izquierdo's commission and the controversy that surrounded it in: Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 111–30; and Carlos Valdés, "Evocación de Héctor Xavier: Muerte de María Izquierdo, dolor de Frida Kahlo," *Revista de la Universidad de México* XXXIII, no. 8 (April 1979): 29–33. See more about other women's participation in mural projects in Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, *Eclipse de siete lunas: mujeres muralistas en México*, Colección Destiempo (Mexico City: Artes de México y del Mundo, 2017).

than dismissing them out of hand, what sorts of political agendas could we uncover in these artists' works?

Even more broadly, untangling the public and the political allows for a rethinking of how art practices across Latin America from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s have been read and historicized. In particular, I am interested in scrutinizing the collapse between a certain type of political work and the category of Latin American conceptual art. In the 1990s, authors like art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez and artist Luis Camnitzer worked to dismantle assumptions that conceptual art practices in Latin America were derivative or delayed in relation to their European and Anglo American counterparts.[58] Building upon a set of polarities that Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz first described in 1974 between "linguistic" and "ideological" conceptualisms, their texts forged crucial frameworks that brought important artworks into the global view, many for the first time.[59] They focused on artworks that dealt with macropolitical issues of the region—chiefly, issues stemming from authoritarian regimes including State-sponsored violence and disappearances of citizens, as well as extensive censorship and oppression. But over the next decade or so, those artworks and their relationship to Latin American autochthony and authenticity had become entrenched. Problematizing the collapse between macropolitical issues and Latin American art created during this period, art historian Zanna Gilbert has argued that the most visible types of politically engaged art in Latin America have reinforced stereotypes of the

[58] See: Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America," in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Waldo Rasmussen, Fatima Bercht, and Elizabeth Ferrer (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 156–67; Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999); and especially Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity," in Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss, 53–71; and later, Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 20.
[59] Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto (1960–1974)*, repr. 2012, Arte y estética 83 (Madrid: Akal, 1974), 404–07.

region, pointing to the most violent and unstable parts of Latin American nations' histories and foreclosing other forms of political art from being considered authentic.[60] Further, as cultural critic Suely Rolnik has suggested, grouping artworks that were made across the region under the rubric of "political" erases much of the nuance behind individual artists' choices and experiences. It suggests that each of those artists opted to make activist art and ignores the daily and personal contexts that infused their practices.[61] Even in artworks where icropolitics are relevant, they need not have exclusive rights to political readings of those works; micropolitics remain worth considering.

"…that affects the community."

How, then, can an art historical approach account for art's micropolitical effects? I argue that the consideration of affective experience is crucial to such an approach, and that Lara's artwork offers a particularly compelling example of how affect and politics can intersect. Her art's ability to contribute to a feminist political project by way of affective experience is not necessarily more or less politically effective than the macropolitical approaches of the muralists or *los grupos,* but differently political. And as a result, her art can communicate differently, reaching different audiences and effecting different sorts of change. Micropolitical gestures can traverse gaps that are insurmountable for exclusively macropolitical approaches.

When encountering Lara's works, critics and curators have often dwelled upon

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[60] Zanna Gilbert, "Ideological Conceptualism and Latin America: Politics, Neoprimitivism and Consumption," *Rebus: A Journal of Art History & Theory*, no. 4 (2009): 32, 35. See another compelling problematization of the dominance of certain understandings of political history and their relation to conceptual artistic practices from this period in Miguel A. López, "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?," trans. Josephine Watson, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 23 (2010): 5–21.
[61] Suely Rolnik, "A Shift Towards the Unnameable," in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 38.

sensations. Sometimes her images are sharp and incisive, as if they have a “cutting edge.”[62] Sometimes they are tender and peaceful, sometimes melancholic or nostalgic, sometimes tense, aggressive, or even violent.[63] Some of her images are “cloyingly sweet” or almost blindly optimistic, while others are cold, dry, and aseptic.[64] Some are full of pain and anguish—some so much so that they seem to dole out “intimate flagellations.”[65] Some of her images are deeply unsettling, tumultuous, or even nauseating.[66] What is clear from this diversity of sensorial descriptions is that Lara’s works have struck many of her viewers on an affective level. They inspire sensations that lie at the intersection of emotion and embodied experience. This study takes seriously the role that affect can play in effecting political change, recognizing that affective experience can be a significant means of transmitting knowledge and transforming thought.[67]

In his seminal theory of affect, Silvan Tomkins claims that affect is “a motivational

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[62] Magali Lara and Rita Eder, *Miedo* (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 1988).
[63] Gonzalo Vélez, “Magali Lara: Obra gráfica,” *Uno más uno*, September 21, 1991, sec. El cuadro en el ojo, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Graciela Kartofel, “Caminos del arte,” *Vogue México*, May 1985, Caja 2, Núm. 127, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Luis Rius Caso, “Ambitos de Magali Lara,” *Uno más uno*, September 12, 1985, Hemeroteca Nacional; Pilar Morales Hernández, “Magali Lara, Pintora y Mujer,” *El Heraldo de México*, January 3, 1988, sec. El Heraldo en la cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional.
[64] Vélez, “Magali Lara: Obra gráfica.” “Acaramelado emaplagoso”; Macario Matus, “Magali Lara en el MUCA,” *Excelsior*, December 5, 2004, sec. Arena, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; “Obras de M. Lara son como puestas en escenas,” *El Porvenir*, August 4, 1984, sec. C, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.
[65] Raquel Peguero, “Magali Lara y el árbol del cuerpo,” *La Jornada*, May 16, 1994, sec. Cultura, Hemerografía, Museo de Arte Moderno; Macario Matus, “Sueños vegetales de Magali Lara,” *Excelsior*, June 13, 1993, sec. El Búho, Hemeroteca Nacional.
[66] Peguero, “Magali Lara y el árbol del cuerpo”; Vélez, “Magali Lara: Obra gráfica”; Magali Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019.
[67] See compelling accounts of the power of affective experience in: Diana Taylor, “‘You Are Here’: The DNA of Performance,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 46, no. 1 (2002): 149–69, especially 155–56; and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45.

system"—a system of feedback where we react to stimuli and then choose how to interpret or respond to those reactions.[68] Affect is not a conscious process, but neither is it purely autonomic. It lies somewhere between the activities of the body and those of the mind: "an excluded middle, prior to the distinction between activity and passivity," philosopher Brian Massumi writes.[69] It isn't performed by the subject, but perceived by them, and it is fundamentally relational, lying somewhere between the who or what that is affecting and the who or what that is affected.[70] For Tomkins, affect's preconscious, in-betweenness means that it is crucial to our freedom of thought.[71] Massumi suggests something similar; affect allows for the possibility of "hold[ing] contrasting alternatives together without immediately demanding that one alternative eventuates and the others evaporate."[72] Affective experiences create situations wherein the subject responds involuntarily, and as a result, new possibilities come into focus.

The affecting qualities of Lara's artworks open up a range of responses, even for a single viewer, as critics have mentioned time and again.[73] They allow for those responses—Massumi's "contrasting alternatives"[74]—to be held together. They allow for a single viewer to return to an image or remember an image and arrive at a different interpretation than they had previously.[75]

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[68] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 34.
[69] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 32.
[70] Massumi, 35; Brian Massumi and Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation*, no. 3 (October 2009): 2.
[71] Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 37–39.
[72] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 12.
[73] See, for example, discussions of the multiplicity of possible readings in Lara's work in: "Magali Lara Expone su Obra Reciente," *Excelsior*, August 10, 1978, sec. B, Microfilm, Hemeroteca Nacional; Kartofel, "Caminos del arte"; and Teresa del Conde, "Proliferación," *La Jornada*, November 10, 1990, sec. Cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional.
[74] Massumi and McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," 12.
[75] See discussions of the way that meaning in Lara's work shifts over time in: Leticia Ocharán, "Magali Lara y lo cotidiano," *El Nacional*, January 2, 1983, sec. Revista Mexicana Cultural, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México; and Braulio Peralta, "Magali Lara y el universo vegetal visto desde dentro," *La Jornada*, May 17, 1992, sec. Cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional.

Her images aren't prescriptive, but rather open-ended. Caught in the moment between passivity and activity, involuntarily compelled to respond, the affecting qualities of her artworks provide the opportunity for viewers' thinking to transform in subtle yet significant ways.

Lara's images don't rely upon the explicit messaging or confrontation that characterized so much of what had constituted political art in twentieth-century Mexico. Her paintings weren't chipped off the wall or whitewashed like the murals of Rivera or Siqueiros. Her images didn't inspire intervention on the part of the State, as her earlier activities with Grupo Março had. Instead, each of her images induces "a slight stutter that alters our perception, draws us into the work and involves us in its action," as one reviewer compellingly described the affective experience of viewing Lara's artwork in 1986.[76] Those "slight stutters"—those small shifts in a viewer's perception—can effect real change. Not all at once, but little by little. They can be just enough to momentarily disrupt habitual responses and behaviors. They can be just enough to compel viewers to consider an issue from another perspective, or to reevaluate one's prior assumptions and opinions. They can be just enough to communicate across the cultural, experiential, and even ideological divisions in our society.

* * *

In what follows, I investigate how Lara's artworks induce those "slight stutters." How do her images draw viewers in? How do they compel them to keep looking? How do they alter viewers' perceptions of women's experience? How do they shift viewers' perspectives around feminist issues, thereby contributing to a feminist political project? The chapters of this dissertation are organized around a series of formal strategies operating in Lara's work that I

[76] Steven Marsh, "Speaking with Paint," *The Mexico City News*, October 12, 1986, sec. Arts & Leisure, Hemeroteca Nacional.

argue kindle political communication. Over the course of my explorations of these strategies, I develop a theory of political art that accounts for art's affective power.

The first chapter examines the role of seriality in Lara's artwork. I consider the ways that the serial structure of her artistic practice combines with content and facture to evoke frequent comparisons between her work and a diary, and I explore her self-described "obsession" with representing certain objects and spaces over and over again.[77] I argue that the varying and repeated ways in which Lara presents intimacy in her work allows her images to not only describe intimate encounters but to engender intimacy between artist and viewer.

The second chapter explores the ambiguous relationship between text and image in Lara's work. Centering on a series of works from about 1982–85 called *Historias de casa* (Stories of home), it examines the juxtaposition of images of domestic interiors and quotidian activities (e.g., cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry) with ambivalent, hand-scrawled bits of text. In this chapter I argue that the play between looking and reading—especially reading Lara's difficult to decipher text—evokes a slow process of looking that leaves space for viewers to have surprisingly affecting experiences.

In the third chapter, I investigate Lara's choice to avoid the direct depiction of bodies. Focusing upon a series of images of bathrooms from 1984, I demonstrate that, by figuring women's bodies without picturing them directly, Lara was able to address realities of women's bodily experience that remained taboo in 1980s Mexico. While these realities importantly included physical experiences (e.g., female sexuality, menstruation and other aspects of

[77] Lucía Alvarez, "El humor, un elemento necesario en la pintura, dice Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, December 16, 1989, No. 179, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM.

reproductive health), I argue that her unpictured bodies also enabled the articulation of a nuanced relationship between body and self.

My final chapter builds upon the previous one, continuing to investigate the lack of directly depicted bodies, but turning to Lara's flower pictures of the mid-1980s. Examining her metaphoric representations of bodies by way of the still life genre, I argue that her images of flowers invite a multifaceted, "female-oriented" gaze that allows for complex presentations of women's subjectivity. This chapter concludes with attention to Lara's subtle political approach in the context of the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, and particularly the ways that feminism evolved into a much more class-conscious movement in Mexico following the earthquake.

None of these formal strategies—seriality, complex relationships between text and image, unpictured bodies, the blurring between portraiture and still life—are found exclusively in Magali Lara's artwork. But the way that they come together in her practice, and the way that she uses them to unveil hidden aspects of Mexican women's experience and raise awareness of feminist issues, unfolds into a unique opportunity to consider their potential as effective conduits of political communication. In spite of the ways in which Lara's artwork differs from both the monumental murals of the post-Revolutionary period and the reimagined mural practices of the post-1968 generation of *los grupos,* Lara's intimate images operate "almost as if she were painting murals";[78] they are powerfully affecting and, by very way of that, surprisingly politically potent.

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[78] Kartofel, "Artimundo: ¿Dónde aprendió Magali a pintar de esa manera?"

CHAPTER 1
"To Turn Your Private Life into Something that's Shared": Engendering Intimacy

In a postcard-sized drawing from 1983, Magali Lara presents a disheveled double bed, viewed from above (figure 1.1). Two plump pillows lie side by side, and the covers are thrown back. On the right, a small bedside table is partially in view with a desk lamp propped on top. On the left, a pair of high heels stand beside the bed, as if they were slipped off just before someone swung themself onto the mattress. Sketched in black ink on white paper, Lara's drawing has the appearance of a quick, bare-bones scribble. There is almost nothing to it. But it pulses and hums with the intimacy of reading someone else's secret diary.

Indeed, Lara's artwork has been compared repeatedly to a diary. Her images have been likened to "personal diaries," to "an intimate diary," and to "a diary of confessions."[1] She "produces" her works like a diary, her works "transform" into a diary, they "function like diaries," they "share her experience" like a diary, and they "seduce" like a diary.[2] I cite here reviews and essays that span 1984 to 2017. What do these descriptions imply? A certain type of autobiographical description; an articulation of subjectivity that borders on the extreme; a set of objects that suggest that they were "not consciously constructed for a [viewership] other than the [artist] and her intimates," to rephrase one scholar's apt description of diaries.[3] I want to home in

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[1] Rina Epelstein, "Herbolario," in *Herbolarios* (Xochimilco: Galería del Sur; Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, 1992), 6; Sylvia Navarrete, "Flor, espejo de los sentidos en la pintura actual," *Artes de México*, no. 47, Flores (1999): 73; Andrea Torreblanca, "Espiral: Magali Lara," Museo de Mujeres Artistas Mexicanas, 2014, https://museodemujeres.com/es/exposiciones/120-espiral.
[2] Epelstein, "Herbolario," 6; Navarrete, "Flor, espejo de los sentidos en la pintura actual," 73; Ixchel Ledesma, "El error en la obra de Magali Lara," *Nexos: Cultura y vida cotidiana* (blog), May 29, 2017, https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/?p=12789; Mariana Obarrio, "Los zapatos de tacón," *Artes plásticas: Revista de la Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* 1, no. 1–2 (October 1984): 85.
[3] Helen M. Buss, "A Feminist Revision of New Historicism to Give Fuller Readings of Women's Private Writing," in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*, ed. Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia Anne Huff (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 88.

upon those aspects of Lara's images that provoke these comparisons to diaries. How do Lara's artworks grant their viewer intimacy? How do they bring their viewer into the fold as one of "her intimates"?

In the small sketch of the double bed, the subject matter of the image suggests intimacy in an overt way. But in Lara's work, the already-intimate space of the bedroom enters into dialogue with choices in facture and form: her insistent, handmade approach and her serial explorations of quotidian themes. Her repeated artistic investigation of bedrooms establishes a site where sexual intimacy and eroticism can be understood as part of a continuum of intimate expression. But so too do her repeated investigations of other themes, including those that are less overtly intimate than the bedroom. This chapter considers Lara's images of beds in conversation with other serial investigations, including images that incorporate mouths or lipstick prints, and those that center upon pairs of scissors. In her repeated renderings of each of these themes, she folds together different ways of kindling closeness. Eroticism co-exists with her endeavors to express interiority and validate inner life. The substance, surface, and structure of her artworks all operate in tandem such that, in the artist's words, she is able "to turn [her] private life into something that's shared."[4]

Lara's images enable a range of interactions, behaviors, expectations, and feelings that are frequently ascribed to intimate relationships. In both scholarly and vernacular understandings, self-disclosure is inherent to intimacy.[5] Intimate relationships require revealing something personal to another—sharing something private and interior that could not be

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[4] Magali Lara, *Animaciones*, trans. Richard Moszka (Puebla: Museo Amparo, 2012), 29.
[5] Karen J. Prager, *The Psychology of Intimacy*, Guilford Series on Personal Relationships (New York; London: Guilford Press, 1995), 43.

observed from the outside. They require a process of making oneself vulnerable before another.[6] But intimacy also depends upon interactions that are bidirectional; understandings of intimacy frequently rely upon notions of mutuality or reciprocity. In order for acts of self-disclosure to be recognized as intimate interactions, those acts require a response of some kind, whether it be an offer of validation or understanding, or a reciprocal act of self-disclosure—a process of sharing something that is similarly personal.[7] Intimate interactions both depend upon and result in empathy; the capacity for intimacy is contingent upon "the ability to see the world through the eyes of another" and "the ability to experience vicariously the emotions and experiences of another."[8] Real intimacy goes deeper than reacting appropriately to another's self-disclosure; it involves an empathic process that spurs responses that are as emotional and as vulnerable as one's counterpart in an intimate interaction. Further, a set of discrete intimate interactions only evolves into an intimate relationship when those interactions occur on a repeated and ongoing basis. To become intimate with someone depends upon a set of expectations surrounding practices and patterns of mutual self-disclosure and validation.[9] In their essay "Sex in Public," cultural theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe intimacy as "a common language of self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness."[10] Succinctly encapsulating the primary characteristics of intimacy enumerated above, this description also allows for a wide range of interactions and relationships to be recognized as intimate.

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[6] Prager, 25; Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron, eds., *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 421.
[7] Prager, *The Psychology of Intimacy*, 21, 46; Mashek and Aron, *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, 422.
[8] Prager, *The Psychology of Intimacy*, 59.
[9] Prager, 23; Beverley Fehr, "A Prototype Model of Intimacy Interactions in Same-Sex Friendships," in *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 9–26.
[10] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 561.

The images that Lara creates enact self-disclosure, encourage reciprocity, and do so in a sustained way. They allow for something that is held in *common,* that is *shared* and *exchanged.* The images that Lara creates do not simply describe intimacy. They engender it. Through her combination of choices in content, facture, and form, Lara's static images reach across space and time and make their viewer feel close to their creator.

Unmade beds

In late 1982, Lara took part in a very early feminist endeavor: a "collective installation" created by a group of five artists.[11] Each artist designed a bed as a means of examining and critiquing "traditional sexual roles."[12] But in the work that Lara made in the years that followed, the notions of sexual intimacy and eroticism that this installation addressed were just one aspect of what her images of beds explored. "I'm…obsessed with the bed," Lara explains. "It is the origin of other lives, or where other lives occur, like those of dreams, illness, and death. It's a place of pain and of pleasure, but perhaps what I really like is that there, there is an encounter with the other, imaginary or real."[13] Her investigation of the bed incorporates encounters that are both erotic and non-erotic, both real and imagined, and her images describe both physical and psychic aspects of those encounters.

Consider a painting from 1985, *La noche* (The night; figure 1.2). Part of a bed with a rumpled pink sheet is pictured in the foreground. Beyond, there is a window with a leafy plant

[11] Mónica Mayer, *Rosa chillante: mujeres y performance en México* (Mexico City: CONACULTA/FONCA, 2004), 36.
[12] Mónica Mayer, "On life and art as a feminist," *n. paradoxa*, no. 8 (November 1998): 42.
[13] Magali Lara, *Mi versión de los hechos...* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Dirección General de Artes Visuales, 2004), 46. "La cama…me obsesiona. Es la madre o donde suceden otras vidas como la del sueño, la enfermedad y la muerte. Es un lugar de dolor y de placer, pero quizá lo que realmente me gusta es que ahí hay un encuentro con lo otro, imaginario o real."

covering the sill, the venetian blinds pulled up to reveal a sliver of light blue sky. A fan is suspended from the ceiling, its teal blades reaching menacingly close to the curve of the pink pillow. White lines and fragments of text punctuate the image, imbuing the strange glow of the sienna walls with a dreamlike quality. "Tu cuerpo," or "your body," Lara writes, just above the edge of the bed. "Mi deseo por ti" ("my desire for you"), she squeezes underneath the scribbled leaves of the plant on the far right, the words and the outlines scrambling together. Above the fan, accompanying small white lines that suggest the rotation of the fan's blades, she writes "el viento" ("the breeze"), and beneath, wedged in the gap between fan and pillow, "la sombra" ("the shadow"). Here, descriptions of physical sensations overlap with those of psychic sensations and inner life: the movement of air on one's skin, the proximity of another's body in a shared bed; the surreality of the space with its black ceiling pressing down and teal fan looming over the bed; the experience of desire, and the space between dreaming and waking.

The artist's explorations of interiority and psychic sensation expanded in the months that followed this painting. In a series of works from 1986 entitled *Insomnio* (Insomnia), Lara repeatedly investigated the space between dreaming and waking. Subjective, psychic perception blurs together with tangible, external reality in these attempts to capture the experience of insomnia. The flowers pictured on the bedspread in images such as a photocopy featuring the phrase "noches de insomnio…me despierto y siempre es demasiado pronto" (nights of insomnia…I wake up and it's always too soon; figure 1.3) began to take on a life of their own over the course of the series. Slippages between undulating waves of flowered fabric and flowers that creep off the surface of the bedspread seem to probe the uncanny sensations of being awake in the middle of the night and of drifting off to sleep (figures 1.4–5). As Lara explained, the images from this series were constructed out of "tinges of colors, many greys seen with the eyes

of someone who hasn't slept, or who imagines that they haven't, and confuses daylight with electric light."[14] Her compositions aim to record interior vision, acknowledging, documenting, and sharing the experiences of inner life.

The paintings that made up her series *Insomnio* marked an important moment for Lara—a moment where, she explained, "I was starting to do what I wanted to do with painting."[15] She suggests that one of her chief aims in her paintings from this period was to bring together different modes of perception. In order to capture reality in her canvases, she sought to depict aspects of "the waking world" alongside "dreams, fantasies, frustrations, digressions, etc."[16] Finding a way to capture and share interiority was a driving force for her painting practice. The bed or the bedroom, with its long-held associations of both sexual intimacy and interiority, was a pictorial space where Lara could explore the ways in which different forms of intimacy overlapped and different modes of expressing intimacy combined. Through her recurrent investigation of the empty bed—her self-described "obsession" with it as subject matter—a representation of inner life could slowly come into focus.

Recurrence and obsession play a central role in evoking the frequent comparisons between Lara's work and a diary. As literary scholar Rebecca Hogan has pointed out, "Diaries…are inclusive in the sense that they do not privilege 'amazing' over 'ordinary' events, in terms of scope, space, or selection."[17] The serial, everydayness of the diary creates a

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[14] Angélica Abelleyra, "Carece de crítica la plástica en México: Magali Lara," *La Jornada*, October 14, 1986, sec. Cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Colores matizados, muchos grises vistos con los ojos de alguien que no ha dormido, o se imagina que no lo ha hecho, y confunde la luz del día con la luz eléctrica."

[15] Pilar Morales Hernández, "Magali Lara, Pintora y Mujer," *El Heraldo de México*, January 3, 1988, sec. El Heraldo en la cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Empezaba a hacer lo que quería con la pintura."

[16] Morales Hernández. Lara comments, "El problema de pintar la realidad es un problema muy amplio, uno quiere creer que la verdad es como el mundo en vigilia, pero creo que también los sueños, fantasias, frustraciones, desvíos, etcétera, forman parte de esa realidad."

[17] Rebecca Hogan, "Engendered Autobiographies: The Diary as a Feminine Form," *Prose Studies* 14, no.

horizontal narrative. Trivial, ephemeral details are written in the same hand as extraordinary events, one after the other. This same serial, ordinariness can be observed in Lara's art practice, which revolves around repeated investigations of objects and spaces with which she says she is obsessed. In the case of her beds and bedrooms, this approach establishes a non-hierarchical relationship between the different intimacies that her images advance. The sexual intimacy suggested in the lush, tumbled sheets and softly glowing pink pillows in the midst of a dusky bedroom labelled "New York, April" (*Cama, New York,* 1985; figure 1.6) is treated with the same seriousness and dignity as the glimpse into vulnerable, inner life suggested by the jacket and change purse strewn across the unmade bed in the piercingly bright bedroom in which Lara urgently scrawls in red, "I want to leave, I want to leave" (*Me quiero ir,* 1985; figure 1.7). While these paintings grant the viewer access to different aspects of interiority, in Lara's renderings, they are equally worthy investigations and equally deserving of being captured in paint on canvas.

In these images, Lara offers a seemingly authentic version of herself. This is not the airbrushed, touched-up version of her bedroom. Between the wrinkled sheets and the untidied room, she permits glimpses of what appears to be a self that is unperformed and almost-unconsciously presented. These images are acts of self-disclosure.

The empty, unmade bed has been a means of representing interiority or eroticism both before and after Lara's exploration of it. But examining other works that treat the unmade bed as subject matter reveals the way that Lara's works do not simply describe intimacy but engender it between artist and viewer. For instance, in her notorious 1998 installation *My Bed,* British artist Tracey Emin gave the viewer unmitigated access to her private life (figure 1.8). Consisting of the

2 (September 1, 1991): 98, https://doi.org/10.1080/01440359108586434.

literal detritus of a particular moment in her life that she packed up and reassembled in the space of the gallery, Emin's installation infamously presented the aftermath of a post-breakup "bender." At the center of the installation was an empty, unmade bed. Its rumpled, soiled sheets were accompanied by worn underwear and pantyhose, cigarette butts, empty vodka bottles, a used condom, polaroid snapshots, and other refuse. The work, which has been read alternatingly as a stunning commentary on the role of autobiography at the end of the twentieth century and an excessive instance of self-indulgence, seems to lie at the opposite end of autobiography from the diaristic.[18] Whereas Rebecca Hogan points to the ways in which diaries deemphasize exceptional events, devoting the same attention to the ordinary as to the extraordinary, Emin's bed spectacularizes her everyday life.[19] Even as the installation depends upon trivial, everyday materials, it memorializes a set of events such that they become extraordinary. It documents a period of intense emotion and loss of control that Emin was interested in preserving and re-presenting precisely because of its extremity.

At first glance, a photograph of an unmade bed by Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres may seem to behave similarly to Emin's installation. In 1991, Gonzalez-Torres blew up the photo to monumental size and displayed it on twenty-four billboards scattered across New York City (figure 1.9). In the image, morning light streams across rumpled white sheets and a pair of pillows record the impressions of two heads that have lain side by side (figure 1.10). In both its original iteration and in subsequent installations, the image was embedded anonymously within the urban landscape. As critic and curator Robert Storr has pointed out, in this context,

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[18] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 4; Michael Glover, "The Artist Makes an Exhibition of Herself; She Has Become Famous through Self-Exposure but, as Michael Glover Finds, It Still Doesn't Make Tracey Emin Interesting," *The Independent*, May 15, 2001, sec. Arts, Gale OneFile: Popular Magazines.
[19] Hogan, "Engendered Autobiographies," 98.

Gonzalez-Torres's bed offers no insight into the nature of the coupling that he records.[20] Rather than transforming the artist's life into spectacle, the quiet image, repeated again and again in different parts of the city, creates a site of open-ended, multivalent intimacy.

When the work is not encountered anonymously, and is instead considered within the broader context of Gonzalez-Torres's artistic practice, the bed advances a more specific intimacy. Alongside his repeated pairs of identical objects that allude to same-sex couplings—two strings of mass-produced lightbulbs (*"Untitled" (Lovers – Paris),* 1993); two small, circular mirrors hung side by side (*"Untitled" (March 5th) #1*, 1991); two identical, battery-powered clocks that slowly fall out of synchronous time keeping (*"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers),* 1987–90)—and his heart wrenching candy spills that capture the degradation of queer bodies and the loss of friends and lovers through the eloquent conceptual premise of participatory depletion—works such as *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* or *"Untitled" (Lover Boys),* both from 1991, that consist of piles of candy installed on the floor and which allow viewers to take a piece of that candy and to eat it—the unmade bed poignantly invokes the artist's own, intimate partnership with Ross Laycock that haunts a significant portion of his work. There is something about Gonzalez-Torres's artistic practice that seems to endlessly engender intimacy. As artist Glenn Ligon put it in 2007, "Felix is the artist that artists of my generation feel on a first-name basis with."[21] And more recently, performance theorist Joshua Chambers-Letson opened his discussion of Gonzalez-Torres's practice with the following: "I have noticed this tendency amongst other queers of color: We often call the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres by his first name.

[20] Robert Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," in *Félix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2006), 28.
[21] Glenn Ligon, "My Felix," *Artforum*, Summer 2007, 125.

Casually, as if we knew him, though most of us did not."[22] What I want to suggest is that this ability to make the viewer feel like one of his intimates lies within the artist's use of recurrence and seriality. As in the work of Magali Lara, it is the repeated gesture that produces this enduring sense of proximity. In the context of Gonzalez-Torres's repeated explorations of queer coupling that address eroticism, but also love and loss, pain and illness and death, the unmade, empty bed becomes a site of plenitude where intimacy, in all of its varieties, can be projected onto the pair of impressions of heads recorded on the pillows.

The artworks of Lara, Emin, and Gonzalez-Torres each make public the private space of their respective bedrooms. But whereas Emin's work has been read as consisting of "self-exposure" and generating "public spectacle," Lara's and Gonzalez-Torres's practices have been understood in different terms.[23] Gonzalez-Torres's artworks suggest "something that can be shared, intimate, and common to so many of us."[24] Lara's artworks "provoke an intimate echo in the viewer," consistently juxtaposing "the collective…with the intimate."[25] The distinction that emerges, I am arguing, stems from the latter two artists' use of seriality in their work. Both Lara and Gonzalez-Torres consistently and repeatedly share aspects of their personal lives with their viewers. Instead of spawning a cult of celebrity, as Emin's practice did ("I, for one, found myself worshiping her as a goddess and eating up even the most banal details," one critic wrote after

[22] Joshua Chambers-Letson, "The Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 126.
[23] Glover, "The Artist Makes an Exhibition of Herself"; Gülsüm Baydar, "Bedrooms in Excess: Feminist Strategies Used by Tracey Emin and Semiha Berksoy," *Woman's Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2012): 31.
[24] Chambers-Letson, "The Marxism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 126.
[25] Karña Garduño, "Borda su intimidad en tapices," *Mural*, July 10, 1999, NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current. "Provocan un íntimo eco en el espectador"; Carlos Blas Galindo, "Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, May 9, 1998, sec. Sábado, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Lo colectivo…con lo íntimo."

seeing Emin's 1999 exhibition at Lehmann Maupin that featured *My Bed*[26]), Lara and Gonzalez-Torres establish intimacy little by little. They develop a pattern of intimate acts that evolves into an intimate relationship between artist and viewer. More than describing intimacy, they engender it.

Lipstick prints

In her images of beds, Lara accumulates a variety of intimate associations. She describes sexual desire and pleasure, but she also depicts interiority and inner life. She devotes energy and attention to both physical and psychic sensations, acknowledging encounters with both real and imagined others as legitimate experiences. Individually, each of those expressions of intimacy were significant; to explore those themes in relation to female experience, and to do so in the public sphere, cannot be taken for granted. In fact, it was a driving force in Mexico in the late 1970s and early 80s for many feminist practices, both artistic and otherwise. But in Lara's artwork, those different expressions of intimacy always overlap, not only in her depictions of bedrooms, but across objects, spaces, and imagery that she repeatedly—even obsessively—explores.

Female desire and eroticism emerged as important themes in artworks created by feminist-identifying artists in Mexico during this period. Although attitudes around female sexuality were beginning to shift, spurred, in part, by national policy changes, discussions of women's sexual lives remained largely taboo. For decades, the Mexican State had promoted a "pro-natalist" approach, encouraging women to bear children—in some cases even penalizing

[26] Bill Arning, "Tracey Emin at Lehmann Maupin," *Art in America* 87 (December 1999): 115.

people that were unmarried or didn't have children—and forbidding the sale of contraceptives.[27] All forms of contraception were illegal in Mexico until 1974, when the federal government took measures to curb the rapid expansion of the population, and abortion remained illegal (in Mexico City, abortion was legalized in 2007, but, presently, it continues to be illegal in many parts of the country). In the 1970s, even as the federal government moved away from pro-natalist policies, pro-natalist ideology could be found not only amongst conservatives, but also amongst radical leftists, who connected the regulation of fertility with U.S. imperialism, their stance reflected in the popular refrain "A parir madres latinas, a parir más guerrilleros" (which can be translated as: "Bear children, Latina mothers / bear more guerrilla fighters").[28] During this period, women's political agency was still intertwined with their reproductive faculties. Thus, discussions around contraception, abortion, and women's sexuality as something that could be divorced from reproduction were still far from mainstream, and making these aspects of women's experience visible was a political move.

Works by artists such as Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante—artists with whom Lara occasionally collaborated and frequently exhibited—explored female eroticism through humor, performance, and participation. Mayer's *Lo normal* (On normality, 1978), for instance, explored

[27] Gustavo Cabrera, "Demographic Dynamics and Development: The Role of Population Policy in Mexico," *Population and Development Review* 20 (1994): 109, https://doi.org/10.2307/2807942.
[28] Feminist activists Marta Lamas and Ana Victoria Jiménez each describe their respective frustrations with leftist ideology that conflicted with the goals of the burgeoning feminist movement in the 1970s. Each specifically mentions the circulation of this refrain and its destructive impact upon the fight for reproductive rights. Marta Lamas, "Feminismo y organizaciones políticas de izquierda en México," *Fem* 4, no. 17 (March 1981): 35–37; Carolina A. Miranda, "How Mexico's Súper Rudas 'Radical Women' Are Rewriting the History of Latin American Art," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2017, sec. Entertainment & Arts, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-radical-women-mexico-pst-lala-20170831-htmlstory.html. For further discussion of the relationship between left-wing ideology and Mexican women's fight for reproductive rights in the 1970s and 80s, see: Adriana Ortiz-Ortega and Mercedes Barquet, "Gendering Transition to Democracy in Mexico," *Latin American Research Review* 45 (2010): 108–37.

what constituted “normal” female sexuality through a series of postcards that functioned as a participatory quiz where viewers considered a variety of sexual encounters and what sort of emotions those encounters inspired in them (figure 1.11). Reflecting upon the 1978 exhibition (also titled *Lo normal*) where she first showed this artwork, Mayer emphasized the significance of questioning social mores and expectations. She observed, “This exhibition was one of the most radical of the era in feminist terms, bringing together a series of women artists questioning the conventional ideas of normality.”[29] She pointed out the feminist intervention that such a line of questioning presented in late-70s Mexican culture.

Bustamante’s so-called “social performance” *La patente del taco* (The taco patent, 1979) similarly pointed to assumptions surrounding what constituted “normal” eroticism.[30] In this conceptual intervention, the artist patented the taco as an object that had potential far beyond consumption, emphasizing the taco’s “erotic content and sexual validity.”[31] In one image from the project, Bustamante presents a series of lipstick prints that record slightly different mouth positions that she labels “labial exercises” (figure 1.12). Underneath, she enumerates the “immediate benefits” of those exercises: “relaxation, *oral eroticization,* and boldness and security to express your TRUE(?) OPINION.” On the bottom half of the page, a photo of Bustamante’s patented taco appears alongside the slogan “dare to commit an erotic act; eat a taco,” suggesting, presumably, that one is meant to perform those “labial exercises” upon the

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[29] Mónica Mayer, “Lo normal,” Blog, *Si tiene dudas...pregunte* (blog), January 12, 2016, http://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra/feminismo-y-formacion/item/16-lo-normal. “Esta exposición fue una de las más radicales de la época en términos feministas ya que reunía a una serie de mujeres artistas cuestionando las ideas convencionales de la normalidad.”

[30] Maris Bustamante, “Conditions, Roads, and Genealogies of Mexican Conceptualisms, 1921-93,” in *Arte [no es] Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960–2000*, ed. Deborah Cullen (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008), 145.

[31] Roselyn Costantino, “Lo erotico, lo exotico y el taco: el reciclaje cultural en el arte y performance de Maris Bustamante,” *Chasqui* 25, no. 2 (1996): 13, https://doi.org/10.2307/29741280.

taco. Mayer and Bustamante both addressed crucial issues surrounding female sexuality and eroticism during this period, questioning established norms, encouraging open discussion around desire and sexual exploration, and doing so in ways that implicated the viewer through humor and text that directly addressed that viewer.

Lara's works from the same period explore similar questions to those of Mayer and Bustamante and rely upon similar compositional strategies: collaged combinations of photocopies and handwritten text. But whereas the gestures of Mayer and Bustamante are tied explicitly to sexuality, Lara's works are left open-ended. In particular, her use of lipstick prints in collages created between about 1977 and 1980 often bear a striking resemblance to Bustamante's series of lipstick prints in *La patente del taco.* Lipstick prints are incorporated into several of the collages in Lara's series entitled *Ventanas* (Windows, 1977–78), which consisted of over 50 individual collages, small in scale (25 x 22.5 cm each), that were composed of pastel and ink, bits of text and drawings, layers of paper, photocopies, stamped images, and yarn or thread. In one of the *Ventanas*, a red lipstick print is contained within a strange opening, transforming the *labios* (lips) into something decidedly more suggestive of genital labia (figure 1.13). Elsewhere in the series, the lipstick prints merely seem to complement fingerprints that are also occasionally incorporated into the collages, recording literal physical intimacy—the contact and pressure of the artist's lips and fingertips upon the surfaces of these images (e.g., figure 1.14). Indeed, it is perhaps only within the context of the larger series of *Ventanas* that the red lipstick print can be read erotically at all. Displayed alongside collages that delved into more explicit sexual content, such as one of the more controversial images featuring two curtains that part at the bottom center to reveal the words "muchacha masturbandose" (woman masturbating; figure

1.15), viewers may have jumped more quickly to erotic interpretations.[32] For critic and art historian Teresa del Conde, for example, Lara's collages were able to employ a small set of symbols, such as the lipstick print, in order to suggest "a broad array of possibilities in the area of eroticism."[33]

But lipstick prints appear in others of Lara's series from this period, accumulating a variety of connotations beyond that of eroticism. They are integrated into her series of photocopies exploring the work of Frida Kahlo from 1978 where they engage in a dialogue with Kahlo's own use of the lipstick print on photographs and letters that she sent to lovers, friends, and acquaintances (e.g., figures 1.16–17). Whereas Kahlo's lipstick prints, accompanying her annotations on photographs or her handwritten correspondence, record an intimate gesture that is mobile and lasting, Lara's are mediated through the photocopier. No longer recording any physical intimacy between the artist and the artwork, the photocopied lipstick prints become an almost-abstract motif upon which she parcels out words (figure 1.18). Lipstick prints also appear in Lara's series of collages *Infancia y eso* (Childhood and Such) from 1980, integrated with fragments of photographs of the artist and bits of text that reflect upon her personality and her childhood (figure 1.19). Here clearly impressed onto the paper with a rubber stamp, the lips are revealed as one of several mass-produced elements in the series of collages, contrasting with those elements that are hyper-personal. Further, Lara has repeatedly alluded to lipstick prints in relationship to memories of her mother, perhaps shedding light upon their place in *Infancia y eso*; "She puts on her lipstick without looking in the mirror: it's perfect. It's the first drawing I

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[32] According to Lara, this collage "sparked a lot of controversy and got a lot of recognition." Magali Lara and María Minera, "Lesser Forms: A Long-Distance Conversation between Magali Lara & María Minera," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 175.
[33] Teresa del Conde, "Una aproximación al arte erótico en México," *Arte Sociedad Ideología* 4 (1978). "Posibilidades muy amplias en el área del erotismo."

remember seeing and wanting to imitate. Not on myself but outside, making everything she embodied—beauty, seduction, closeness—my own."[34] Spanning associations with sexual intimacy (*Ventanas)*, mother-daughter relationships *(Infancia y eso)*, and unrealized but imagined professional proximity *(Frida)*, Lara's repeated use of lipstick prints complicate the eroticism that Bustamante's clearly labeled "ejercicios labiales" indicate. In Lara's lipstick prints, different forms of intimacy are coextensive, represented in the very same mark and occupying the very same space rather than being held apart.

From this early moment in her career, Lara's exploration of intimacy consisted of an array of relationships and interactions. Reflecting on her experience viewing the *Ventanas* in 1978, when they were shown for the first time, Mónica Mayer has written, "Some [of the collages] spoke of love, of masturbation, and of pain. Injuries, blood, the female body, they made clear that these were images created by a woman for a woman, very conscious of being a woman."[35] Mayer's powerful description suggests the heterogenous content that came together to create a sense of intimacy in this extensive series of collages. Lara's images combine eroticism with romantic, vulnerable, messy, quotidian, and practical aspects of private life. Lara has commented that, in her *Ventanas,* she wanted to depict "this idea of you glimpsing out the windows with something very intimate, something very frail, very sexual too; but not the entire thing, just a glimpse, just a second."[36] These "glimpses" within, which the viewer is granted

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[34] Lara, *Animaciones*, 45.
[35] Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 18. "Algunos hablaban del amor, de la masturbación y del dolor. Las heridas, la sangre, el cuerpo de la mujer, dejaban claro que éstas eran imágenes realizadas por un mujer, muy consciente de serlo."
The *Ventanas* were first shown in the exhibition *Nuevas Tendencias* at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City in March–April 1978.
[36] Magali Lara, Mónica Mayer, and Carla Stellweg, "Game Changers: Women Artists in 1970s Mexico. A Conversation with Magali Lara and Mónica Mayer Moderated by Carla Stellweg" (Latin American Forum, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, May 4, 2018), https://vimeo.com/271089245.

from their position on the street, suggest a notion of intimacy that is not limited to sexual or romantic intimacy, but one that encompasses friendships and familial relationships alongside transient intimate encounters and interactions between strangers.[37] As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner remind us in their exploration of intimacy, "Affective life slops over onto work and political life; people have key self-constitutive relations with strangers and acquaintances."[38] Lara's images account for this; as early as her *Ventanas,* her serial approach to art making advanced a multifaceted understanding of how intimacy is produced and sustained.

Lara's accumulation of a variety of intimate gestures was a compelling account of the feminist mantra "the personal is political," or "lo personal es político" as the phrase circulated in Mexico beginning in the mid-1970s. The phrase, which had emerged in the U.S. a few years earlier, was popularized by an essay by feminist activist Carol Hanisch published in 1970.[39] Both in the U.S. and in Mexico, "the personal is political" was closely connected with the feminist strategy of organizing known as the "small group." This strategy relied upon a grassroots system where participants met regularly with a small, consistent group of women. During these meetings, participants shared their personal experiences in order to recognize systemic problems of patriarchal society. As Hanisch wrote in her essay, "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."[40] In Mexico City, the small

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[37] In their original installation at the Museo de Arte Moderno in 1978, Lara's *Ventanas* were hung in groupings that suggested the facades of buildings, underscoring the viewer's position standing on the street looking inside. Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 18.
[38] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 560.
[39] Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation; Major Writings of the Radical Feminists.* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970). While her essay is often identified as an important point of origin for the phrase, Hanisch disavows authorship, and others have suggested that the phrase was collectively authored by participants in the feminist movement across the globe.
[40] Hanisch, 76.

group (or "pequeño grupo," as it was known there) took root as an organizing strategy in the late 1970s. Over the course of their meetings, participants worked gradually towards difficult topics of conversation as they established rapport, beginning with more innocuous topics like education, parents, and siblings, and, once confidence had been secured, broaching topics such as sexuality, contraceptives, and abortions.[41] The small group enabled participants to gradually establish a network of mutual trust—to gradually become intimate with one another. As a result, it created much-needed space to discuss those latter topics, which continued to be largely taboo in Mexico during this period.

Intimacy, with its implications of that which is most private, ostensibly "refers to that which is walled off from the public sphere, from governance and regulation, from oversight."[42] However, the policies and public opinions surrounding population control in Mexico during this period and the impact that they had upon women and their place within society suggests that certain aspects of intimacy and domestic life were already incorporated into the public sphere. Beginning in the post-Revolutionary period, intimate heterosexual relationships were regulated at the federal level, and that regulation continued as the Mexican State responded to the rapid expansion of the population in the mid-1970s.[43] Even as the State shifted its policies to ones that promoted family planning and made contraception accessible, the implementation of those policies made women almost solely responsible for contraceptive practices.[44] The economy could not sustain the projected population growth if it were to continue at the same rate, and thus, in the late 1970s and 80s, Mexican women's intimate, sexual lives remained spaces of civic

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[41] "Pequeño grupo," *La Revuelta* 9 (July 1978): 3.
[42] Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4–5.
[43] Cabrera, "Demographic Dynamics and Development," 108, 116.
[44] Silvia Llera, "La práctica anticonceptiva en México: dos quinquenios, dos patrones diferentes (1976-1977 a 1987)," *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 5, no. 3 (1990): 542–44.

and economic duty. Sharing openly about other aspects of intimacy was a manner for women to recognize and unpack the ways that aspects of their lives that were supposed to be private were already deeply politicized. Communicating about their intimate lives allowed women to recognize that the control asserted over their sexual lives was neither intrinsic to society nor immutable.

Lara's commentary on her experiences of the 1970s and 80s underscores the importance of the small group strategy in the Mexican feminist movement. She explains, "Telling stories about your life was the first step in breaking down taboos, understanding that many secrets are maintained by power structures that are used in the dynamics of domestic life."[45] Her art practice reflects this. Her images tell everyday stories about her own life and the lives of other women.[46]

Like her compatriots Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante, Lara's work from the late 70s and early 80s explored expressions of female eroticism and desire—topics that were of central importance to the thriving Mexican feminist movement at this time. And like Mayer and Bustamante, Lara's work pushed against societal norms and expectations regarding women's sexuality, seeking to scratch away at the pristine façade of patriarchal culture. But in Lara's work, her explorations of those themes were always mixed with other aspects of inwardness. She examines erotic encounters alongside those that are friendly, familial, and even fleeting. As they accumulate serially, her images become a visualization of the processes that occurred within the small group; they gradually establish intimacy between artist and viewer.

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[45] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 176.

[46] Mónica Mayer has also mentioned the significance of the small group strategy. Her participation in these groups in the late 1970s motivated her choice to create artwork from a first-person perspective. Erin L. McCutcheon, "Dis/Appearance: Self-Portraiture in the Work of Mónica Mayer," in *Mónica Mayer: sí tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva*, ed. Karen Cordero Reiman, Folio MUAC 40 (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016), 135–36.

Seriality as strategy

Seriality is a constant in Lara's practice. In her artworks, she returns again and again to the same objects, spaces, and themes. "I have always had very clear obsessions, that in truth have been intense obsessions," Lara commented in 1989.[47] Over time, her repeated investigations of those obsessions accumulate, building up an idea that is not exactly clearer, but deeper—multidimensional and multilayered. Lara's repeated depictions of specific items becomes "a way of understanding how a single object behaves at different moments."[48] The objects become well-developed characters, each image showing different facets or attributes of those characters, until they gradually become familiar friends that the viewer recognizes. Through this gradual accumulation of density and depth, her images suggest a capaciousness to the objects that she repeatedly pictures. In Lara's practice, obsession, recurrence, and seriality become an artistic strategy. Repetition and pattern-making are compositional tactics that enable nonlinear forms of narrative and that disrupt standard forms of representation. Through this serial approach, Lara does not solely describe intimacy such that her viewer looks in from the outside, but rather invites her viewer into an intimate exchange, transforming them into one of her intimates.

Lara was drawn to the practices of artists who relied upon repetition. In 1981, she co-organized an exhibition entitled *Obsesiones y recurrencias* (Obsessions and recurrences) that brought together the work of both visual artists and writers in order to explore the way that repetition drove both thematic and formal principles in the practices of those included.[49] She has

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[47] Lucía Alvarez, "El humor, un elemento necesario en la pintura, dice Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, December 16, 1989, 24, No. 179, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Siempre he tenido obsesiones muy claras, que en verdad han sido grandes obsesiones."
[48] Daniel Montero, "The Action of Painting," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 188.
[49] "Exposición colectiva de poetas, pintores, fotógrafos y actores," *Uno más uno*, August 5, 1981, Hemeroteca Nacional.

also pointed to the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi's repetitive oeuvre as an important influence upon her investigation of the still life; she explains that she was interested in Morandi's "repetition of the same subject, until he became a mystic."[50] Indeed, Morandi's obsessive return to the same vessels—the specific bottles, jars, vases, and boxes that he painted again and again with slight variations over the course of decades—offers a means of clarifying what might be productive or valuable within Lara's own obsessive practice. In Morandi's paintings, the systematic exploration of light, form, perspective, and compositional arrangement create a set of objects that become almost transparent (e.g., figure 1.20). Even as they can be traced back to the specific objects he kept in his bedroom studio, those objects' individual identities are obscured behind the talismanic shapes that they become; in his paintings, specific content becomes "extraneous," or "mere armatures" that give way to "the primacy of form."[51] In Lara's practice, repetition functions almost in reverse. The objects she obsessively represents become animate and agentive figures. They gradually build up personalities, becoming forms that are at once familiar and unfamiliar.

Morandi's project was a teleological one. His careful rearrangements of the same objects allowed him to gradually progress towards a final goal.[52] In Lara's work, repetition is not systematic. In fact, her persistent repetition—her self-described obsession with certain objects, spaces, and themes—contributes to a practice that combats teleological progression and instead, opens space for nonstandard narratives and forms of expression.

In a recent reflection upon the work of U.S.-American artist Eva Hesse, Lara writes, "in

[50] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 177.
[51] Emily Braun, "Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi's Still Lifes and the Cultural Politics of Strapaese," *Modernism/Modernity* 2, no. 3 (1995): 90–91, https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.1995.0050.
[52] Flavio Fergonzi, Giorgio Morandi, and Elisabetta Barisoni, *Morandi: Master of Modern Still Life* (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Collection, 2009), 37.

Hesse's art, the series…conveys a sense of proliferation, of an open and fertile organism ripe for growth."[53] In Lara's reading (and in the reading of Mel Bochner, to whom Lara writes in response here), Hesse's own self-described "obsessive repetition" of certain forms carries with it the promise of productivity.[54] In Lara's practice, then, to make and remake over and over again is no Sisyphean task, but an alternative path—a path that advances while nonetheless permitting looping, spiraling, and overlapping.

Lara's repetitive, obsessive, serial practice makes space for nonlinear, nonstandard routes. As she explained in 1984, "If we break down linearity and its determinations, we are also subverting the limits of conditioned perception."[55] Spoken in the context of a conversation about the significance of experimental artist's books, I understand linearity here to point towards both standard methods of depicting space and standard methods of mapping narratives, i.e., both linear perspective and temporal linearity.[56] Lara suggests that presenting stories and ideas in nonstandard, nonlinear ways makes possible the presentation of content that was previously unpresentable or imperceptible.

Lara's artist's books are a microcosm of her practice; they present sustained investigations of themes through a series of images contained within a single object. They have been a mainstay of her practice since she began to exhibit in the late 1970s. Her first artist's

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[53] Magali Lara, "Artists' Artists: Part Two," *Frieze* (blog), October 13, 2020, https://www.frieze.com/article/artists-artists-part-two.
[54] Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation with Eva Hesse," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 11.
[55] "Se inauguró la Librería Marginalia en el Museo del Chopo," 1984, PRES045_84, Museo Universitario del Chopo. "Si quebrantamos la linealidad y sus determinaciones; estamos también subvirtiendo los límites de la percepción condicionada."
[56] Elsewhere, she has indicated the influence of Julio Cortázar on her earliest artist book projects, underscoring her investment in non-linear forms of narrativity. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, "The Liberating Agency of Vulnerability: Interview with Magali Lara," in *Coraza*, trans. Tania Puente, Cuadernos (Buenos Aires: waldengallery, 2020), 13.

books were created completely by hand and in tiny editions. Her book-making practice expanded as she entered into conversation with artists like Felipe Ehrenberg, who had co-founded the experimental, artist-run Beau Geste Press in England in 1970, and Ulises Carrión, who she met in Amsterdam while he was running a shop and gallery space devoted to artists' publications called Other Books and So.[57] In the early 1980s, artist's books offered experimental sites of collaboration; individual books mapped dialogues between Lara and other makers, and she also organized some of the earliest exhibitions devoted to Mexican artist's books, both locally and internationally.[58] The medium has remained an important part of Lara's practice, the format uniquely suited to themes that drive her production, such as the relationship between text and image, intimacy, and seriality.

In her artist's books, pictured objects become fully-fledged characters that perform actions and develop personalities across the pages. Suggestions of animacy and agency that can be traced throughout her practice are made explicit in the self-contained seriality and narrativity of her books. Consider *Sabor* (Taste), an artist's book that Lara created in 1985 that takes up the bed as its central subject. Consisting of a small series of two-tone, silk-screened images, the small, accordion-fold book (18 x 9.3 cm) was printed in a run of 500. It takes a cinematographic approach, slowly zooming in and panning across the space of a bedroom, and the images are bookended by the phrase "sabor….a mí" (taste…of me) scrawled in large, black cursive.[59] The

[57] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 167; Donna Conwell, "Beau Geste Press," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 2 (2010): 183.
[58] Early examples of Lara's co-authored artist's books include *Lealtad* (1980) a collaboration with writer Carmen Boullosa, and *Se escoge el tiempo* (1983) a collaboration with photographer Lourdes Grobet). In 1981, Lara organized the Mexican section of the XVI São Paulo Bienal which focused on artist's books. Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 168.
[59] This phrase can be traced to a Mexican bolero song written in 1959 and made popular by the group Los Panchos. It might also be inspired by an artist's book that Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña published with Beau Geste Press in 1973, which she named after this bolero song. While Lara does not cite Vicuña as a particular influence upon her artist's book practice, she may have been familiar with Vicuña's book due

first two-page spread is a long shot: a door left ajar frames a partial view onto a bedroom (figure 1.21). A double bed with a black bedspread is accompanied by a ceiling fan that hangs from above, a window visible just beyond, and on the right, the slightest glimpse of a table with pink flowers atop. Over the next series of page spreads, the view shifts, zooming in upon the bed and panning to a birds-eye view, looking down through the blades of the ceiling fan. Hatch marks that accompany the fan suggest that it is spinning faster and faster as the pages advance. On the reverse side of the accordion-fold, the perspective shifts again. We are given a panoramic view of the bed that spans four pages. The ceiling fan is out of view, and the image has panned to show a glass vase full of bright pink flowers perched upon a round table at the foot of the bed. In contrast to the neatly-made bed in the first spread, in this view the bed is completely disheveled, barely recognizable as such. In the final image, we zoom in upon the flowers, the flicker of magenta ink visible in the first page spread now dominating our view.

Over the course of the pages of this small book, these inanimate objects become actors in a narrative. The ceiling fan whirls faster and faster, blowing the neatly tucked bedspread loose and out towards the window. Zooming in upon the pink flowers in the last pages, they are completely untroubled by the ceiling fan's turbulence, even as it transforms the bed into an amorphous blob of white sheet and black bedspread. The bedspread appears to blow right past the flowers as they remain calmly erect in their vase. This small object collects a series of intimate associations: the physical sensation of air moving upon bare skin; the possibly erotic implications of rumpled sheets; the psychic sensation of shifting and unconventional understandings of spatial relationships; and, suggested in the phrase "taste…of me," the notion

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to her interest in Beau Geste Press. Cecilia Vicuña, "Beau Geste Press's Sabor a mí," in *Cecilia Vicuña: Veroír el fracaso iluminado (Cecilia Vicuña: Seehearing the Enlightened Failure)*, ed. Miguel A. López (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM, 2020), 94; Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 167.

that, together, these aspects of the bedroom might constitute a portrait of the artist. For one reviewer, this collection of intimate associations (in her terms: "air, light, darkness, life, death, saliva, secretion, germinal spillage"[60]) collapses the distance between viewer and object. She suggests that, over the course of the book's pages, the viewer is invited to participate in an "erotic game," or even summoned to a tryst.[61] The self-contained seriality and repetition within *Sabor* suggests a shorthand for the broader role that these tactics play in Lara's art practice. Here, different forms of intimacy occupy the same space. The accordion-fold offers the opportunity for literal overlappings and contiguities, literal foldings and unfoldings of the space and time that are mapped over the course of the book's pages.

In another artist's book entitled *Lealtad* (Loyalty, 1980), a collaboration between Lara and Mexican poet Carmen Boullosa, the recurrent *boca* of Lara's images of the late 70s and early 80s unspools into a slippery synecdochic symbol for a female character. Over a series of images that appropriate poems by Boullosa alluding to sexual violence and the trauma of its psychological effects, the lips repeatedly transform.[62] In conversation with the words that accompany them, and as they slide back and forth between hearts and mouths, the lips become almost endlessly elastic: they metamorphose into eyes, legs, vaginas, a brain, and even a pair of blood-stained underwear (figures 1.22–23). Lara created these images after a mutual friend suggested that she look at Boullosa's poems due to the commonalities that she saw running

[60] Nedda G. de Anhalt, "Sabor, de Magaly Lara; Querida, de Guillermo Samperio," *Uno más uno*, August 24, 1985, sec. Sábado, 11, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Aire, luz, oscuridad, vida, muerte, saliva, secreción, derrame germinal."
[61] de Anhalt, 10–11. "Juego erótico"; "Se nos convoca a una cita."
[62] Lara explains that the combination of Boullosa's poems and her own imagery in *Lealtad* "wasn't so much about illustrating as collaborating, since [Carmen] let me appropriate [her poems], write them in my hand and make them my own work." Itzel Vargas and Magali Lara, "The Personal is Political: Interview with Magali Lara," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 197.

between their practices.[63] Lara's images compound the "excessive intimacy" and exploration of psychological experience present in Boullosa's poems, and vice versa.[64] Now violent, now vulnerable, now sexual, now scatological, as the lips move and morph over the course of the pages of the book, the wide range of associations that Lara's *boca* accumulated across her drawings, collages, and photocopies from the late 70s are condensed into a single object.

This condensation was a crucial aspect of Lara's investment in artist's books. In a discussion of *Lealtad*, Lara described the potential of the book format as "the possibility of having a paper gallery and taking it with you to other places" as well as "an alternative to the spaces of cultural institutions" that foreclosed certain discussions, especially during this period.[65] The artist's book could be a mobile exhibition: a way to put different images in dialogue with one another and to tell stories that mainstream exhibition spaces weren't interested in presenting.

I want to suggest that we take Lara's investment in the artist's book as an indication of how to read her oeuvre more broadly. That we return to her paintings and drawings and read them collectively, like the pages of a book. In so doing, we can understand her obsessive, serial depictions of the same objects, spaces, and themes to be not derivative, but generative—a strategy that produces multidimensional, layered, non-linear, and non-hierarchical systems of representation.

Seriality in Lara's practice is highly motivated. She has described her series as organized around "research topics," explaining that the images and objects that make up her series are accumulations of "small stories" that aim to, collectively, respond to "very specific questions."[66]

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[63] Vargas and Lara, 197.
[64] Aurelio Asiain, "La salvaja de Carmen Boullosa," *Vuelta*, no. 160 (1990): 31.
[65] Vargas and Lara, "The Personal is Political," 197.
[66] Magali Lara, Interview with author, July 30, 2018; Magali Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019.

These recent descriptions of the role that series have played in her practice are resonant with critical commentary from the early 1980s. In her review of the exhibition *Tres propuestas temáticas* (Three thematic proposals, Museo Nacional, Havana, 1983), Teresa del Conde wrote, "Magali's story…unfolds from a series of still lifes that assemble a mosaic of narrations until they come together, forming a single storyline."[67] She suggests here that Lara's series of images created a cohesive narrative, but one that evolved in a decidedly non-linear fashion. Like the accordion-folded pages of *Sabor,* the serial format of Lara's imagery allows for rearrangement, rereading, and evolution.

What might it look like, then, to return to her images depicting beds from the mid-1980s and read them as a series? If, as Del Conde suggested of the still lifes Lara showed in 1983, we understand her beds to be "a mosaic of narrations" that form "a single storyline"?[68] To do so, I argue, reveals the stakes of obsession, recurrence, and seriality as a formal strategy in Lara's practice.

In her repeated portrayals of bedrooms, the bed unfolds simultaneously into a character that seems to act in its own right and a witness to Lara's intimate experiences. In fact, Lara has described many of the objects that she recurrently represents as, at once, her "otros yos" (other selves) and as "testigos" (witnesses).[69] In some images, elements of the bed suggest agency. The pillows seem to whisper to one another (figure 1.1), or the bedspread seems to unmake itself (figure 1.24). Elsewhere, the bed is almost an afterthought—the ground into which an experience can be carved; a palimpsest that can be quickly erased each time the covers are neatly remade

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[67] Teresa del Conde, "Tres Propuestas Para Cuba," in *Arte Objeto II* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1983). "El relato de Magali…se desenvuelve a partir de una serie de bodegones que van armando un mosaico de discursos hasta que se emparejan, formando una sola línea."
[68] del Conde.
[69] Lara, Interview with author, July 30, 2018.

(e.g., figure 1.25). And still elsewhere, the bed serves as an empty set that the artist has evacuated between scenes, as can be observed in a 1986 photograph of Lara with her painting *Me quiero ir* where she playfully positions herself in front of the painting so that her head leans against the pillow (figure 1.26). Like Les Nabis, a group of French artists working in Paris in the late nineteenth century whose work centered on domestic spaces, Lara's images recognize the challenges of communicating inner life. For Les Nabis, "Psychological interiority could not be directly represented…but could be evoked through a series of seductive formal fragments."[70] Similarly, Lara's repeated intimate gestures come together to articulate the complexity of introspection. They tell a story, but it is a story that is assembled through a mosaic of fragments rather than moving linearly from point A to point B.

Lara depicts and re-depicts the same objects, spaces, and themes. In her practice, dwelling upon those items and ideas—even obsessing over them—is not stagnating. Rather, it is a process of looping and spiraling and overlapping, each time approaching from a slightly different angle. The momentum of her practice may not be exclusively forward moving, but it is moving nonetheless. In Lara's practice, as it was in Eva Hesse's, repetition is "open and fertile" and "ripe for growth."[71] Her serial images compose a narrative that is flexible and rearrangeable. And like the pages of a diary, her serial images refute standard assumptions regarding valuation. Diverse intimate experiences are treated non-hierarchically: eroticism and interiority; physical and psychic experiences; waking and dreaming life; exchanges with friends, lovers, or strangers. In Lara's work, obsessive, recurrent forms of image making emerge as tactics that enable her to push against standard systems of narration and representation. They assemble frank stories of

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[70] Katherine Marie Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 1.
[71] Lara, "Artists' Artists."

intimate experience that were not often told—indeed, that were often not permitted to be told. Through seriality and multiplicity, these images engender intimacy with their viewer.

Sincere lines

The gradual establishment of intimacy in Lara's work depends upon the content of what she depicts—the wide-ranging, intimate encounters that she suggests—as well as her serial investigations of certain spaces, objects and themes. But her artwork's ability to engender intimacy also depends upon *how* she goes about depicting her subject matter. The very facture of her images is a means of unveiling her inner self. "Something that stands out completely is Magali's sincerity," one reviewer wrote in 1986. "Between her and her work there is nothing that denies what she feels and wants to express."[72] This sincerity is imparted through formal qualities that seem to lay her hand utterly bare: wavering line, hurried scribble, wayward blot or smudge or fingerprint. The evidence of the hand-wrought quality of her images is visible seemingly regardless of artistic medium. Drawing or painting, etching or screenprint, collage or artist's book, her images seem to offer an intimate window into her inner life.

In her small drawing of the double bed from 1983 (figure 1.1), the ink seems to transparently record bodily gesture. The lines are thin and shaking along the top of the bed and the edge of the blanket, slow and equivocal in the drawn and redrawn outline of the pair of heels and the electric plug on the left side of the bed, fiercely scribbled along the bottom corner of the mattress, and finally, heavy and plodding where the ink pools in the bottom left corner. This same transparency pervades Lara's paintings of the mid-1980s, especially as a result of the ways

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[72] Ambra Polidori, "Magali Lara: Los objetos: testigos implacables," *Uno más uno*, June 2, 1986, No. 227, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Algo que salta a la vista completamente es la sinceridad de Magali; entre ella y su trabajo no hay nada que niegue lo que siente y quiere expresar."

in which she employs outlines. In *La noche* (figure 1.2), lines that are tremulous and uncertain (those outlining the bed and marking where sienna walls meet black ceiling) contrast with those that are vigorous and rapid (the repeated loops outlining the leaves of the plant on the windowsill). In *19 de abril* (April 19th, 1986; figure 1.25), lines that are painstakingly scraped along the canvas little by little (the black frame that surrounds the window) commingle with those applied in one smooth stroke (the black curves that form the radiator in the bottom right corner).

The sometimes hesitant, sometimes hurried lines of her images articulate an ambivalent relationship between physical body and interiority. They simultaneously capture emotional energy and physical uncertainty. As has often been proposed with respect to the paintings of Cy Twombly (an artist whose work Lara has expressed interest in, and whose work she began to encounter in the mid-to-late 80s[73]), "the play of intention and chance, deliberation and accident, mark and erasure" suggest "…something more than idle doodling, scribbling or pattern-making is going on."[74] The combination of approaches—the making visible of both accident and purposeful, planned composition—serves as a means of mapping the discrepancies between inner vision and physical realization.

Lara explains that both her handwriting and her drawings were "clumsy" and that "you could tell that sometimes my hand shook."[75] She created lines that she wanted "to feel fragile, with an unknowing pulse."[76] Together with the misspellings and crossed-out words that appear in

[73] Carlos E. Palacios, "Interview with Magali Lara," in *Intimidad del jardín: Magali Lara, Pinturas 1985-2016 (The Intimacy of the Garden: Magali Lara, Paintings 1985-2016)*, trans. Debra Nagao (Cuernavaca, Morelos: Secretaria de Cultura de Morelos; Jardín Borda Centro Cultural, 2018), 147.
[74] Jon Bird, "Indeterminacy and (Dis)Order in the Work of Cy Twombly," *Oxford Art Journal* 30, no. 3 (2007): 490–91.
[75] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 170.
[76] Fajardo-Hill, "The Liberating Agency of Vulnerability: Interview with Magali Lara," 13.

the fragments of text incorporated into her images, these qualities served as a means of "expressing that place of doubt, where you're not sure what it is you want to say, though your body does."[77] Reviewers have often dwelled upon the nature of her lines, describing them as "nervous," "quick," and "unfinished," as well as "sensual," "tender," and even "naïve," repeatedly suggesting a certain transparency with respect to physical construction and control.[78]

The quality of Lara's line is underscored by the close relationship between handwriting and drawing in her works—types of mark making that she understands to be "twin sisters."[79] As literary scholar Hillary Chute points out in her study of graphic novels, handwriting "carries, whether or not the narrative is autobiographical, what we may think of as a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker."[80] Irrespective of specific content, handwritten text remains tethered to its maker. Chute goes on to explain, "Handwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author."[81] It is not only that handwriting records bodily gesture, but that it points back to the maker's inner self in a way that operates differently than other forms of artistic expression.

Here again, discussions of Cy Twombly's work are helpful. In contrast to the vigorous pouring, dripping, splattering, and slathering of the Abstract Expressionist artists who dominated the U.S.-American avant-garde art scene when he began to exhibit his paintings in the early

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[77] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 170.
[78] Polidori, "Los objetos"; Rafael Vargas, "Naturaleza muerta: Problemas y soluciones," *México en el arte* 3 (invierno 1984): 79; Bertha Wario, "Muestra aquí extraña flora," *El norte*, June 24, 1999, NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current; José Luis Barrios, *Símbolos, fantasmas y afectos: 6 variaciones de la mirada sobre el arte en México: SEMEFO, M. Lara, G. Suter, C. Amorales, M. Palau, S. Gruner*, Colección Libros de la Meseta (Mexico City: Fundación del Centro Histórico de la Universidad de México, 2007), 58.
[79] Lara, *Animaciones*, 27.
[80] Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 10.
[81] Chute, 11.

1950s, Twombly relied upon passages of handwritten and writing-adjacent marks that generate, like Lara's work, "a sense of intimacy."[82] His employment of "the line or mark that repeats upon itself—looping, spiraling, crossed out and overlaid, and the semi-legible writing and numerical notation" point back to him, regardless of whether the writing is decipherable or intelligible.[83] As art historian David Joselit writes of Twombly's work, in contrast to the canvases of artists such as Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning, "In place of grand painterly acts emerging from authentic psychic need are decidedly anti-heroic, furtive scrawlings reminiscent of anonymous communications on bathroom walls."[84] This description haunts me. It captures the sense of vulnerability that emerges in the scribbled writing that is scattered here and there across the wide expanses of Twombly's unprimed canvases and the almost voyeuristic experience of trying to make sense of the private language of his marks (e.g., figure 1.27). It sums up the strange, emotional intimacy that is engendered by way of distanced encounters such as reading a stranger's message scratched on the wall of a bathroom stall. And it is this same vulnerability and intimacy that Lara's images communicate by way of her own "decidedly anti-heroic, furtive scrawlings."[85]

The choices that Lara makes in her renderings close the distance between what she puts on the page and "what she feels and wants to express."[86] If "what is most intimate…is what divides one from others," and if intimacy consists of a process of self-disclosing so as to dissolve that division between self and other, her renderings contribute to that process.[87] The combination of carefully premeditated articulation and unpredictable accident in her artworks develop a

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[82] Bird, "Indeterminacy and (Dis)Order in the Work of Cy Twombly," 499.
[83] Bird, 499.
[84] David Joselit, *American Art since 1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 40.
[85] Joselit, 40.
[86] Polidori, "Los objetos."
[87] Christopher Lauer, *Intimacy: A Dialectical Study* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 4.

nuanced form of intimacy. The discrepancies contained within a single canvas, such as the luscious layers of pink and white that make up the sheets and pillows in *Cama, New York* (figure 1.6) and the smeary, indistinct confusion of yellow and ochre near the foot of the bed, convey the messiness of intimate encounters. Even when a viewer encounters one of Lara's works alone, isolated from her serial investigations, her images suggest intimacy by way of their facture.

The stakes of intimacy

In Lara's artwork, content, form, and facture combine, developing an intimacy that is not only described in the artworks, but engendered between artist and viewer. Encountering insistent articulations of intimacy that accumulate across series, the viewer comes to feel as though they know the artist—that they are on a "first-name basis" with her.[88] By establishing an intimate relationship between artist and viewer, Lara's artworks make for a different sort of viewing experience. This is not a unidirectional, voyeuristic glimpse into the artist's intimate life. Rather, Lara's images summon up an "*exchange* of inwardness," to return to the description of intimacy Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner advance.[89] Her acts of self-disclosure require reciprocity.

Consider two exhibitions that occurred in 1977, just a few weeks apart: a solo exhibition of Lara's work that opened at the end of May in one of the galleries at the Academia de San Carlos and a three-woman exhibition entitled *Collage íntimo* (Intimate collage) that opened in July at the Casa del Lago. Lara's exhibition, held while she was still a student at San Carlos, was the first solo show of her career. It lasted just over two weeks and consisted of a small series of works entitled *Tijeras* (Scissors), which included an artist's book and ten drawings.[90] Already

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[88] Ligon, "My Felix," 125.
[89] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 561. My emphasis.
[90] Magali Lara and Juana Gutiérrez, "Tijeras: dibujos y collages de Magali Lara" (Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, UNAM, 1977), No. 56, Caja 1, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de

present in the *Tijeras* are the principal themes that Lara continued to probe for at least the next decade: depictions of domestic space and women's experience, the relationship between objects and bodies, and intricate plays between text and image. Yet, in each case, the *Tijeras* approach these themes in an oblique way. In the longest passage of text in the artist's book, Lara writes, "Scissors have always formed a part of the objects that correspond to the feminine world," and then enumerates their role in domestic activities such as sewing, cooking, and cutting flowers.[91] Other pages of the book seem to show pairs of scissors doing just such activities. For example, they open slightly, seemingly of their own accord given that there is no hand in sight, approaching a thread that is sewn into the paper (figure 1.28). Yet there is often a way in which the images twist those domestic activities into scenes of sinister violence or surprising eroticism. For instance, in a series of drawings in the upper register of one page, rather than trimming the stem of a flower, the scissors close slowly over the bloom itself, squeezing it between the blades (figure 1.29). The viewer does not see the blades actually slice the bloom, only threaten to do so, but the splatter of ink surrounding the pair of scissors below—outlined in red, blades now firmly closed—gestures towards a violent act.

As art historian Juana Gutiérrez suggests in her text for the brief catalogue that was published alongside the exhibition, Lara's scissors seem to take on a violent and sexual life of their own: "The pair of scissors…thinks, intuits, and cuts," Gutiérrez writes. "Its acts become independent from the manipulator….its eyes observe, its blades bite, and its point attacks. In the scissors we enter into and we cut, we trim, and why not? we penetrate."[92] The scissors seem to

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Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Adriana Raggi Lucio, "Transmutaciones corporales: Del oprobio a los infinitos géneros: Magali Lara, Nicola Constantino y Cris Bierrenbach" (Ph.D., Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013), 272.

[91] "Las tijeras siempre han formado parte de los objetos correspondientes al mundo femenino."

[92] Lara and Gutiérrez, "Tijeras." "La tijera…piensa, intuye y corte. Sus actos se independizan del manipulador…Sus ojos observan, sus hojas muerdan, y su punta ataca. En las tijeras nos introducimos y

take on a variety of characteristics and personalities. They range from the phallic (the blades closed tightly, the round handles appearing especially testicular) to the vaginal (with one of the handles missing and the blades open, the scissors suggest a human figure, the blades like two legs that are spread as the other pair moves towards penetration; e.g., figure 1.30); from the comical (in a series of sketches set up as a graphic narrative, the scissors take on the persona of a chick hatching and encountering the outside world for the first time; figure 1.31) to the philosophical (the scissors become a diagrammatic space to map the mind, their point labeled as "mental acuity," the screw holding the blade together as "consciousness," the curve of the handles as "sensuality," etc.; figure 1.32); and from the meek (two pairs of scissors are bound with thread, hog-tied, blades closed tight; figure 1.33) to the aggressive (the blood-spattered flower-snippers mentioned above; figure 1.29). However, in each case, even as the pairs of scissors take on these varying personas, they stubbornly remain scissors. The longer one looks at these works, the more ways one can see to interpret them, and yet the only stable or decisive way to do so is to do so literally, i.e., as scissors. As Lara has succinctly put it, "The scissors could be very violent or very silly, but they were simply pairs of scissors."[93]

Nevertheless, on multiple occasions Lara has described the vehemence with which the public responded to her exhibition: that friends refused to speak to her afterwards, that she was labeled "puta" (whore), and that visitors vandalized the exhibition's signage.[94] There is nothing explicitly violent in Lara's *Tijeras;* there is nothing explicitly sexual; there is nothing explicitly political. Yet, for some viewers, there was something threatening bubbling just beneath the

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cortamos, recortamos, y por qué no, penetramos."

[93] Raggi Lucio, "Transmutaciones corporales," 272. "Las tijeras podían ser muy violentas o muy tontas, pero eran simplemente unas tijeras."

[94] Andrea Giunta, "Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975–1987," *Artelogie*, no. 5 (October 2013): 11, http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/spipi.php?article271; Raggi Lucio, "Transmutaciones corporales," 272; Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 175.

surface of these images. Their very ambiguity—their interpretive capacity to oscillate between the extremes of quotidian tasks (sewing, cooking, arranging flowers) on the one hand and displays of blood-splattered violence, acts of sexual penetration, and diagrams of existential reflection on the other—generated a unique type of discomfort.

A few weeks later, Mónica Mayer exhibited a series of collages alongside the work of friends and collaborators Lucila Santiago and Rosalba Huerta. In works like *Pareja* (Couple, 1977) and *A veces me espantan mis propios sentimientos, mis fantasías* (Sometimes I'm frightened by my own feelings, my fantasies, 1977; figure 1.34), photographs of genitalia are interspersed with delicate layers of gauze or miniature fabric curtains that offer barely-mitigated views onto the explicit sexual content. Mayer recounted preemptive concerns regarding her work as the exhibition opening approached: "The night before the exhibition, my parents called me because they were worried about the reactions to such risqué works."[95] In spite of these concerns—"curiously," as Mayer puts it—the series "had great success and good reviews"; one of the collages received a prize shortly thereafter, and another was quickly acquired by a local collection.[96]

What was it about Lara's ambiguous drawings of scissors that inspired such ire, when Mayer's collages featuring photos of erect penises could be accepted—even awarded and collected—without issue? The reactions to Lara's *Tijeras* discussed above might be situated alongside other reactions that Lara has recounted, including the controversy set off by her *Ventana* that dealt with masturbation, but also more visceral reactions to her work, such as one

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[95] Mónica Mayer, "Collage íntimo," Blog, *Si tiene dudas...pregunte* (blog), January 13, 2016, http://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra/feminismo-y-formacion/item/23-. "La noche antes de la exposición, mis papás me llamaron porque les preocupaban las reacciones por estas obras tan atrevidas."

[96] Mayer. "Curiosamente, tuvieron gran éxito y buenas reseñas."

collector who told her, "Your drawings make me want to vomit."[97] I argue that it was intimacy that was responsible for provoking such surprising vehemence—the potent and insistent intimate exchange that Lara's images engender with their viewer.

In her drawings and collages of scissors, the images implicate the viewer. In the exhibition catalogue, Gutiérrez explains, "It isn't just that the scissors are in dialogue with one another, but that they meddle with the viewer, they make him laugh and they also introduce a subtle game where he is the one that is made fun of."[98] The viewer cannot remain completely outside of these images, their affective power pulling them into an intimate interchange with the pictured objects. They laugh at the scissors, but the scissors also seem to laugh at them. In images such as the drawing that appeared on the invitation to Lara's 1977 exhibition, depictions of scissors are paired with texts that disrupt their seeming harmlessness (figure 1.35). The page is divided into three columns: on the left, the artist pictures a pair of scissors with the blades closed accompanied by an empty speech bubble; on the right, she presents a similar pair of scissors, this time with the blades opened wide and a dotted line indicating the motion of opening; in the center, she writes "scissors, or what they said before and then what happens." While the relationship between the text and the pairs of scissors is left relatively open-ended, the text cordoned off from the images in its position in the central column, it is difficult to escape the sexual innuendo, where scissor blades suggest legs first tightly closed ("what they said before…") and then open wide ("…and then what happens"). This is especially true in the context of the larger set of images where, elsewhere, scissor blades seem to take on both phallic and vaginal associations. Grasping the innuendo and then perhaps made uncomfortable by the

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[97] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 175, 167.
[98] Lara and Gutiérrez, "Tijeras." "No son tan sólo las tijeras las que dialogan, sino que inmiscuyen al espectador, lo hacen reir y también lo introducen al sutil juego de ser él el burlado."

implication of potential sexual violence, the viewer might indeed feel "meddle[d] with"—as if, as soon as they were let in on a joke, the joke turned sour.

These relatively simple images are dense with emotion, evoking an affecting viewing experience. The images were "disturbingly aggressive," Mónica Mayer commented.[99] Or, as art historian Olivier Debroise wrote in a particularly gruesome description of Lara's images of scissors, "Sometimes, boredom is converted into rage…scissors cut off heads and red blood gushes from the neck."[100] Pent up emotion suddenly seems to erupt from these household objects.

For Lara, the vehemence of the public's reaction to her exhibition was highly gendered; it mattered that it was a woman that made these images. She explains, "It was that in this very strange form people were able to see a sexuality that was of a young woman and not a man, and they saw it as horrifying."[101] Indeed, descriptions of the *tijeras* emphasize their relationship to femininity. Gutiérrez writes, "The scissors are characters that live in their environment and make their home in the sewing box, in the kitchen, close to women in particular. Female characters driven by the author with feminine intentions."[102] In spite of the wide ranging presentations of pairs of scissors over the course of the series, the gender of the artist was mapped onto these images.

Reflecting upon the response to this exhibition as well as other vehement reactions to her

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[99] Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 17. "Inquietantemente agresivos."
[100] Olivier Debroise, "Me quiero morir...," 1987, 56, 3-443, Fondo Olivier Debroise, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "A veces, el tedio se convierte en rabia…la tijeras cortan las cabezas, y el rojo sangre brota del cuello."
[101] Raggi Lucio, "Transmutaciones corporales," 272. "O sea que en esa forma muy rara la gente sí veía una sexualidad que era de una chava y no de un chavo, y eso lo veían como horripilante."
[102] Lara and Gutiérrez, "Tijeras." "Las tijeras son personajes que viven en su entorno y que tienen su domicilio cotidiano en el costurero, en la cocina, cerca de la mujer en especial. Personajes femeninos manejados por la autora con intenciones femeninas."

work from this period, Lara has explained, "I realized we weren't authorized to talk about female desire and even less about its contradictions."[103] Her renderings—of scissors, but also of bedrooms, lipstick prints, and other recurrent themes—capture those contradictions. They capture the instability of desire and the ways in which both pleasure and pain may be found in unexpected places and situations. But it wasn't just that Lara was talking about female desire and its contradictions. It was that she was doing so in such a way that it was affecting to her viewer. Feeling, perhaps, "meddle[d] with," or disturbed by her aggression, or shocked by her sudden bursts of rage, her viewer was wrapped up in an emotional and intimate dialogue.[104]

Anthropologist Ruth Behar has observed, "When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably."[105] Behar discusses vulnerability specifically in relation to academic writing, and she describes the backlash that vulnerably-written academic work has received. But artists and artworks have received similar critiques.[106] Such responses suggest that there is an invisible line that, upon crossing, renders "objective" or "properly 'disinterested'" or "cool" critiques of a given artwork impossible.[107] Artworks that are too personal or too honest—especially too honest about pain, suffering, or anger—artworks, in short, that are too vulnerable have been deemed "undiscussable."[108]

It is precisely this thwarting of a "cool critique" that Lara's work mobilizes. Her artworks

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[103] Lara and Minera, "Lesser Forms," 167.
[104] Lara and Gutiérrez, "Tijeras."
[105] Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 16. See also Karen Cordero Reiman's discussion of vulnerability in relation to Mónica Mayer's use of the diaristic in her artwork from the 1990s in "When in Doubt...Ask: Mónica Mayer's Artistic Project," in *Mónica Mayer: sí tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva*, ed. Karen Cordero Reiman, Folio MUAC 40 (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016), 40.
[106] See Homi K. Bhabha's problematization of reactions to so-called "victim art" in "Dance This Diss around: On Victim Art," *Artforum International*, April 1995, 19–20.
[107] Bhabha, 20.
[108] Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 175.

are too vulnerable; they are too honest about the messy contradictions of her emotions and experiences. They are too insistently intimate. At times, that vulnerability has resulted in critical avoidance.[109] But often, it has provoked a spectrum of vulnerable, emotional responses: ire, as in the case of her *tijeras;* repulsion, as the visceral response of the collector described above; sorrow and loneliness; empathy, lucidity, and self-awareness.[110] Although her images approach controversial content obliquely, the private spaces and experiences that she depicts combine with renderings that seem to almost overflow with intimacy. More than describing intimacy, her images engender it. Responding viscerally and vulnerably, her viewers become engaged in an "exchange of inwardness."[111] They become one of her intimates.

* * *

> What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds & ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, & find that the collection had sorted itself & refined itself & coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life & yet steady, tranquil composed with the aloofness of a work of art.[112]

This is what Virginia Woolf mused in a diary entry from April 20, 1919. Her invocation of a "deep old desk" is compelling, summoning up heavy, wooden drawers and compartments full of

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[109] Alvarez, "El humor, un elemento necesario en la pintura, dice Magali Lara."
[110] Art historian Olivier Debroise describes Lara as a "painter of loneliness and absence" and describes an "implicit sorrow in many of her canvases" ("pintora de la soledad y la ausencia"; "tristeza implícita en muchas de sus telas"); Leticia Ocharán describes Lara's approach to describing femininity as "one of the strongest blows dealt to women" ("uno de los golpes más fuertes asestados a la mujer"); and finally, to return to Mónica Mayer's words, Lara's images powerfully communicate the fact that they were "created by a woman for a woman, very conscious of being a woman." Debroise, "Me quiero morir...," 55; Leticia Ocharán, "La mujer en tacón alto," *La guía de Novedades*, March 30, 1983, No. 197, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 18.
[111] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 561.
[112] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 266.

small treasures accumulated over decades. She suggests here the power of the diary as a genre: its ability to catch hold of "odds & ends" that one might overlook or forget, but that ultimately capture the evanescent effects that contain life's truths. But what if, instead of wanting to return to her diary to "find that the collection had sorted itself & refined itself & coalesced," Woolf permitted the messy mass of material to persist? What if, instead of wanting it to transform into something "steady, tranquil" and "aloof," she embraced the vulnerable intimacy of it all?

Here is where I want to locate Magali Lara's practice. Instead of polishing up her experiences until they fit expectations of "the aloofness of a work of art," she makes herself vulnerable. And then she does it again. Admitting to the messiness of intimacy—to the places where "affective life slops over onto work and political life"[113]—Lara's artwork acknowledges the varying ways in which intimacy is produced and treats each of those diverse expressions and experiences of intimacy as legitimate. Her repeated and wide-ranging intimate gestures open up discussions of sexuality, eroticism, and interiority in the public arena. Her depictions of private spaces and intimate experiences combine with modes of facture that seem to lay bare her making processes. Through her serial, diaristic practice, she engages her viewers in a reciprocal, bidirectional interaction. She makes the viewing public not observers, but interlocutors and intimates.

Lara's work has often been understood to be less militant in its political approach than the work of her feminist contemporaries, including in the artist's own reflections upon her work.[114] But the intimacy of her imagery offers an alternate route towards political

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[113] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 560.

[114] For a problematization of the distinction between the art practices of Mayer and Lara on the grounds of Mayer's being more overtly political, see Erin L. McCutcheon, "Feminism Unfolding: Negotiating In/Visibility of Mexican Feminist Aesthetic Practices within Contemporary Exhibitions," *Artelogie* 5 (October 2013), http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/spip.php?article229. For her part, Lara has explained, "There is for me an ethical thing, but I don't want to say 'political' because I'm no Maris Bustamante or Mónica

communication. The utter sincerity of her images demands that her viewers respond vulnerably. By turning her "private life into something that's shared," Lara engages her viewers in an intimate exchange that, in 1970s and 80s Mexico City, presented its own danger to contemporary audiences.[115]

Mayer or Lorena Wolffer" ("Sí hay para mi una cosa ética, yo no voy a decir 'política' porque no, o sea, no soy Maris Bustamante o Mónica Mayer o esta Lorena Wolffer"). Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019.

[115] Lara, *Animaciones*, 29.

CHAPTER 2
Looking Slowly: Text, Image, and Affect

In 2008, Magali Lara worked with the Taller Mexicano de Gobelinos in Guadalajara to produce a series of handwoven tapestries. Using traditional techniques first developed in fifteenth-century France, the weavers replicated in excruciating detail what appear to be hastily scrawled notes that Lara dashed off in black ink on scraps of white paper.[1] Entitled *Leer,* or "to read," the series consists of five tapestries, each about three feet by four feet, and each featuring a composition created entirely from words. "Leo y no entiendo," one of the tapestries reads—"I read and I don't understand"—where "y no entiendo" is contained inside a speech bubble that emanates from a large-scale "Leo" (figure 2.1). Each scribbled flourish, each flick of the pen, is faithfully recorded into the woven wool. Long interested in the relationship between text and image, Lara explores the limits of the border between writing and drawing in her series *Leer.* Handwritten text becomes not just a compositional element, but the composition in its entirety. Here, the boundary between looking and reading begins to blur.

Lara's 2008 series offers a shorthand for what this chapter explores—a type of looking that I propose her artwork invites, and a type of looking that depends upon her specific employment of text. In Lara's artwork, meaning unfolds gradually. The hastiness of the scrawled text slows to a snail's pace as the viewer's comprehension is woven one strand at a time. Text is no guarantee of transparency, but rather prolongs and protracts the process of viewing. "Leo y no entiendo"; "I read and I don't understand."

Since Lara began making artwork in the late 1970s, text has played a central role in her

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[1] Mariana Aguirre, "The Taller Mexicano de Gobelinos: A Tapestry Workshop in Guadalajara," *Art21 Magazine*, July 31, 2012, http://magazine.art21.org/2012/07/31/the-taller-mexicano-de-gobelinos-a-tapestry-workshop-in-guadalajara/.

compositions. Fragments of text appear interspersed in her images, often scribbled in the same hasty scrawl that appears in *Leer,* sometimes so hurried that the words are barely legible, and sometimes containing orthographic or grammatical slippages so that meaning is repeatedly obscured and comprehension is repeatedly deferred. The uncertainty of what is literally written as well as what sort of meaning those words might convey becomes an integral part of the viewing experience. But rather than defanging her work, Lara's employment of text generates a multi-staged process of viewing—a slow process of consumption. Lured in close in their effort to decipher, the viewer becomes invested in the process of looking.

The *Leer* series also suggests an important tension: the relationship between labor that is attributed and that which is unattributed, and further, labor that is acknowledged and that which remains unacknowledged. In these weavings, Lara's seemingly effortless scribbles that served as source material are transformed into the repetitive, time-consuming, labor-intensive process of weaving by hand. This is not Lara's handiwork, yet her recognizable handwriting immediately seems to tether these works to her hand. Meanwhile, the laborers themselves are invisible. Lara points to this tension when describing her collaboration with the Taller Mexicano de Gobelinos: "I'm interested in the contradiction that can be produced between this completely loose drawing and the laborious weaving."[2] Her weavings begin from a conceptual premise where authorship is held in tension with anonymity, and where processes of making that are ephemeral are held in tension with those that are feats of endurance. Where the time spent making and the time spent looking both rub up against the initial impressions that these works provoke. This premise is

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[2] Lara's comment here refers to the first series of tapestries she made in collaboration with the Taller Mexicano de Gobelinos in 1998, which similarly transformed small-scale works on paper into large-scale tapestries—much larger-scale than the *Leer* tapestries, in fact, with most of the finished tapestries measuring 230 x 350cm or 248 x 322cm and at least one measuring 300 x 400cm. Magali Lara, *Allá (Lá-bas)* (Mexico City: Embajada de México; CONACULTA; FONCA, 1999), 9. "Me interesaba la contradicción que podía producirse entre ese dibujo totalmente suelto y el tejido laborioso."

certainly not without its problems, raising questions of the hierarchy of "fine" art and craft, and the way that craft-based practices in Mexico map onto marginalized class-based and indigenous identities.[3] But it also represents a through line in Lara's practice.

Her work from the 1980s involves these same tensions, inviting scrutiny of what types of labor are attributed and acknowledged and what types are left unattributed and overlooked. In drawings, etchings, and paintings that focus upon domestic interiors and household objects, Lara investigates the tasks and chores that occur within those spaces. Domestic labor, a key issue of the feminist movement in Mexico in the 1980s, becomes her central theme. She considers the ways that the very invisibility of the physical burden of domestic labor takes a psychic toll upon those that perform it. Comprised of hurried and haphazard or cute and cartoon-like approaches to depicting familiar objects, at first glance, Lara's images suggest that they are quick and easy to grasp. But, interspersed with fragments of text that interrelate ambivalently with the pictured scenes and objects, the images are slower than they seem. They play with the slightly different paces at which looking and reading occur, and they build temporality into their very compositions through organizational devices commonly used in comics. Lara's images persuade the viewer to look longer than they might expect. In so doing, they compel the viewer to attend to content that had not seemed worth lingering over.

Looking slowly

While their appearance often suggests that they were rapidly made and may be just as rapidly consumed, Lara's formal choices in her artworks engage the viewer in a slow process of

[3] For a recent study of the relationship between indigeneity and the hierarchy of art and craft in the Mexican context, see Gloria Elizabeth Chacón's discussion in "Material Culture, Indigeneity, and Temporality: The Textile as Legal Subject," *Textual Cultures* 13, no. 2 (2020): 49–69.

looking. She combines text and image in ambiguous and often confusing ways, and the interplay between elements draws viewers into the compositions and draws out the time those viewers spend looking. To make sense of these artworks, a quick glance will not suffice. Instead, the viewer must attend closely—in close physical proximity and with careful scrutiny.

From early on in her practice, whether handwritten or composed of stickers or rubber stamps, Lara's use of text disrupted any pure transfer of meaning. Words overlap one another. Letters are inverted or repeated or exchanged. The viewer stumbles over orthographic anomalies, over deeply ambiguous sentence constructions or word choices. These "errors" become alternate systems of meaning that the viewer learns to interpret over time. In a whole series of works from 1978, the "c" of *cielo* (sky, or heaven) becomes an "s" (e.g., figure 2.2). What, if anything, might *sielo* mean that *cielo* does not? For Lara, these errors don't thwart meaning making, but instead contribute to it. She explains, "I like the idea of the accident, of the stain and the error; for me, they make sense."[4] And, "I'm interested in the relationship between what is said by a mistake, a grammatical or orthographic error, invented codes that speak of a constantly changing identity."[5]

As the small speech bubbles that appear in her *Leer* tapestries gesture towards, Lara's interrogation of text has also long been tied to an interest in comics. Describing herself as a "voracious comic reader," she has frequently mentioned the influence of underground comics on her artwork—both those published in Mexico and elsewhere.[6] In Lara's works from the late 70s

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[4] Elena Coll, "Magali Lara: Entre persona(le)s y colectivos," *Código: Arte–Arquitectura–Diseño*, November 23, 2017, https://revistacodigo.com/entrevista-magali-lara-personales-colectivos/. "A mí me gusta la idea del accidente, de la mancha y el error; para mí tienen sentido."

[5] Ixchel Ledesma, "El error en la obra de Magali Lara," *Nexos: Cultura y vida cotidiana* (blog), May 29, 2017, https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/?p=12789. "Me interesa la relación entre lo que se dice desde el error, la falta de ortografía, los códigos inventados que hablan de una identidad siempre cambiante."

[6] Magali Lara, *Coraza*, trans. Tania Puente, Cuadernos (Buenos Aires: waldengallery, 2020), 32. She has frequently discussed the influence of comics upon her work, and especially the comics of Alejandro Jodorowsky, a Chilean-born artist who worked in Mexico City beginning in the 1960s, and French, feminist cartoonist Claire Bretécher. See her discussions in: Merry Mac Masters, "Todos estamos sin nada

and early 80s, text interacts with comic book-like structures to play out sequentially; organizational framing devices suggest duration. For instance, positioned within a series of three, evenly spaced, rubber-stamped red ovals, the clear printed text of *AMOR* slowly smears until it is illegible (figure 2.3). Or, in a work from her series of drawings, etchings, and paintings *Historias de casa* (which can be translated as Stories of home, or House stories) text both explains and enacts a sequence of events (figure 2.4). "But," she writes above a gently simmering pot, mimicking a comic narrative device akin to a movie voiceover, where text isn't tied to a particular actor. As the viewer's eye moves from panel to panel, the contents of the pot smoke and boil until: "se derrama," or "it spills." In the bottom register, the words come tumbling out of the pot alongside the liquid that boils over completely. Relying upon the same set of eight, gridded panels to structure her compositions that is employed in this work, Lara repeatedly juxtaposed text and image in the spring of 1982. Sometimes the fragments of text are contained within the grid, like subtitles or captions (e.g., figure 2.5); sometimes they burst across lines, interrupting the logic of the panels and asserting themselves as compositional elements; sometimes they narrate in the first person, sometimes omnisciently; sometimes they label or describe. But they are never neatly printed. They are always hurriedly scribbled and occasionally smudged or squeezed into a corner of the composition (e.g., figure 2.6), or on the verge of fading away completely. The text cannot be taken in at a glance, but requires a patient process of deciphering. In these works, comics' spatial articulation of the passage of time—the way that

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que nos cubra ante la violencia, opina Magali Lara," *La Jornada de enmedio*, Agosto 2015, sec. Cultura, Hemerografía, Museo de Arte Moderno; Carlos E. Palacios, "Interview with Magali Lara," in *Intimidad del jardín: Magali Lara, Pinturas 1985-2016 (The Intimacy of the Garden: Magali Lara, Paintings 1985-2016)*, trans. Debra Nagao (Cuernavaca, Morelos: Secretaria de Cultura de Morelos; Jardín Borda Centro Cultural, 2018), 145; and Magali Lara, Mónica Mayer, and Carla Stellweg, "Game Changers: Women Artists in 1970s Mexico. A Conversation with Magali Lara and Mónica Mayer Moderated by Carla Stellweg" (Latin American Forum, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, May 4, 2018), https://vimeo.com/271089245.

images are parceled out between panels that can be read from left to right, top to bottom—combines with the literal passage of time as the viewer squints and strains to make sense of Lara's scrawled text.

Comics fosters a unique type of looking. It is a process of looking that grows from the organizational system of the page as much as it does from the combination of text and image and the differences that emerge between reading text and looking at images. As literary scholar Hillary Chute explains, "The movement of the eye on the page instantly takes in the whole grid of panels and its particular opening elements at once; comics suggests we look, and then look again."[7] Lara's gridded compositions rely upon this same dynamic, allowing for an oscillation between a holistic and sequential view. Built into the images is a durational process of looking. In comics, this duration is compounded by the different paces at which image and text are consumed. Rather than being grasped completely simultaneously, there is a temporal disjunction—a brief interval—that separates the apprehension of image and the apprehension of text.[8] The juxtaposition of image and text can take advantage of this interval in order to unveil humor, satire, discomfort, or any number of effects.

In Lara's *Historias de casa,* the process of both looking and reading are each protracted as the viewer sifts through the visual material until the pieces settle into something approaching sense. In *Todos los días otro punto de vista,* from May 1982 (figure 2.7), the top register displays a pair of floppy cigarettes that swivel and smoke alongside a book of matches visible in the second and fourth images. On the bottom register, circles and swirls of pink and red and black

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[7] Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 8.
[8] Frank L. Cioffi, "Disturbing Comics: The Disjunction of Word and Image in the Comics of Andrzej Mleczko, Ben Katchor, R. Crumb, and Art Spiegelman," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, Studies in Popular Culture (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 98.

refuse to cohere upon first glance. The viewer reads “todos los dias,” “everyday,” across the top, and on the bottom, “otro punto de vista,” “another point of view.” Is it a mouth that we’re gazing into—red lips, pink gums, dark cavity—our point of view transformed into that of the cigarette’s? A splash of blue appears at the end of a central, curved, pink form in each of the images. It’s labelled “water” in the first and the fourth image. Suddenly the image pulls itself together: a bathroom sink, seen from behind and slightly above the faucet, from where we might expect a mirror to hang. This becomes clearer when this image is considered alongside another work from the series, *Si la luna se sonriera* (If the moon were to smile), also from May 1982 (figure 2.8), that slowly zooms in, panel by panel, upon a circular mirror hung above a rounded sink.

If in many comics the interval between comprehension of image and text passes in an instant, the words revealing the joke that is pictured and the image likewise contextualizing what is humorous about the caption, in Lara’s works the interval stretches and expands.[9] As image and text intersect and interact, myriad connotations unspool. Each of these artworks asks their viewer to not only “look, and then look again” (to return to Hillary Chute’s words), but to look longer and to linger.

* * *

Lingering over domestic interiors and household objects carried particular significance in early 1980s Mexico. Lara began her series *Historias de casa* in the midst of a major, national economic crisis. With the discovery of large-scale oil reserves in the late 1970s and rising oil

[9] See more in: Robert C. Harvey, “Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image: The Emergence of the Modern Magazine Gag Cartoon Reveals the Vital Blend,” in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, Studies in Popular Culture (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), especially 81–82.

prices in 1980, then-president José López Portillo and his administration (1976–82) spent exorbitantly and expansively. Confident in a future national windfall, the Mexican government racked up massive amounts of foreign debt. When oil prices fell over the course of 1981, Mexico was left in a debt crisis that came to a head in 1982. Beginning in February 1982 the Mexican peso was in free fall, the government having propped it up through foreign borrowing.[10] In January 1982, the peso was valued at 26 to the U.S. dollar. By March of that year, the exchange rate had already fallen to more than 45 pesos to the dollar.[11] By November of 1987, it had plummeted to a terrifying 2,300 pesos to the dollar.[12] The years that followed 1982, which came to be known simply as *la crisis,* were characterized by huge losses in per capita income and inconceivable rates of inflation.[13] The effects were felt profoundly on the level of individual Mexican citizens, and especially women. The gains Mexican women had made in the workplace over the course of the 1970s—expanded employment opportunities, fairer wages—were rolled back. The types of jobs that women held were rapidly and unequally impacted.[14] With fewer opportunities for paid work and greater need for income, women took on domestic labor at home that they may have outsourced prior to 1982.[15] In the midst of *la crisis,* the issue of the "doble jornada" ("double shift") that Mexican feminists had raised beginning in the late 1970s[16]—the

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[10] Nora Lustig, *Mexico, the Remaking of an Economy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), 20–24.
[11] Lustig, 24.
[12] Larry Rohter, "Peso Hit By Panic In Mexico," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1987, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/19/business/peso-hit-by-panic-in-mexico.html.
[13] Claudio Lomitz, "Times of Crisis: Historicity, Sacrifice, and the Spectacle of Debacle in Mexico City," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 131.
[14] Nora Lustig and Teresa Rendón, "¿Cómo afecta la crisis a la mujer mexicana?," *Fem* 6, no. 24 (September 1982): 32.
[15] Mariana Iturralde, "Mujeres que compran, pagan...y hacen colas," *Fem* 8, no. 29 (September 1983): 37.
[16] For example, see Marta Lamas's poem that addresses the "doble jornada" that was published in the very first issue of *Cihuat:* "El obrero y la obrera," *Cihuat* 1, no. 1 (May 1977): 3.

notion that women frequently came home from a full day of paid labor to a full evening of unpaid domestic labor—took on renewed urgency.

Lara made her first *Historias de casa* drawings in April 1982, just as individuals began to feel the effects of the debt crisis. Considered in this context, her illustrations of domestic labor—making coffee, cooking dinner, washing dishes, doing laundry, ironing clothes, sewing on buttons—reflect the impact of *la crisis* upon Mexican women's everyday lives. Further, for women who were involved in the feminist movement, the images speak to the crippling disappointment that must have accompanied the transformations of their lives as they watched the progress that they had fought so hard for begin to slip away. Indeed, Lara's *Historias de casa* resonated strongly with Mexican feminists. In 1984, two different etchings from her series appeared on the cover of *Fem* magazine, one of the most important feminist publications in Mexico. A version of one of her paintings from the series, *Luego lo lavo* (Then I wash it, 1984), was printed on the cover of the magazine's spring issue that year (figure 2.9), while on the cover of the fall issue, an etching that depicted an overly large iron sitting flat atop an ironing board (figure 2.10) complemented a story featured inside: "The Politics of Domestic Labor," which focused on the burden of unpaid domestic labor and the way that it perpetually falls upon women's shoulders.[17]

Something about Lara's images rang true for Mexican feminists in the 1980s. Somehow they managed to capture and convey women's experience. Their slowness was a key aspect to what set them apart from other feminist cultural production during this period. In spite of their hurried, almost harried first impression, the drawings in Lara's *Historias de casa* are slower than they seem. The viewer lingers upon these drawings as they struggle to decipher the text and

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[17] Pat Mainardi, "Las políticas del trabajo doméstico," trans. Elena Urrutia, *Fem* 8, no. 36 (November 1984): 55–56.

make sense of its ambiguous relationship to the images. The drawings don't attempt to make the often repetitive, monotonous tasks of domestic labor into something slick or glamorous, or to make them match the speed of late-capitalist valuations of labor, wherein only gains and advancements are recognized as productive and acts of maintenance cannot be understood as such.[18] Instead, Lara's artworks undulate with "the slow rhythms of daily life" that determined many women's lives in 1980s Mexico, especially in the midst of *la crisis.*[19]

Slowness and attention

Between about 1982 and 1985, Lara continued to create works within her series *Historias de casa.* Letting go of the grid that had served as the organizational structure of her drawings, her etchings and paintings moved towards compositions that cohered into single scenes. But text still punctuated these images. Thus, even as the sequentiality of comics' visual framework faded, duration remained. Lara's printed and painted images no longer suggested quite as hastily-made an appearance as her drawings, but the slowness of the viewing experience that they engender remains somewhat unexpected. Upon first glance, Lara's images from this period were often read as easy, or, on the other hand, unhinged. Either way, such impressions suggest that the images aren't worth dwelling upon. In spite of those readings, these images manage to slow the viewer down and, as a result, they focus attention upon aspects of the compositions to which the viewer wouldn't otherwise attend.

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[18] For a discussion of other artistic approaches that draw attention to acts of maintenance, specifically within in a U.S.-American context, see Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (2000): 71–97, https://doi.org/10.2307/779234.
[19] Julia Tuñón, "Ensayo Introductorio: Problemas y debates en torno a la construcción social y simbólica de los cuerpos," in *Enjaular los cuerpos*, ed. Julia Tuñón, Normativas decimonónicas y feminidad en México (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2008), 11–66, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhn0c7x.4. "Los lentos ritmos de la vida cotidiana."

Cuteness

"Magali Lara offers some nice little paintings…you can find paintings similar to these in art fairs that, like the one in Greenwich Village, serve as a forum for Sunday painters…salable, yes, but too conventional."[20] This is what critic and art historian Teresa del Conde wrote about a group of paintings that Lara showed in 1985 at an exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City. Del Conde's disparaging commentary—amateurish and entrepreneurial; "pleasant," "nice little paintings"—suggests that Lara's latest work was too easy. That it was lacking in sharp edges. That it was lacking in seriousness. That it wasn't worth dwelling upon because it could be grasped quickly.

Certainly Lara's artworks did not look like the "serious" political art that was being produced in Mexico City at that time. Nor did they look like "serious" feminist political activity given that, except for occasionally including the work of feminist artists as illustrations in feminist publications, the militant feminist movement largely ignored fine art production.[21] But they also did not look like "serious" easel paintings. They combine formal aspects that have been marginalized: mass-media derived compositional approaches like her explorations of comic book-like structures; articulations of subjectivity that border on the extreme, repeatedly earning her work comparisons to the pages of a diary, such as her employment of hand-scrawled fragments of text;[22] and objects and forms that appear adorably cartoon-like.

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[20] Teresa del Conde, "Diecisiete en el Tamayo," *Uno más uno*, July 25, 1985, sec. H, 17 Artistas de hoy en México, Centro de Documentación Museo Rufino Tamayo. "Magali Lara ofrece unos simpáticos cuadritos…cuadros similares a estos pueden verse en las ferias de pintura, que como la de Greenwich Village, sirven de foro a los pintores de domingo…vendible, sí, pero demasiado convencional."

[21] In an interview with Edward J. McCaughan, artist Mónica Mayer explained, "If in the Left it was considered bourgeois to discuss feminism, within the feminist movement it was considered bourgeois to discuss art." As McCaughan puts it, Mayer points to the ways in which "'serious' feminists, like 'serious' leftists, seemed to regard the artists' work as frivolous." Edward J. McCaughan, "Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence: Feminist Artists in Mexico," *Social Justice* 34, no. 1 (2007): 55.

[22] For further discussion of comparisons of Lara's work to the pages of a diary, including specific

In her etchings from *Historias de casa*, the hurried messiness that characterizes the lines of her drawings from the year before transforms into a quality that approaches "cute." The objects depicted in the etchings—irons, shower caps, buttons, a coffeemaker, a string of sausages—appear animated and anthropomorphic, soft and squishy as if they were stuffed with kapok. Literary theorist Sianne Ngai describes cuteness as "an aesthetic response to the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate," pointing to its associations with smallness, passiveness, softness and pliancy, vulnerability and powerlessness.[23] She writes, "While the antisentimental avant-garde is conventionally imagined as hard and cutting edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, being simple or formally non-complex and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening."[24] Lara's etchings, which one reviewer described as "at times syrupy, cloyingly sweet," appear nonthreatening.[25]

But often, the cuteness of her images operates in tandem with a slightly more sinister quality that simmers just beneath the surface. In *Plancha* (1983), two electric irons fill the page, printed in grey and pink (figure 2.11). The curve of their edges—the uneven bulge of the light grey planes and the small hatch marks that run along their length—indicate plush pliancy. Their cords splay out to the side, like two little tails, and their narrow ends lean together, as if they are resting their heads against one another's. But their hot plates press up against the picture plane, out towards the viewer, their affinity to adorable animals simultaneously subtly menacing. In another etching from this period, a string of pink sausages is slung over a hook (figure 2.12). The

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references, see chapter 1.

[23] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 53.

[24] Ngai, 59.

[25] Gonzalo Vélez, "Magali Lara: Obra gráfica," *Uno más uno*, September 21, 1991, sec. El cuadro en el ojo, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "A veces de un acaramelado empalagoso."

curved forms, tied off at the ends, are reminiscent of balloons: stretchy, yielding, vulnerable. One of the knots in the casing is labelled “belly button.” Here, cuteness rubs up against queasy repulsion, where the fleshiness of the sausage comes too close to the fleshiness of human bodies.[26] Working in conjunction with the hastily scrawled fragments of text, cuteness draws the viewer in close. The powerless appearance of the pictured objects lures the viewer into a sense of security, suggesting that these images are quick and easy to digest.

If Lara’s work is lacking in seriousness—if it looks too cute, “pleasant,” or “sweet” to be taken seriously—what might its *un*serious nature allow for? How might her work wield its powerless appearance as a weapon?

Embracing the unserious opens up the possibility of addressing subject matter that has not been permissible elsewhere. Once an artwork is operating outside of the realm of seriousness, it is no longer beholden to the rules and customs by which “serious” works of art are expected to abide.[27] Early on in her career, Lara was deeply interested in the idea that comics allowed for the representation of certain aspects of the world that painting did not seem to permit—e.g., obscenity or the complexity of sexuality and desire.[28] Her earliest works dwelled in the margins of “serious” art, relying upon “minor” mediums: drawing, collage, photocopies, artist’s books. Decades later, even as she devoted herself to the “major” medium of painting, she investigated the limits of seriousness. In a 2002 exhibition, she gathered a series of small-scale paintings

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[26] In her analysis of the category of cuteness, Ngai emphasizes the frequent proximity of attraction and repulsion. Although anthropomorphism and animation play a crucial role in producing cuteness, she describes a fulcrum wherein something that is too verisimilar, or too mimetic in its approach to anthropomorphism, passes out of the realm of “cute” and, instead, gives its viewer “the willies.” Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, especially 91–92.
[27] Ernst Van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 53/54 (2008): 29.
[28] Adriana Raggi Lucio, “Transmutaciones corporales: Del oprobio a los infinitos géneros: Magali Lara, Nicola Constantino y Cris Bierrenbach” (Ph.D., Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013), 265.

under the title *Satori,* a term from Zen Buddhism that she described as "an illumination which comes when logic is left behind."[29] Elsewhere, Lara has mentioned the influence of Roland Barthes's description of satori upon her practice.[30] For Barthes, satori "run[s] counter to the seriousness with which we consider religious experience."[31] In these paintings, created between 2001 and 2002, Lara continued to seek out forms and tactics that operated beyond or counter to what might be deemed "logical" or "serious."

Over the course of her *Historias de casa* series, Lara moved from drawing (1982) to etching (1983–84) to painting (1984–85). But as she migrated between mediums, her subject matter held her series together. That which had seemed impossible to represent in paint—experiences that were overlooked and labor that had been ignored—became available after Lara embraced the unserious: the minor, the trivial, the illogical, and the cute.

Lara's endearing irons and sweet-seeming sausages make use of their appealing cuteness. As Ngai explains, "The cute object seems to insist on *getting something* from us (care, affection, intimacy) that we in turn feel compelled to give."[32] Reeled in by the adorable, animated appearance of the pictured objects, compelled by their cuteness to indulge those objects, the viewer *attends* to them. Whereas their utter ordinariness would typically repel close looking, instead of glancing through or past them, the viewer observes: the distinctive contour of the iron's flat plate, the six small notches at the top, the tight coil where the electric cord attaches to the base, the strange perspective that the image grants, the way the words both label and command—"así, plancha:" ("like this, iron:"). The longer one looks, the harder it becomes to

[29] Magali Lara, *Satori*, trans. Karen Cordero Reiman (Mexico City: Galería Nina Menocal, 2002), 14.
[30] Itzel Vargas and Magali Lara, "The Personal is Political: Interview with Magali Lara," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 194.
[31] Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002), 109.
[32] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 98. Emphasis original.

dismiss the utility of the pictured objects and the labor-intensive tasks that they imply.

At the same time, the longer one looks, the clearer it becomes that the objects themselves are the ones that are performing those labor-intensive tasks: pots boil themselves (figure 2.4), whisks clean themselves (figure 2.6), buttons sew themselves back on (figure 2.13). These images do not attempt to document or represent the domestic laborer at work. Rather, they draw attention to a problem. They point to societal failures to appreciate women's labor by suggesting the fantastical implications of leaving the domestic laborer unpictured—that the labor magically performs itself. Contained within these objects that reflexively carry out everyday chores, the artist captures the very invisibility of the domestic laborer and the assumption that the labor performed in the home isn't labor at all.

Lara's "unserious" approach set her work apart from contemporaneous artistic attempts to address the depreciation of domestic labor in Mexico City. In a remarkable series of photographs entitled *Cuaderno de tareas* (Assignment book, 1978–81), feminist activist Ana Victoria Jiménez documented the hands of a colleague as she performed a series of everyday tasks (figure 2.14).[33] The closeups on the woman's hands not only track the time taken up by those tasks, but also make tangible the laborious effort that they require. They record the tension in her muscles and the chafing of her skin as she chops and cooks, cleans and scrubs and squeezes, washing dishes, clothes, a toilet, and her own hands. But the familiarity of the scenes, objects, and actions that make up Jiménez's photographic series make them all too easy to glance past. They document and perhaps even "dignify" domestic labor (as art historian Karen Cordero Reiman argues),[34] but they do not demand that their viewer dwell upon it. They do not insist

[33] Karen Cordero Reiman, "Corporeal Apparitions / Beyond Appearances: Women and Bodily Discourse in Mexican Art, 1960–1985," in *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, ed. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017), 273.
[34] Cordero Reiman, 273.

upon the viewer's attention the way that Lara's cute and quirky irons seem to plead for acknowledgement. Whereas Jiménez's photographs rely upon recording action and activity in an attempt to "recognize the value of work in the home,"[35] Lara's images take a different tack. Embracing the unserious, Lara throws out the rules for what is acceptable material for "serious" art to address. She depicts objects and spaces that have been repeatedly assumed uninteresting and repeatedly rendered invisible. She leaves the actor out completely. Captured by the cuteness of the objects that she depicts, the viewer dwells for a moment. Long enough to read the ambiguous fragments of text, long enough to contemplate the strange animacy of the objects, and perhaps long enough to feel curious or uneasy about the absence of any human figure.

Errancy

Lara's images from her *Historias de casa* series depict the monotonous, everyday realities of domestic labor. But that isn't all. They also depict the messiness, frustration, and infuriation of that labor. She points to small moments of failure—when pots boil over (figure 2.4), or noodles slide through the holes of a colander (figure 2.15), or coffee burns (figure 2.16). She illustrates moments when that which is supposed to stay safely hidden behind closed doors comes tumbling out, as when the doors of a medicine cabinet explosively burst open (figure 2.5). She describes moments when that which is so familiar it barely deserves notice takes on monstrous, incendiary qualities, as when the orange flame of a hot water heater escapes its confines, growing into a menacing blaze (figure 2.6).

Lara's images from this period poke and prod at the boundaries of what constitutes normative experience. They glare resentfully out at their viewer, demanding acknowledgment of

[35] Cordero Reiman, 273.

representations that refuse to adhere to what women's lives are "supposed" to look like. During this period, women in Mexico started to recognize the ways in which discontentment and the devaluation of domestic labor were closely related and, further, how expressing that discontentment often led to women being labeled "neurotic," "psychotic," or "crazy."[36] Discussing her experiences working collaboratively with other women, Lara has explained that "by being friends and sharing secrets…you could realize that those things that seemed like a fault in your character" were only "faulty" according to a predefined set of social structures that determined what was appropriate or womanly.[37] To err can be to push against such normative structures—to recognize that those structures may not accurately portray lived experience and to attend to certain realities that are typically avoided, elided, or ignored.

In July 1984, Lara produced a flurry of drawings in pencil and red and yellow oil pastel. Like the *Historias de casa* series*,* these drawings, which formed her series *Dibujos sucios del mes de julio* (Dirty drawings from the month of July), featured household objects and items associated with quotidian tasks performed in domestic spaces: irons and coat hangers, pots and pans, whisks and tongs, baby bottles, vegetables, fish, and strings of bright red sausages. And like her *Historias de casa,* the objects and items in these drawings were often accompanied by brief fragments of scribbled text. Smudgy pencil and smeary pastel combine with wavering lines and, at times, barely legible scrawl to indicate an intense urgency. But they also leave the drawings teetering on the very edge of what was deemed reasonable or acceptable as a form of expression. "I took [the *Dibujos sucios*] to a collector and he asked me if I had had a nervous

[36] "Ser mujer: boleto abierto hacia el manicomio," *La Revuelta*, no. 8 (March 1978): 4. See also: Lore Aresti, "Mujer ¿qué te lleva a la locura?," *Fem* 8, no. 32 (March 1984): 55–57.
[37] Coll, "Magali Lara." "Y al ser amigas y compartir secretos…podías darte cuenta de que esas cosas que parecían un error en tu carácter eran estructuras sociales que estaban calificando tu comportamiento y tu capacidad de identificarte como mujer."

breakdown," Lara has explained matter-of-factly.[38] For this (male) collector, something about the drawings suggested experience that was outside the realm of "normal"—that was, instead, errant and unhinged. Put another way, something about the drawings made the collector uncomfortable.

One drawing from the series features a bright yellow coat hanger (figure 2.17). It is accompanied by a pair of cartoonish, red, human hearts. They are adorably round and tomato-like, each sporting a pair of perky arteries reaching out from the top. Two red strings flop over the hanger's bottom rung. The yellow and red pastel intermingles with the pencil lines that outline the hanger and hearts, smearing messily outside of them. Just beneath the hanger, four oily, yellow fingerprints are visible. "Enganchar," Lara scribbles in pencil beneath the bottom left corner of the hanger. "To hang up." The word suggests the practical purpose of the hanger: to hang one's clothes up after washing or ironing them. But it also suggests a more metaphoric meaning: to captivate or seduce, to be hung up on something or someone, to have one's heart hung up. The drawing oscillates between quaintly trivial—simple, straightforward subject matter; cute, cartoonish drawings—and quivering with the threat of pain and violence. The gap between the sharp hook of the yellow coat hanger and the vulnerable, supple surfaces of the red hearts suddenly seems far too narrow.

The bright yellow hanger appears in another drawing from the series (figure 2.18). This time, the hanger is accompanied by the word "devestir," or, "to undress." Beneath the hanger are three, small, paper shopping bags outlined in pencil. Scrawled in tiny letters beneath the bag on the far right: "sólo piensa en eso," "they only think about that." Here, the hanger takes on a decidedly different quality. Its emptiness is edged with eroticism, suggesting clothes taken off in a hurry and strewn on the floor rather than neatly hung up.

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[38] Magali Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019. "Los llevé a un coleccionista y me preguntó que si había tenido una crisis nerviosa."

The *Dibujos sucios* are sparse and dense at once. They appear haphazard and happenstance, all hurried lines and careless smears. But they also hum with rawness and ferocity. Each "error," each messy smudge outside the pencil lines, each streak of oily residue is laid bare, while somehow each pictured object and each scribbled word is thickly layered. The same yellow hanger can be simultaneously banal and menacing and erotic. In the *Dibujos sucios,* domestic space is revealed as something that cannot be neatly divvied up, but a site where labor overlaps with emotional and erotic life. Describing her experiences working in the late 70s and 80s, Lara comments, "As a woman, to express your desires wasn't 'cute.'"[39] Her "Dirty Drawings" point to this problem. They point to the untidiness of honest emotion and real, lived experience and the discomfort that results when that untidiness isn't swept under the rug, but rather made visible. Discomfort that results in relegating such expressions outside the scope of normativity (as evidenced by the collector to whom Lara showed the drawings).

And yet, the slow manner in which the viewing experience unfolds forestalls the urge to quickly dismiss, brush off, or move past these images, whether or not they impress one as unhinged or errant. Drawn in close to the image, straining to decipher the scrawled text and struggling to make sense of its relationship to the imagery it accompanies, Lara's viewer engages in an active and extended process of looking.

On the surface, Lara's images have often seemed quick and easy to digest. They appear too cute, too "pleasant," too "conventional," or even too unhinged to be taken seriously. But their seemingly unserious nature combines with ambivalent juxtapositions of text and image in order to focus their viewer's attention. Caught up in a slow process of consumption, the viewer attends to the images. Relying upon a "poetic-plastic" approach to picturing "generally disregarded

[39] Coll, "Magali Lara." "Como mujer, expresar tus deseos no era 'lindo.'"

domestic objects," Lara is able to "grant an uncommon visual relevance" to overlooked aspects of women's lives.[40] In her *Historias de casa,* the very invisibility of the domestic laborer is captured by way of the adorably animate objects that perform their own tasks. In her *Dibujos sucios,* domestic space and labor overlap with emotional experience. The mundane and the extraordinary are unveiled as coextensive. Her images "make us aware of present daily reality, which most of the time goes by unnoticed, but which is so important, above all in a woman's life."[41] Slower than they seem, Lara's images compel their viewers to pay attention to the very invisibility of women's real, lived experiences.

Slowness and affect

In long-held understandings of political art in Mexico, slowness has been associated with the apolitical, its seeming lack of action associated with a lack of power to make political comment. Regardless of ideology, from the militant communism of the Mexican avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s to the global culture of late capitalism of the 1980s, slowness has been disregarded in favor of images that allow for rapid comprehension. But what if the type of politics that slowness allows for just hasn't been recognized as such? What if the political effects of slowness aren't lacking, but rather, subtle and simmering? Abrasive and lingering as opposed to explosive and immediate? In Lara's work, slowness compels attention, inciting the viewer to focus upon activities and experiences that they might typically look past or even turn away from. Dwelling upon such images and the activities and experiences that they depict enables a different

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[40] Leticia Ocharán, "Magali Lara y lo cotidiano," *El Nacional*, January 2, 1983, sec. Revista Mexicana Cultural, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México. "Poética-plástica"; "objetos domésticos generalmente desatendidos"; "otorga una relevancia visual poco común."
[41] Leticia Ocharán, "Magali Lara: Los objetos domésticos," *El Heraldo de México*, February 6, 1983, sec. Cultural, 5, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Concientizarnos sobre la diaria realidad presente, que la mayor de las veces nos pasa desapercibida, pero que tiene importancia tal, sobre todo en la vida de una mujer."

sort of viewing experience. Slowness generates affect, which can motivate viewers to grapple with subtle political commentary that they might otherwise overlook.

Since the Mexican Revolution, politically engaged artists had been railing against slowness. Muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, in his iconic, 1923 call-to-arms (which was also signed by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, among others), vilified the "sentimentality and languor" of traditional, "so-called Salon painting."[42] Instead, he demanded an art of immediacy that could communicate quickly and clearly: "clear ideological propaganda."[43] At mid-century, critics in Mexico continued to draw connections between slowness and bourgeois decadence. Art practices that were "combative, rebellious, passionate, vehement" lay in opposition to those that were "decorative" and "frivolous."[44] If art practices weren't advancing quickly enough, they were stagnating, wallowing in individualism and self-indulgence, or they were incapacitated, timidly and passively accepting the status quo.[45] To act slowly was to not act at all.

Decades later, Mexican political art remained devoted to immediacy. The avant-garde art scene in Mexico City in the late 1970s and early 80s was dominated by the politically motivated artist collectives known as *los grupos.* Though working in a range of experimental mediums including installation, performance, participatory action or "happening," and street intervention

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[42] David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors," in *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, by Dawn Ades (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1989), 324.
[43] Siqueiros, 324.
[44] Antonio Rodríguez, "¿El abandono de su tradicional plataforma ideológica servirá a la pintura mexicana?," *Espacios*, no. 2 (Winter 1948), Record ID 799572, ICAA Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art Project.
[45] Antonio Rodríguez, "Orozco no cambia, no investiga, siempre se repite: Tamayo está listo para defenderse: La controversia sigue su marcha," *El Nacional*, September 26, 1947, 1, Record ID 755525, ICAA Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art Project; Rodríguez, "¿El abandono de su tradicional plataforma ideológica servirá a la pintura mexicana?"

(e.g., wheat-pasted posters, protest banners, spray-painted mural campaigns), their aims were not dissimilar from the original Revolutionary aims of the mural movement. Most of *los grupos* shared the main goals of (a) using art to raise awareness about pressing social issues and (b) pushing against the elitism of the art world by making their work visible to a much broader public.[46] Framing the phenomenon of *los grupos* within the legacy of the post-Revolutionary mural movement, art historian and critic Rita Eder characterized the work of *los grupos* as "the maturation" of Mexico's longstanding tradition of public art.[47] In fact, Eder has suggested that the principal intervention of *los grupos* in the history of Mexican art was the advancements that they made in concretizing "the public."[48] Rather than making art for a generalized and ultimately faceless public as the muralists did before them, *los grupos* took their art to the streets and stood face to face with their public, seeking to create dynamic, participatory experiences.[49]

Frequently relying upon ephemeral interventions and actions, the activities of *los grupos* responded directly to their contemporary moment. Grupo Germinal (active 1977–80) often relied upon *mantas,* or protest banners. Not only did the *mantas* allow for physical mobility, as suggested by Germinal members' descriptions of their *mantas* as "murals with legs," but the speed of production also allowed for conceptual mobility:[50] the *mantas*' "form and content were *immediately* determined by popular demands during a demonstration."[51] Along with

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[46] Rita Eder, "El arte público en México: Los grupos," *Artes Visuales*, no. 23, Suplemento (January 1980): ii–iii.
[47] Eder, i.
[48] Rita Eder, "Comentarios al margen," in *De los grupos los individuos: artistas plásticos de los grupos metropolitanos*, by Dominique Liquois (Ciudad de México: Museo de Arte Carillio Gil; Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1985), 2.
[49] Eder, 2.
[50] Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta*, Testimonios y documentos (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco, 2008), 44. "Murales con patas."
[51] Shifra M. Goldman, "Elite Artists and Popular Audiences: Can They Mix? The Mexican Front of Cultural Workers," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 4 (1985): 142. My emphasis.

interventions by other *grupos* such as Suma's graffiti-like paintings on public walls around the city that the government promptly white-washed, or Março's integration of the latest political buzzwords published in recent newspapers (*Poemas urbanos,* c. 1979–81), Germinal's *mantas* operated swiftly.[52] They were rapidly produced, immediately relevant, and often quickly dismantled, ephemerality being a crucial aspect of the artists' circumvention of the Mexican art market's insatiable appetite. Unfortunately, much of the time this meant that the social impact was as ephemeral as the artworks themselves. Their work rarely resonated with the broader public that they sought to involve.[53] Writing in 1980, Eder commented that the "participatory experiences" created by *los grupos* resulted "in the best of cases, in the viewers' momentary diversion."[54] Swiftness and immediacy, it seems, were no guarantee of political efficacy, but the long-held associations between slow viewing experiences and decadent, bourgeois culture made slowness inconceivable as a political approach.

Although artwork that invited slow processes of consumption had not been recognized as a route towards political expression in twentieth-century Mexico, slowness's potential had been explored elsewhere. The effects that Magali Lara's images have upon viewers can be situated alongside theories of perception and spectatorship that sought out tactics that could disrupt habitual modes of looking, defamiliarize mundane experiences, and destabilize interpretation.

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[52] Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina, eds., *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México: 1968-1997 (The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico: 1968-1997)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Turner, 2006), 221; Grupo Março, *Poema urbano*, transfer to DVD (Mexico City, 1979), Fondo Olivier Debroise, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM.
[53] According to Shifra Goldman, members of Grupo Mira admitted "that popular audiences with low educational levels had many difficulties" understanding their artworks, especially given the group's reliance upon a combination of images and densely written texts. "Elite Artists and Popular Audiences," 144.
[54] Eder, "El arte público en México: Los grupos," vi. "En el mejor de los casos, en una diversión momentanea de los espectadores."

For instance, writing in 1917, Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky explains that a chief aim of art is to disrupt "the automatism of perception" through approaches that "defamiliarize" a given artwork's content.[55] He argues that artworks should be created such that "perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the *slowness* of the perception."[56] One of the methods that Shklovsky describes that contributes towards slowing down perception is the "disordered rhythm" of poetry which repeatedly disrupts automatic modes of perception.[57] The messiness of Lara's hand-scrawled text can be considered alongside this notion of "disordered rhythm." It impedes perception, preventing viewers from relying upon habitual modes of looking and instead asks them to linger upon her images as they strain to make sense of what is written.

In the 1930s, building upon Shklovsky's theory and especially his notion of "defamiliarization," German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed the concept of the "distancing effect" or the "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt).* He proposes that, by performing in such a way that they "appear alien to the spectator. Alien to the point of arousing surprise," an actor is able to create distance between the audience and familiar, mundane experiences.[58] Such an effect can be achieved through various methods including styles of comportment, actions that call attention to the audience's presence, incongruous props or settings, or adjustments to the rhythm and temporality of a performance.[59] He writes, "By this craft everyday things are removed from

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[55] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 2nd edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 22.
[56] Shklovsky, 26. My emphasis.
[57] Shklovsky, 27.
[58] Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," trans. Eric Bentley, *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 131, https://doi.org/10.2307/1125011.
[59] Brecht, 130–31; Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theater: The Brechtian Legacy*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Rochester, NY and Suffolk, UK: Camden House, 2000), 20.

the realm of the self-evident."[60] Through defamiliarization and distance, these "everyday things" can instead be shifted into a realm where criticism and protest of such acts are conceivable[61]—wherein they are no longer assumed to be natural and unchangeable, but made contestable. While in Lara's images there is no literal control over the time a viewer spends looking, as there can be for a stage director such as Brecht or a filmmaker devoted to practices of slow cinema, the unpredictable rhythms and unexpected temporalities that can be found in her drawings, etchings, and paintings result in a measure of defamiliarization. Lara's cute, animated, household objects that fantastically perform labor on their own can be read within Brecht's notion of distancing or alienating; they defamiliarize the utterly mundane and invite a different type of perception.

More recently, film scholar Karl Schoonover has suggested that the frequent dismissal of slow viewing experiences is tethered to understandings of activity or productivity in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He asks us to consider "whether we might be enacting a particular late-capitalist ideological myopia that removes certain kinds of labor from view and refigures them as apolitical."[62] Capitalism has established cultural expectations regarding the look of productive labor to such an extent that certain types of activity are, in fact, labelled as *in*activity. Schoonover's argument is doubly persuasive with respect to Lara's series *Historias de casa,* where the seeming inactive process of slow looking combines with attempts to represent a type of labor that had not been recognized as such. How does one make visible forms of labor that have been repeatedly rendered invisible? As Lara pointed out in a 1981 essay, part of the trouble with daily acts of maintenance is that the labor becomes so routine that it is performed unconsciously. Recuperating consciousness with respect to those acts, or deautomatizing those

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[60] Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," 131.
[61] Brecht, 136.
[62] Karl Schoonover, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53, no. 1 (2012): 66–67.

acts, in Shklovsky's terms, is a necessary part of problematizing their routine nature and recognizing them as onerous.[63] Running up against the constraints of what constituted permissible content in the politically-driven avant-garde art scene of the late 70s and early 80s and, in the midst of *la crisis,* faced with a renewed urgency regarding Mexican society's unwillingness to recognize domestic labor as productivity—as something that should be remunerated—Lara turned to slowness and its defamiliarizing effects as a tactic to recuperate consciousness around routine acts.

* * *

In 1984, Lara painted a small group of interiors in acrylic on canvas. With bold reds and blues painted atop bright, verging-on-highlighter yellow backgrounds, these canvases pop and glow from afar (figure 2.19). The pictured scene—bathroom, kitchen—asserts itself before the viewer is close enough to read any text incorporated into the composition. In these paintings, a different sort of temporal disjunction is enacted than that experienced by the comics reader, who only looks in intimate physical proximity, the comic book or newspaper held in their hands. As the viewer approaches these paintings, the brief pause between apprehension of image and text extends further as they struggle to decipher Lara's quickly scrawled cursive. One of the paintings, *Guardé mi infancia* (figure 2.20), shows a partial view of a kitchen: refrigerator, countertop, cabinets, and an open window. Sidling along the shadow of the chair on the left: "At night, my grandmother would peel a mandarin." Harder to read, squeezed onto the side of the refrigerator and between the legs of the chair on the right: "I kept my childhood in the freezer. I asked myself, when am I going to take it out? When will I be able to eat it?"

[63] Magali Lara, "De la ciudad," 1981, 4, Centro de Documentación de Juan Acha, Centro Cultural Universitario de Tlatelolco; Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 26.

What happens over the course of this deciphering process, as text and image interact, and as the systematic and successive linearity that is built into the act of reading rubs up against the holistic and rambling act of looking at an image?[64] What happens as the viewer looks slowly? In Lara's case what occurs is a shift in perspective that is unveiled, little by little. Where the bright light of the once cheery-seeming kitchen is revealed to be an uncanny fluorescent flicker. Where quaint dreaminess transforms into surreality. As the viewer reads, meaning is set swinging like a pendulum, between vivid image and murky text, between the matter-of-fact memory recounted on the left and the slightly unsettling reflection articulated on the right. In this vibrant kitchen, the naivety, the pleasure, the wonder of childhood cannot be enjoyed or savored, but must be indefinitely deferred and imperfectly preserved. Its rosy glow slowly fades, greying and frost-eaten in the freezer, as one attends to the mundane responsibilities of adulthood that dominate the domestic sphere. Here, childhood cannot be revisited. It cannot be read and reread like a beloved book, but instead is consumed: chewed up, metabolized, and excreted. The juxtaposition of words and images produce a subtle but biting discomfiture that grows into the slow burn of political consciousness—here, specifically feminist political consciousness—as one considers descriptions of small violences within domestic spaces. There is no action pictured here, but as text and image commingle, they suggest a minor but steady process of abrasion. Dreams and desires are sacrificed—forfeited to the labors of everyday life that the *Historias de casa* record—pushed aside, but never forgotten. There is the prickle of what Lara has described elsewhere: that, in 1970s and 80s Mexico City, women's ideas and actions continued to be discounted—

[64] While I'm building most directly upon the work of film historian Tom Gunning here, the notion of temporal and perceptual differences between reading text and looking at images can be traced back to Lessing's "Laocoon" (1766). Tom Gunning, "The Art of Succession: Reading, Writing, and Watching Comics," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (March 1, 2014): 46, https://doi.org/10.1086/677328.

“The problem…was that what [we] did as women always seemed less important.”[65]

Lara’s words here are drawn from a specific discussion of her experience within the art making collective Grupo Março. However, they are echoed in the reflections of many women artists active in the 1970s and 80s. In the avant-garde art scene of this epoch, women’s issues were viewed as trivial—as “bourgeois” and in “bad taste.”[66] In the artwork produced within the context of *los grupos*, the address of such issues “was not permitted”;[67] discussions of feminism and women’s issues were always subordinate to the urgency of class struggle. Lara explains, “What we as women proposed on an artistic level was belittled. Thinking about [gender] equality made you look petit bourgeois, because the proletarian struggle came first and then day-to-day life.”[68] The militantly Marxist ideals of *los grupos* foreclosed the possibility of addressing feminist issues alongside those of class. The burden of “day-to-day life”—small scale inequalities operating in familial structures and marital relations—simply had to be endured while the class revolution was waged.

Lara’s descriptions of her experience as a woman and an artist reverberate with cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s poignant description of the “ordinary and ongoing” qualities of trauma, pain, and hardship that affect women in the United States: that women are expected “to spin negative value into the gold of an always deferred future, meanwhile coping, if they can, in the everyday.”[69] Pushed to the back of the freezer, Berlant’s “gold of an always deferred future” sits alongside Lara’s childhood. “When am I going to take it out? When will I be able to eat it?,”

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[65] Vargas and Lara, “The Personal is Political,” 199.
[66] McCaughan, “Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence,” 53; Olivier Debroise and Magali Lara, “Entrevista a Magali Lara (transcript),” n.d., 30, B87 069, Fondo La era de la discrepancia, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM.
[67] Debroise and Lara, “Entrevista a Magali Lara (transcript).”
[68] Vargas and Lara, “The Personal is Political,” 195.
[69] Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics,” in *Thinking through Feminism*, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 33, 44.

Lara asks. When will the struggle for gender equality take center stage? When will the burden of everyday life—the cooking and cleaning and childrearing that Lara pictures in her *Historias de casa*—be more fairly distributed? When will women no longer be asked to "cop[e], if they can"?

In another of her canvases from 1984, *Luego lo lavo* (figure 2.21), Lara paints a view onto a bright yellow and orange bathroom. On the far right, a toilet is tucked into a corner. Three garments are draped over a clothing line strung up above a drain and a red bucket. A white tunic drips rapidly into the bucket. Along the bottom of the canvas, scrawled in black: "I wear my destiny sewn to my body"; and in blue: "then I wash it." This text is set off from the bathroom scene, painted on a white background with wavering black lines, like a caption or subtitle to the painting. Integrated into the painting are a set of labels, painted in the same blue as "then I wash it." The long-sleeved pink garment on the left is labelled "the other," the white tunic and pair of blue tights on the right as "mine," and next to the bucket, "dampness" or "moisture." As the viewer struggles to decipher and make sense of the text, and as text and image interact, meaning is set in motion once more. At first glance, the clothes strung up on the line appear soft and floppy. In conversation with the text below, they transform into something decidedly less comfortable. Likened to the artist's "destiny" which cannot be slipped on and off at will, but rather is worn "sewn to [her] body," the clothes seem to take on a different sort of quality—stiff and constricting, itchy and chafing. The viewer is left to wonder just what was washed out of these freshly laundered garments. As the weft of the fragments of text weave across the warp of the image and the canvas coalesces, something visceral suddenly locks into focus: a series of pricks of the needle; a steady repetition of low-level pain that can be endured but, nevertheless, accumulates; a process of "coping…in the everyday" [70]— ignoring the pain while going about

[70] Berlant, 44.

the labor of everyday life—while constantly accepting that one's "destiny" has already been designed.

The drawings, etchings, and paintings that make up Lara's *Historias de casa* series would never be recognized as "a militant activity," as Eder described the practices of *los grupos* in 1980.[71] Their slowness would always foreclose them from being viewed within the "combative" and "rebellious" framework that militancy requires.[72] But militancy is not the only means of effecting political change. Perhaps, by very way of their slowness, viewers of Lara's images would be affected by them. Perhaps they would find themselves dwelling upon the unexpectedly visceral reactions that the experience of looking at those artworks ignited. Perhaps the low-level discomfort produced by those artworks would niggle at them, well after having walked away from them. The slow burn of the affective power of Lara's images didn't match the immediacy with which political art had been so deeply associated in Mexico, and which continued to dominate the sphere of political art in Mexico City in the 1980s. But if the "militant" interventions of *los grupos* produced only fleeting effects, slowness offered the potential for staying power.

Transformative thinking

As art historian Karen Cordero Reiman puts it, Lara's images "lure us onto a voyage" that "evoke[s] a profound, visceral level of experience."[73] The artwork compels the viewer to keep looking, to keep trying to make sense of the image. Affected by the image, they become an invested interpreter. No longer simply a spectator, they become a passenger on a voyage, a

[71] Eder, "El arte público en México: Los grupos," i.
[72] Rodríguez, "¿El abandono de su tradicional plataforma ideológica servirá a la pintura mexicana?"
[73] Karen Cordero Reiman, "Lessons in Logic Drawn from Magali Lara's Satori Series," in *Satori*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Galería Nina Menocal, 2002), 20.

participant, or an interlocutor, even. The sustained viewing experience unfurls into a conversation. In her drawings, Lara "is *speaking,"* feminist artist Mónica Mayer explains; her work is "very particularly a conversation—a personal conversation that's shared."[74]

The conversational quality of Lara's work depends upon more than the presence of text. In the mid-1980s, she was far from the only artist using fragments of ambiguous text as a vehicle for politics, either in Mexico City or elsewhere. Indeed, in a 1984 exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City that traveled to New York, Lara's work was displayed under the rubric "narrative art" alongside the work of an international group of artists including American artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger. Holzer and Kruger are amongst those visual artists best known for their rigorous and consistent deployment of text, and the coevality of their careers with that of Lara's, as well as each of their respective positions as self-identified feminists, serves to throw into relief the way that text functions in Lara's work.

Slowness is a crucial difference. Whereas in Lara's images, reading is part of the protraction of the viewing process, in the works of Holzer and Kruger, the act of reading is rapid. Jenny Holzer turned to text because, as she explains, "I wanted explicit content…I wanted to discuss certain subjects in a clear way."[75] Relying upon cleanly printed fonts, text becomes an almost transparent medium through which she can present political comment (e.g., figure 2.22). She explains, "The bold typeface was a practical decision…it was chosen so people would be drawn to the posters and be able to read them easily."[76] Similarly, Barbara Kruger almost always relies upon the same bold, sans serif font—specifically, Futura Bold—that promotes rapid

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[74] Mónica Mayer, Interview with author, August 9, 2019. "Está hablando,"; "muy particularmente una conversación—una conversación personal compartida."
[75] Seth Cohen and Jenny Holzer, "An Interview with Jenny Holzer," *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 15 (1990): 154.
[76] Michael Auping, "Interview," in *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 80.

comprehension.[77] Often, the texts appear upon their own background, pasted atop an image like the magazine cutouts of a ransom-note, further facilitating legibility (e.g., figure 2.23). Earning comparisons to "the best of advertising" and "effective propaganda," if the viewer dwells upon one of Kruger's compositions, it isn't because they are trying to make out what they are seeing.[78] Evaluations of the texts of both Holzer and Kruger have attributed a type of violence to their words: Holzer's words "confront" and "assault";[79] Kruger's "arrest," "attack," and "accost."[80] These violent associations suggest the swiftness with which their words strike the viewer.

The political potency of Lara's artwork shares something with that of Holzer and Kruger; the work of all three of these artists startles their viewer into thinking about an issue from a different angle. Holzer suggests this is an aim of her work: "You might startle people so much that you have some hope of changing their thinking a little bit, or even prompting them to take some kind of action."[81] Indeed, Holzer's comment is precisely what is significant about Lara's probing of the relationship between text and image. But whereas explicitness and immediacy are crucial for both Holzer and Kruger to generate political efficacy in their work, slowness is integral to the viewing experience of Lara's work.[82] Her words don't assault or accost, they draw

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[77] Alexander Alberro, "Picturing Relations: Images, Text, and Social Engagement," in *Barbara Kruger* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 195.
[78] Miwon Kwon, "A Message from Barbara Kruger: Empathy Can Change the World," in *Barbara Kruger* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 90.
[79] Michael Auping, "Reading Holzer or Speaking in Tongues," in *Jenny Holzer: The Venice Installation* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1991), 27, 29.
[80] Craig Owens and Jane Weinstock, *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture: Barbara Kruger* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1983), 3, 12; W. J. T. Mitchell and Barbara Kruger, "An Interview with Barbara Kruger," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 445.
[81] Jenny Holzer and Diane Waldman, "Interview," in *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1989), 17–18.
[82] Holzer and Kruger have both pointed to the importance of explicitness and immediacy in their work. Holzer has commented that she is aiming to make works that are "beautiful enough or compelling enough or understandable enough to make people stop." Bruce Ferguson, "Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer," *Art in America* 74 (December 1986): 111. For her part, Kruger explains "the most important thing is that in order for these images and words to do their work they have to catch the eye of the spectator." Mitchell and Kruger, "An Interview with Barbara Kruger," 439.

the viewer in close. They slow the viewer down. They destabilize the connotations summoned up by the images that they complement. They make micropolitical interventions into those images, imbuing charming domestic scenes with uneasy airlessness, or queasy constriction.

Furthermore, the intimate and conversational quality of Lara's artworks is absent from those of Holzer and Kruger. Commandeering the slick look of advertising and, in many cases, relying upon the same infrastructure as advertising, Holzer and Kruger both write using anonymous, authoritative voices—voices that are decidedly different from Lara's highly personal, confessional writings. "Are these anyone's words?" one critic asks of Kruger's texts.[83] In a 1986 interview, Holzer explains:

> I always try to make my voice unidentifiable, though. I wouldn't want it to be isolated as a woman's voice, because I've found that when things are categorized, they tend to be dismissed. I find it better to have no particular associations attached to the "voice" in order for it to be perceived as true.[84]

Holzer seeks to circumnavigate the quick dismissal that often results from words that are clearly identifiable as the words of a woman. Lara's works do something similar. But, in sharp contrast to Lara, in order to achieve this, Holzer makes her writing as anonymous and unmarked as possible. She adopts voices that have already been established as authoritative and as part of the (patriarchal, capitalist) system. Attuning her words to the swift speed of urban consumer culture, she infiltrates the system. She inserts small, startling moments into the routines of passersby. But by relying upon those established, authoritative voices, Holzer's words brook no argument. They do not allow for interlocution or empathy.

Instead, the rapid-fire impact of the words of both Holzer and Kruger often elicit a defensive reaction on the part of the viewer. Art critic Kenneth Baker observes, "Kruger

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[83] Kenneth Baker, *Slices of Life: The Art of Barbara Kruger* (Urbana-Champaign: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 1986), 4.
[84] Ferguson, "Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer," 114.

composes phrases which implicate, accuse, even threaten the spectator/reader, raising immediately the question 'Is this addressed to *me?*.'"[85] What is startling about the words that appear in the works of Kruger and Holzer is their incongruence with the structures in which they are embedded. The artists insert wry, capitalist critiques in spaces where consumer culture typically dominates. In *Bus wrap* (1997), Kruger printed "I shop therefore I am" in huge letters on the side of a New York City bus. In *Messages to the Public* (1982), Holzer projected the flashing text "PRIVATE PROPERTY CREATED CRIME" on a twenty by forty-foot sign in Times Square. Baker's question—"Is this addressed to *me?"*—points to a type of paranoia that grips the viewer of these works. The incongruent texts unveil an underlying structure that determines the viewer's everyday experience; they "expose the cracks in the mass media context in which they are placed."[86] They ask the viewer to consider all of the texts and images that surround them as they move through the world each day and whose truth and authority they do not question. They accuse the viewer of complacency and complicity, demanding that they approach the world with more suspicion.

Rather than suspicion, Lara's artworks are imbued with candor and vulnerability. They invite empathic engagement on the part of the viewer. Lara explains, "I like the way that my work derived from comics, how it offers an intersection between text and image; a continuous loss of stability that allows for a work that is more open to collaboration and reinterpretation."[87] Acknowledging the destabilizing experience that her artworks often engender as a result of the

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[85] Baker, *Slices of Life*, 4. Emphasis original.
[86] Gordon Hughes, "Power's Script: Or, Jenny Holzer's Art after 'Art after Philosophy,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 3 (2006): 421.
[87] Magali Lara, *Espiral*, Investigación Visual Contemporánea Cuadernos Híbridos 02 (Cuernavaca, Morelos: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos, 2014), 11. "Me gusta la manera en que mi trabajo derivó de los cómics, pues ofrece un cruce entre el texto y la imagen; una continua pérdida de estabilidad que permite una obra más abierta a la colaboración y a la reinterpretación."

interplay between slippery, difficult-to-decipher text and ambiguous imagery, she points to the ways in which that destabilization actively invites her viewers to make their own roving and multifarious meaning. She recognizes interpretation as a making process, and further, a making process that is open, ongoing, and accretive.

In her essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," queer theorist Eve Sedgwick advocates for just such an approach in her elaboration of what she terms "reparative reading." For Sedgwick, "The desire of a reparative impulse…is additive and accretive," and "it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self."[88] Lara's images accumulate meanings, suggesting the capacity for change. Her repeated explorations of the same objects with multiple texts, such as the yellow coat hanger in her *Dibujos sucios* (figures 2.17–18), enable the accretion of meanings—thinking and rethinking, evolution and transformation. They encourage reparative viewing.

In Sedgwick's essay, "reparative reading" is held in contrast to "paranoid reading," and her description of the activities that constitute paranoia is highly applicable to the artworks of Holzer and Kruger and the behaviors that they incite in their viewer: "Subversive and demystifying parody, suspicious archaeologies of the present, the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure."[89] The work of these artists asks their viewer to be cannier, to attend to the problems of the present. But in her essay, Sedgwick points to the debilitating limitations of such approaches. The problem with paranoia is that the future is always already written; there is no space for reimagining or transformation. Whereas paranoia has already foreclosed certain

[88] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.
[89] Sedgwick, 143.

possible futures, the reparative approach to viewing that Lara's images invite is open-ended and generative. Reparative viewing allows for interpretations that lie beyond what the artist may have intended or even imagined possible.

As Lara suggests when describing her interest in "work that is more open to collaboration and reinterpretation," conversational and collaborative making processes have been a touchstone in her artistic practice.[90] Over the course of her career, such processes have manifested in collectively produced performances or happenings, co-authored artist's books which juxtapose Lara's images with another author's text, and projects that rely upon the skills and expertise of other makers, such as her etchings, textiles, and animations. She has repeatedly associated these wide-ranging collaborative processes with unanticipated outcomes and productive shifts in her thinking. She describes the value that she places upon encountering an idea "that would never have occurred to me" over the course of collaboration, and her fascination in working with others "who ask me to do things I wouldn't usually have intended."[91] In an artist statement from the early 1980s, she writes, "I believe that collaborative works allow for more precise observation of images that aren't one's own, which compels one to understand other opinions, making possible a happy and unexpected result."[92] To collaborate, she suggests, is to engage deeply and to attempt to empathize with another's ideas. Often, to collaborate is to be surprised by what emerges over the course of this engagement.

The prolonged, open-ended, and conversational experience of looking that her works

[90] Lara, *Espiral*, 11.
[91] Coll, "Magali Lara." "Que a mí nunca se me habría ocurrido"; "que me pidan hacer cosas que normalmente no intentaría."
[92] This and the next two quotations from Magali Lara, "[Mi Trabajo Consta]," c 1981, GPP.2.4A.104, Fondo Proceso Pentágono, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Creo que los trabajos de colaboración permiten una observación más precisa de imágenes que no son las propias, lo que obliga a entender otros criterios, posibilitando un resultado feliz e insospechado."

invite sets into motion a similar process to the collaborative endeavors that Lara describes. Looking slowly at her images similarly leads to an "unexpected result"—to arrive at a different place than one expected when one started looking. And looking slowly at her images similarly "compels one to understand other opinions"—to take seriously and engage deeply with the experiences, ideas, and issues that Lara describes, to consider those issues anew, and to attend to an opinion that may differ from one's own.

For Sedgwick, the capacity for change that "reparative reading" enables goes hand in hand with opening oneself up to the possibility of unexpected results. She writes:

> To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones…Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present.[93]

Allowing for surprises also means allowing for transformation. It means rejecting visions of the future that have already foreclosed certain possibilities. But what if an openness to surprise is not just an indication of a predisposition for transformative thinking? What if the experience of surprise can *teach* us to think transformatively? What if being caught by surprise can open viewers up to the possibility of different, imagined futures? Bertolt Brecht's concept of the "distancing effect" gestures towards this. For Brecht, this effect depended upon a performer's actions appearing "alien to the point of arousing surprise" and it was a crucial part of developing a form of theater that could "stage history as eminently changeable, a continuing human work capable of being rewritten."[94] These, I argue, are the stakes of Lara's invitation to her viewers to look slowly. Slowness and its defamiliarizing effects enable her images to teach viewers to think

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[93] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 146. Emphasis original.
[94] Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," 131; Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theater*, 5.

transformatively: to see what they couldn't or wouldn't see, and to open themselves up to the possibility of a different future.

While Jenny Holzer's or Barbara Kruger's rapid-fire interventions into urban space grip viewers in a startling paranoia, Lara's viewer is surprised in the midst of a slow and invested process of consumption. In Lara's artworks, the relationship between text and image draws out the viewing experience, allowing for an encounter that is unexpectedly affecting. Their seemingly easy appearance is undermined by the discomfiture that suddenly surfaces as the viewer looks longer. Her drawings document the messy truth of domesticity—the mistakes and frustrations of daily tasks and the ways in which labor overlaps with other aspects of home life. Her etchings, filled with adorable objects independently performing domestic chores, point to the luxury of ignoring work performed in the home; the invisibility of the laborer becomes almost fantastical. The discomfiting fragments of text in her paintings transform their cheery appearance into a trompe l'oeil: the bright colors are a façade, plastered over the pain and disappointment of daily life. When the political commentary embedded within the images coalesces, Lara's viewer is caught by surprise**.**

Caught by surprise

The notion of surprise may seem difficult to map onto Lara's static images, hung on the wall of a gallery. But the compulsion to look slowly and attentively manages to create a surprising viewing experience. Surprise passes in an instant. Yet, in the brief pause that it opens up, it creates space for thinking anew. Surprise is disruptive. It is an "interrupter to ongoing activity" and a "circuit breaker," according to seminal affect theorist Silvan Tomkins.[95] It is

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[95] Silvan S. Tomkins, "Surprise-Startle: The Resetting Affect," in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, ed. Bertram P. Karon, vol. 1, The Positive Affects (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1962), 498–

marked by absence—by speechlessness, being struck dumb, or left with mouth agape. It is a "momentary cessation of speech or action."[96] But embedded within the lacuna of surprise is the capacity for transformation of thought. Surprise is a shift in focus and attention—a turning or reorienting towards whatever unexpected stimulus or event has arisen. And as a result of that shift in attention, "important information that might otherwise be ignored is analyzed, appraised, or reappraised."[97] In the work of evolutionary biologists, psychologists, and affect theorists, surprise is understood to be a catalyst for the reevaluation of one's worldview. When the unexpected occurs, one shifts one's expectations in order to account for that which has, in fact, happened.

Affective encounters, and especially the affective experience of surprise, enable deep and different thinking. "Affect or emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage *involuntarily,*" art historian Jill Bennett writes, building upon the work of critical theorist Gilles Deleuze.[98] For both Bennett and Deleuze, the involuntary nature of affect provokes deep thinking more effectively than pure logic or rationality. Deleuze emphasizes the power of "impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think" over and above the deliberate choice to look, interpret, or think.[99] Explorations of the affective experience of surprise reinforce Deleuze's commentary; psychological studies have documented a high correlation between a

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[96] Christopher R. Miller, *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2015), 118.
[97] Gernot Horstmann, "Latency and Duration of the Action Interruption in Surprise," *Cognition and Emotion* 20, no. 2 (February 1, 2006): 244, https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930500262878.
[98] Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 7. My emphasis.
[99] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: George Braziller, 1972), 161; cited in Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7.

surprising event and subjects' memories of the details of that event.[100] The experience of surprise may be brief, but its effects can be potent and lingering.

Lara's interest in the Zen Buddhist concept of satori offers another way of framing the notion of surprise in her work. Returning to the words of Roland Barthes regarding satori (which Lara has suggested as an early influence upon her work), the author describes the concept as "a kind of *mental jolt* which allows one to gain access, beyond all the known intellectual ways, to the Buddhist 'truth.'"[101] Further, he suggests that through "startling techniques" or "shocks" or "surprises," satori allows for the possibility of "unsettling the dogmatic seriousness which often lends a mask to the clear conscience presiding over our mental habits."[102] In other words, the concept of satori suggests that surprising encounters allow for transformation in thought.[103]

In Lara's artwork, political commentary unfolds unexpectedly. Encountering the subtle feminist politics embedded in the artwork—artwork that at first glance seemed easy or unserious or even illogical—the unsuspecting viewer's attention involuntarily shifts to content that they may not have expected to encounter. The viewer is compelled to look, to interpret, to think. They are coerced into considering issues of feminism anew—to attending not only to activities of domestic labor, but also to the late-capitalist structures and deep-seated social inequalities that have repeatedly obscured and undervalued those activities. Lara's images allow for a "mental jolt" that disrupts habitual thinking. They serve as a circuit breaker, taking advantage of the brief

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[100] Horstmann, "Latency and Duration of the Action Interruption in Surprise," 246.
[101] Vargas and Lara, "The Personal is Political," 194; Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," 109. My emphasis.
[102] Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," 109.
[103] Barthes also refers to satori in his book *Camera Lucida,* describing it alternately as "a tiny shock" and "a sudden awakening." Along with "sudden enlightenment," the latter is a common gloss of satori. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 49, 109.

lacuna of surprise to open up the possibility for transformative thinking around the issues that they raise.

In the 1984 issue of *Fem* that featured the etched version of *Luego lo lavo* on its cover, Rita Eder wrote that Lara's work "becomes a type of labyrinth in which the viewer becomes submerged and enters into a reciprocal game."[104] The immersive and labyrinthian qualities that Eder points to depend upon the curious combination of word and image in works such as those that make up the series *Historias de casa*. Through the combination of ambiguous imagery and difficult to decipher, handwritten text, Lara's images ask for sustained and even strained attention. This type of attention is just what opens up the possibility of surprise. A period of intense concentration is understood to precede the Zen experience of satori.[105] And in startling encounters that range from Joseph Haydn's 1791 "Surprise" Symphony to the 2000s phenomenon of "screamers"—short videos, GIFs, or games that are designed to produce a jump scare—listeners or viewers or participants are first asked to pay close attention. In Haydn's symphony, the eponymous surprise of a sudden fortissimo chord, played by the entire orchestra, depends upon the quiet lead-up that immediately precedes it, where the listener strains to hear the violins play the movement's main theme.[106] Similarly, in "screamers," the scream-inducing shock of a sudden, horrifying image is preceded by strained attention; viewers are frequently asked to look closely at a specific element of an image or, in one popular case, to carefully navigate a maze.[107] Of course, Lara's artwork does not deal in jump scares, neither of the horror

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[104] Rita Eder, "Las mujeres artistas en México," *Fem* 9, no. 33 (May 1984): 11. "Su trabajo se convierte en una especie de laberinto en que el espectador se submerge y entra en juego recíproco."
[105] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki, Volume 1: Zen*, ed. Richard M. Jaffe (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 33.
[106] See Gretchen A. Wheelock's analysis of this musical passage in *Haydn's Ingenious Jesting with Art: Contexts of Musical Wit and Humor* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 16.
[107] For a detailed analysis of popular "screamers," see Adam Charles Hart, "The Lowly Art of the Jump Scare," in *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror across Media* (New York, NY: Oxford University

nor the Haydn variety. Yet there is something similar at work in the demand for slow, sustained attention. Lured in close in the two-fold process of looking and reading, Lara's viewer is caught by surprise when the artwork suddenly coalesces. In the brief pause that follows a startling sting of interpretation, the viewer is forced to "engage involuntarily" with the feminist message undergirding the artwork;[108] subtle expressions of frustration, pain, and constriction point to the ways traditional gender roles determine and regulate women's lives. In that pause, the viewer is compelled to reappraise and reevaluate the vantage from whence they approached the artwork—to think deeply about the issues that it unexpectedly presents.

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In her recent study *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning through Observation* (2018), Shari Tishman points to the ways in which preconceived expectations structure the way that viewers look at and analyze images and objects. She explains, "We need mental concepts and categories in order to make sense of the world."[109] Yet those systems of sense-making can also inhibit vision, rendering certain aspects of the world unseeable. "We can select what we choose to look at, but doing so necessarily blinds us to other things," she writes.[110] For Tishman, looking longer and more carefully—employing a practice of "slow looking"—is one way to bring those unseeable aspects back into the field of vision.

Magali Lara's artworks insist that the viewer lingers**.** Her combinations of text and image and her incorporation of organizational devices derived from comics take advantage of the

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Press, 2020), 59–88, especially 73–74.
[108] Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7.
[109] Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning through Observation* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 37.
[110] Tishman, 11.

slightly differing paces at which looking and reading occur. Hastily scribbled fragments of text motivate the viewer to keep looking as they struggle to decipher the words. Ambiguous juxtapositions between text and image protract the viewing process; discerning the words often muddies understanding rather than clarifying anything about the image. Looking longer at one of Lara's works does not seem to bring the image to any resolution, but to allow it to unfold and expand, new meanings layering atop one's initial interpretations and reactions.

Upon first glance, Lara's images have often struck viewers as frivolous, decadent, or simply innocuous. But dwelling upon her images tends to reveal discomfiting aspects that simmer just beneath the surface. Her artworks describe small violences (the pricks of a needle into skin), steady processes of abrasion (the corrosive effects of freezer burn), and lingering threats of pain (the hot plates of electric irons that confront the viewer) that come into focus with time. The banality of household interiors and objects yields to awareness of a key issue for feminists in Mexico City in the 1980s: the undervalued nature of domestic labor predominantly performed by women, and the social and economic structures that perpetuate its depreciation.

The slowness of Lara's images runs counter to long-held understandings of political art, especially in Mexico. But slowness offers a different sort of political potential. The artist's images entice one into what Tishman describes as the "intrinsically rewarding feedback loop" of slow looking: "the more you look, the more you see, the more you see, the more engaged you become."[111] Lured into a slow, conversational viewing experience, the viewer becomes invested, and the images affect them. As the subtle feminist politics embedded in the images suddenly come into focus, the viewer cannot simply look away or move on. Rather than deciding to analyze something, once in the throes of an affective response, one is compelled to do so.

[111] Tishman, 3.

Affects, and especially the affect of surprise, arrest the viewer, forcing previously imperceptible objects and events into the realm of perception.

Caught up in this surprising moment of comprehension and perception, the viewer not only gains the capacity to see what may have hitherto been unseeable, but also to think transformatively. To recognize that embracing the unexpected means, well, not expecting. Not knowing what comes next. Realizing "that the future may be different from the present."[112] That it is not already written, but moldable, changeable, transformable. To return to the words woven into the tapestry from her series *Leer* (figure 2.1), looking slowly at Lara's artworks teaches viewers to accept that, perhaps, reading and *not* understanding is just fine. Because coming to terms with *not* knowing, with *not* anticipating, is a crucial aspect of opening oneself up to the possibility of transformation—of a world that looks even slightly different from the present one.

In an interview from 2017, Lara suggested that her artworks—and her paintings in particular—could propose "another way of knowing the world."[113] She pointed to the slowness of the painted medium as a crucial aspect of this proposition: "Maybe, now that we consume at such rapid tempos, something that asks you for stillness may be interesting."[114] Stillness has thwarted works like Lara's from being read as political, but dwelling upon them can be productive. Lingering upon these images means looking *at* rather than *through* their familiar, quotidian content. Looking slowly at these images means attending to aspects of women's lives that have repeatedly been elided. Stillness need not be an inactive process.

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[112] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 146.
[113] This and following from Coll, "Magali Lara." "Otra manera de conocer el mundo."
[114] "Quizás, ahora que consumimos esos tiempos tan veloces, algo que te pida quietud pueda ser interesante."

CHAPTER 3
"El cuerpo de verdad": Unpictured Bodies, the Bodily, and the Feminist Body Politic

In 1984, Magali Lara created a series of etchings in collaboration with Mexican poet Carmen Boullosa. Entitled *De la misma, la misma habitación* (Of the same, the same room), the series consists of six prints that are accompanied by a poem of the same title written by Boullosa in April 1984 (figures 3.1–3.6). These delicate, greyscale images, each measuring no more than about nine by twelve inches, in certain ways fit quite neatly within the realm of conventional subject matter for women artists: genre scenes; domestic interiors. Yet, as one continues to look, the images take on new shades of meaning.

In her six etchings, Lara depicts a series of views of bathrooms: toilets, showers, sinks, mirrors, drains set into the floor. While, as in almost all of Lara's prolific production, the body is not represented directly, the evidence of a body—a body that urinates and defecates, that sweats, that bleeds, that menstruates—is of the utmost importance. While Lara's work has often been described as being *absent* of bodies, I argue the body is quite far from absent.[1] In its evacuation of the space, its just-having-been-present, the unpictured body provides an opening for the viewer: a space to enter into the work and to empathize. As Lara puts it, "Of course [the body] *is there.* She's there, but you aren't seeing her there in that moment, but she's there. Everything is made for her to be there, but she's not described, so to say: she's insinuated, she's suggested."[2] The body is suggested in the still-smoldering cigarette ground into an ashtray on the sink, in the

[1] For examples of the use of the term *ausencia* (absence) to describe Lara's approach to presenting bodies, faces, or human subjects, see: the introductory text by Patricia Mendoza in Magali Lara, *De la misma, la misma habitación* (Mexico City: Galería Los Talleres, 1984); José María Espinasa, *Insomnio: Magali Lara* (Mexico City: Rafael Matos Galería de Arte, 1986); and Eduardo Milán, *Magali Lara: Proliferación* (Mexico City: Galería de Arte Contemporáneo, 1990).
[2] Magali Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019. "Claro que *está*. Está, pero no la estás viendo allí en ese momento, o sea, sí está. Todo está hecho para que esté, pero no está descrita por así decir, está insinuada, está sugerida."

roll of toilet paper that has been torn askew, in the still-dripping clothes strung up on a clothesline, in the shower cap draped over a peg ready for the next shower. Early on in her career Lara realized that she wasn't satisfied with direct depictions of the human figure, and so she opted to find other ways of telling stories of her experiences.[3]

How can an image account for both body and self? How can it simultaneously recognize both corporeal and subjective experience? Although the scenes in *De la misma, la misma habitación* are devoid of human figures, through details scattered throughout the images, they sketch the contours of a body. In her choice to describe the body in this way—to allude to and suggest rather than directly represent, to outline and sketch without filling in, to figure without picturing—Lara is able to depict the realities of what it means to live in a body. Making both physical and psychological realities visible, the body that Lara describes in her work has both an exterior and an interior. It is made up of skin and bone, muscle and flesh, and also grey matter. Autonomic processes and self-conscious reflection are all knitted together. Further, as I will argue, and as Lara suggests in the above-cited comment, the body she describes is specifically that of a woman, enabling her to imbue her work with a subtle feminist message. In this series of etchings, she creates spaces for reflection upon women's sexuality, reproductive health, and basic bodily functions—topics that, outside of feminist circles, remained largely undiscussed in early 1980s Mexico. She makes visible mundane aspects of women's experience that had not been admissible to present publicly.

This chapter takes as its premise that the lack of direct representation of bodies allows Lara's images to operate in distinctive ways. Her images catch hold of a specific type of quotidian moment—moments of solitude and interiority, private moments of being utterly

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[3] Lara.

oneself. They simultaneously evince experiences of psychological complexity and frank, physical realities. They offer space for empathy and identification on the part of the viewer. Lara's choice to leave the body out creates a generative site for feminist conversation—a site for imagining alternate visions and understandings of women's bodies.

Bodilessness

Individually, the images that make up Lara's series of etchings suggest the body in small ways, but together as a suite of six, the body begins to take shape. In the first print, the white lid of a toilet is propped up, baring the black seat (figure 3.1). A roll of toilet paper hangs, flying unnaturally towards the seat as if it were just ripped. The scene invokes the familiar actions of sitting on the toilet and of reaching for the toilet paper. In the next image, a towel, a pair of pants, and a dress are draped over a clothesline (figure 3.2). Dashed black lines cascade off of them and white suds spill over the side of a bucket placed on the floor beside them, as if the clothes have only just been washed and strung up on the line to dry. The neck and sleeves of the dress and the waist of the pants gape open, the outline of the clothes taking a literal step towards describing the contours of the implied-wearer's body: legs, arms, torso.

As the body takes shape over the course of these images, it begins to come into focus as that of a woman. In the second image, a dress or nightgown is drying on the clothesline. In the fifth image, a shower cap is hanging on a peg (figure 3.5), and a pair of tights is draped over a clothes hanger alongside it. And throughout the series, the seats of the toilets are all reliably left down (figures 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, and 3.6). These small, suggestive details resonate with Lara's commentary upon her artwork: "The voice that comes out of me is from my body and this is the

body of a woman."[4] The images in *De la misma, la misma habitación* do not foreclose the possibility of a non-female body inhabiting the space. But the specificity and the intimacy of the details that Lara incorporates ensure some measure of singularity. These images remain suspended between the wholly particular and the wholly generic.[5] As the artist has put it, she presents her viewer with an image that "isn't a caricature and isn't *me*."[6] Neither the essentializing, too-generic description of which a "caricature" consists, nor the highly idiosyncratic, too-particular description of which a self-portrait consists, Lara's work finds space between those two extremes.

Critical responses to artworks Lara produced throughout her career reflect the ways in which her images find ground between the extremes of particularity and generality. For instance, describing a group of works that appeared in a 1999 exhibition, reviewer Karña Garduño writes, "Their intentions aren't exactly autobiographical, despite the fact that upon every one…a personal intention remains impressed, marked by elements that indicate an invasion of the private in the public and vice versa, that provoke an intimate echo in the viewer."[7] Observing a suspension between purely autobiographical and completely impersonal articulations in Lara's images, Garduño draws a connection between that suspension and the impact upon the viewer—the "intimate echo" that the artworks provoke in the viewer. Reviewing a 1991 retrospective of

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[4] Raquel Peguero, "Magali Lara y el árbol del cuerpo," *La Jornada*, May 16, 1994, sec. Cultura, Hemerografía, Museo de Arte Moderno. "La voz que me sale es de mi cuerpo y éste es un cuerpo de mujer."

[5] Here my thinking has been shaped by art historian Mieke Bal's book-length study of the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Bal leverages the term "singularity" in an effort to unpack the politics operating in Salcedo's artwork. She employs the term as a means of finding productive space between narratives that operate in the realms of either the overly particular or the overly general.

[6] Lara, Interview with author. "No sea una caricatura y no sea *yo*."

[7] Karña Garduño, "Borda su intimidad en tapices," *Mural*, July 10, 1999, NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current. "Sus intenciones no son precisamente autobiográficas, a pesar de lo cual en cada uno…ha quedado impresa una intención personal marcada por elementos que marcan una invasión de lo privado en lo público y viceversa, que provocan un íntimo eco en el espectador."

Lara's prints (which included her series *De la misma, la misma habitación),* critic Gonzalo Vélez observes that "showing these spaces does not mean sharing them"; while the viewer might feel a sense of "identification" with the stories that unfold through the works, certain aspects of those stories remain "untransmissible, limited to suggestion alone."[8] Here, Vélez describes Lara's images as teetering upon a fulcrum between granting and denying access to the highly personal. The artist shows the viewer private, domestic spaces, but she does not share them; she suggests a set of personal, emotional responses, but she does not transmit them. This in-betweenness—not quite so particular as to be autobiographical but far from disinterestedly generic—is considered in relation to the viewer's ability to identify with aspects of the images. The comments in these reviews resonate with Lara's own words regarding her work in 1989: "For better or worse, I think the world that I have [in my pictures] is a recognizable one. I don't think that it's completely personal, but…I believe that I have managed a certain expressivity."[9] Lara presents a "recognizable" vision of the world—a vision that is not "completely personal," a vision with which others can identify. But at the same time, her images retain some measure of specificity: an intimacy, "a personal intention" embedded within the works, a unique "expressivity."[10]

In *De la misma, la misma habitación,* the crucial role that the unpictured body plays in striking the balance between too-particular and too-generic drives a capacity for an empathic

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[8] Gonzalo Vélez, "Magali Lara: Obra gráfica," *Uno más uno*, September 21, 1991, sec. El cuadro en el ojo, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Mostrar estos espacios no significa compartirlos"; "existe acaso identificación…del espectador"; "es intransmible, se limita a la sugerencia."
[9] Lucía Alvarez, "El humor, un elemento necesario en la pintura, dice Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, December 16, 1989, No. 179, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Para bien o para mal, creo que el mundo que tengo sí es un mundo reconocible. No creo que sea totalmente personal, pero en la medida en que lo he ido elaborando creo que he ido logrando una cierta expresividad."
[10] Garduño, "Borda su intimidad en tapices"; Alvarez, "El humor, un elemento necesario en la pintura, dice Magali Lara."

viewing process—a capacity for viewers to find passages of "identification" and "intimate echo."[11] It is not a question of inducing complete empathy: "showing these spaces does not mean sharing them," at least not completely.[12] Rather, kindling an empathic spark in the viewer opens the way to generative conversation. There is no direct transmission of experience, but suggestion and invitation: an urging and encouraging to discuss alternative ways of representing a woman's body.

As performance and the direct presentation of artists' bodies took on an increasingly important role within feminist artistic practices in Mexico over the course of the 1980s, Lara's unpictured body offered a problematization of the collapse between body and self. The not-presently-present body in Lara's images highlights "the insufficiency and incoherence of the body-as-subject and its inability to deliver itself fully," as art historian Amelia Jones puts it, writing against the assumption that body art offers a form of unmitigated access to the artist.[13] Simultaneously describing aspects of corporeality and subjectivity, Lara's images articulate body and self as inextricable but decidedly inequivalent. They reflect what Jones describes as "the mutual supplementarity of the body and the subject (the body, as material 'object' in the world, seems to confirm the 'presence' of the subject; the subject gives the body its significance as 'human.')"[14] Alluding to both physical and psychological realities of occupying a body but evading or deferring the moment in which the body "deliver[s] itself," Lara's images refute either women's bodies or selves as independent from one another or completely knowable.

Throughout the post-Revolutionary period in Mexico, women's citizenship had been

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[11] Vélez, "Magali Lara: Obra gráfica"; Garduño, "Borda su intimidad en tapices."
[12] Vélez, "Magali Lara: Obra gráfica."
[13] Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 13, https://doi.org/10.2307/777715.
[14] Jones, 16.

equated with their bodies and, specifically, their capacity to bear children.[15] In the late 70s and early 80s, feminists pushed back against this equation, fighting for their own bodily autonomy, homing in upon issues such as sexual freedom, sexual education, and voluntary motherhood. Fighting to separate citizenship and motherhood meant that women's bodies were a crucial battleground for political rights and civic responsibility during this period. Citizenship and subjecthood could not be separated from the body, but neither could the presentation of the body guarantee the presentation of self or subjecthood. Lara's images illustrate the "mutual supplementarity" of subject and body in early 1980s Mexico.[16] The bathroom "represents the opportunity to have a personal, private, and intimate encounter with oneself and one's own selfhood that is the body," Lara suggested.[17] Her series of etchings depicting bathrooms addressed "a search for identity based on the body."[18] For this artist, the bathroom was a space that could help to articulate the complex, tangled relationship between female body and subject.

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Lara's series of etchings takes an alternative approach to representing bodies. Nevertheless, I propose reading the images within the well-established category of portraiture. These images are portraits but, absent of visible bodies, they are portraits of a particular kind. They are a visual twist upon self-portraiture—"a paraphrase of the self-portrait" as one art

[15] Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 188–89, 196.
[16] Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 16.
[17] J. O'Keeffe, "¿Hay un arte para mujeres?," *El Norte*, August 11, 1984, sec. Cultural, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Representa la oportunidad de tener un encuentro personal, privado e íntimo con uno mismo y su mismidad que es el cuerpo."
[18] Merry Mac Masters, "Magali Lara: Todavía no me Recupero de la Infancia," *El Nacional*, May 30, 1984, sec. Tercera Sección, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Una búsqueda de identidad a partir del cuerpo."

historian has described Lara's practice[19]—that approach something akin to "feminist confessional literature" with respect to autobiography. The confessional text, a type of autobiography that attempts to make legible the writer's subjective experience through the sharing of intimate details and anecdotes and suggests an intimate relationship between writer and reader more broadly, took on a specific role in the U.S.-American and European feminist movements in the 1970s and 80s.[20] Feminist confessional texts sought to make visible aspects of women's experience that had been overlooked or repressed, and, in the process, to generate conversation and community around those experiences.[21] Lara, who began reading Anglo-feminist literature in the 1970s, has spoken of her interest in confessional poetry.[22] Like feminist confessional texts, Lara's artworks seek to say something more authentic, more relatable, more intimate, and more conducive to empathic responses than a visually descriptive self-portrait or likeness is typically wont to do. To achieve this position, her images leave the body out.

"Portraits," explains art historian Richard Brilliant in his monograph on that very subject, "are always intentionally tied to the representation of actual persons in some potentially discernible way."[23] The category, then, depends upon the existence of a relationship between an

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[19] José Luis Barrios, *Símbolos, fantasmas y afectos: 6 variaciones de la mirada sobre el arte en México: SEMEFO, M. Lara, G. Suter, C. Amorales, M. Palau, S. Gruner*, Colección Libros de la Meseta (Mexico City: Fundación del Centro Histórico de la Universidad de México, 2007), 48. "Una paráfrasis del autorretrato."

[20] Rita Felski, "On Confession," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 87–88.

[21] Felski, 112, 95.

[22] Lara started to read Anglo-feminist literature when she was in high school in Montreal, and she continued to do so later on, including in a small reading group along with Boullosa. Lara, Interview with author; Karen Cordero Reiman, "Corporeal Apparitions / Beyond Appearances: Women and Bodily Discourse in Mexican Art, 1960–1985," in *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, ed. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017), 274; Magali Lara and María Minera, "Lesser Forms: A Long-Distance Conversation between Magali Lara & María Minera," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 164.

[23] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 39.

artwork and a specific individual. For Brilliant, this need not to be a relationship of a physical variety:

> Theoretically a portrait can be freed from all forms of descriptive reference to physical appearance without losing its categorical status as an intentionally exclusive sign of a named individual…The artist's approach to portraiture as a journey of discovery may be almost infinitely varied, so long as the artwork provides a name and reasonable access to the subject, sufficient to bring the person portrayed to the viewer's mind.[24]

Brilliant underscores the notion of the specific individual as inherent to portraiture—"an intentionally exclusive sign" for that "named individual." Regardless of whatever else is pushed aside or reshaped beyond recognition, the artwork must indicate a specific person. Following Brilliant's definition, then, Lara's works do not exactly fit neatly within the category. There are suggestions that this series of images represents a specific person, but there is not enough information to establish a one-to-one relationship between artwork and "named individual." They are suspended between generality and specificity, never naming an individual, but still providing sufficiently specific detail to bring somebody—some *body*—"to the viewer's mind."

In her discussion of "feminist confessional literature," literary critic and theorist Rita Felski describes a similar phenomenon to that of Brilliant's "named individual." She explains that while the authenticity of an account that comes along with autobiography plays a crucial role in confessional texts, "it is the *representative* aspects of experience, rather than those that mark the protagonist/narrator as unique, which are emphasized in relation to a notion of a communal female identity."[25] There is an emphasis here upon the ways in which one woman's specific experiences can be extrapolated as commentary upon women's experience more generally. Felski continues, "It is for this reason that feminist confession is sometimes deliberately ambiguous in its use of proper names, seeking to minimize the specificity of its content as the depiction of the

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[24] Brilliant, 155.
[25] Felski, "On Confession," 95. Emphasis original.

life of a single individual and to emphasize its exemplary status, while still retaining the claim to historical truthfulness and authenticity which form part of the autobiographical contract."[26] By leaving out the name, these texts create space for readers to identify with the narrator, and in so doing, generate a community around shared experiences. In the case of Lara's *De la misma, la misma habitación*, the same can be said not only of proper names, but also of specific bodies. The bathroom scenes present enough specifics to appear to be drawn from life—they retain a "claim to historical truthfulness and authenticity." But the lack of immediate presence of a specific body enables the viewer to reflect upon their shared experiences. It allows for the generation of "a communal female identity."

The "confessional" genre carries with it a much longer and deeper history that, first and foremost, is rooted in the religious definition of the confession: the admission of sin. As literary scholar Susan David Bernstein has pointed out, the term "confessional," in contrast to counterparts such as "autobiographical" or even "personal," carries with it an "implication of transgression."[27] To describe a text as "confessional" highlights the ways in which that text presents experiences that have been inadmissible, at least for public consumption. Reading Lara's *De la misma, la misma habitación* as a "confessional" series situates her images within a larger socio-historic context of feminist production that simultaneously balances highly particular and generic forms and opens up topics of conversation that had been excluded from the public realm. In her etchings of bathroom scenes, Lara's choice to figure a body without directly picturing it enables her to find space between caricature and self-portraiture. It enables her to create a viewing experience that invites identification and empathy. And it enables her to

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[26] This and the following two quotes from Felski, 95.
[27] Susan David Bernstein, "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' Got to Do with It?," *Hypatia* 7, no. 2, Philosophy and Language (Spring 1992): 121.

address both the physical and psychological realities of women's lived experience—realities that had typically been hidden behind closed doors—within the public sphere.

Bodiliness

Lara's etchings were certainly not alone in their provocation to reconsider the ways that women's bodies had been and were continuing to be represented in Mexico. By 1984, the Mexican feminist movement had a robust agenda regarding women's agency over their bodies. Furthermore, Lara was working in conversation and occasionally in close collaboration with a wide array of spirited, feminist makers. Still, the particular strategies that are operating in *De la misma, la misma habitación* are distinct, even within the context of the vibrant, feminist art scene in 1980s Mexico City. The body that Lara presents in her work is not one that is either erotic or scatological, either desired or desiring, either existing on a mental plane or on a physical plane, but rather it is all of these at once; it is a description of the body that acknowledges the complexity and simultaneity of interiority and exteriority.

In Mexico, second-wave, organized feminism emerged circa 1970. An article by feminist activist Marta Acevedo that was published in the weekly political magazine *Siempre!* on September 30, 1970 has often been referenced as a point of initiation. Reporting on a recent feminist rally she had attended in San Francisco, Acevedo introduced issues such as the pay gap, unfair hiring practices, the unrecognized burden of domestic labor, and the inequality and oppression built into the structure of marriage to mainstream, Mexican audiences for the first time.[28] As in other parts of the world, Mexico had a robust women's movement in the earlier twentieth century. As early as 1904 women in Mexico had actively fought for access to education

[28] Marta Acevedo, "Las mujeres luchan por su liberación," *La Cultura en México: Suplemento de Siempre!*, September 30, 1970.

and women workers' rights, and following the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, in the 1910s women initiated a long battle for suffrage.[29] In Mérida, the capital city in Yucatán, two feminist congresses held in 1916 created a remarkable venue for the discussion of women's issues.[30] Over the next several decades, feminists made legal gains (e.g., in 1927, reforms to the civil code expanded women's rights[31]) and garnered expanded interest in their efforts (e.g., in 1935 feminists organized on a national scale with the establishment of the Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer, which, at its peak, counted some 50 thousand women among its members and connected 800 feminist groups[32]). Yet, those efforts prioritized the experience of middle- and upper-middle-class women. Furthermore, in spite of the extent of feminist interest and organization, Mexican women did not gain the right to vote until 1953.[33]

As worker and student movements ramped up in Mexico over the course of the 1950s and early 60s, women remained largely sidelined from the political arena. It wasn't until 1968, as the student movement rapidly evolved over the course of that summer, that women took a more widespread role in political protest and organization. The women who participated actively in the student movement brought attention to issues of gender inequality through their struggles against widespread machismo, limitations on their access to the public sphere, and deeply rooted expectations regarding gender roles.[34] But in the immediate wake of the traumatic culmination of

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[29] Anna Macías, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940*, Contributions in Women's Studies 30 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 14.
[30] Macías, 36, 80.
[31] Macías, 120–21.
[32] Macías, 127.
[33] Though women gained the right to vote and hold office on the municipal level in 1946, it wasn't until 1953 that the constitution was amended to give them the right to vote in national elections. Ward M. Morton, *Woman Suffrage in Mexico* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1962), 83.
[34] For a study of women's roles in the 1968 student movement, see: Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico*, Diálogos (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

the student movement—the October 2nd massacre on the plaza at Tlatelolco—those issues were pushed aside as the nation coped with tragedy on an unprecedented scale. In December of 1970, Luis Echeverría took over the presidency and his term was propelled by the rhetoric of an "apertura democrática," (democratic opening) as he sought to bring the massive upheaval of the end of the 1960s into check, even as his administration waged what has come to be recognized as a Dirty War against the Mexican people, especially the generation that had participated most actively in the 1968 student movement.[35] Nevertheless, this nominally liberal political climate paved the way for more nuanced discussions of the Mexican social sphere.

In her *Siempre!* article, highlighting the issues for which women were fighting in other parts of the world, most proximally across the border in the United States, Marta Acevedo pushed women's issues into a mainstream arena where they could gain broader traction. In the first half of the 1970s, activists established a range of significant feminist organizations, including Mujeres en Acción Solidaria (founded 1971), Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres (founded 1973), and Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer (founded 1974). During this period, feminists also launched the earliest woman-centered communication platforms, such as the radio program *Foro de la mujer* hosted by Alaída Foppa (1972–80) and television programs hosted by Marta de la Lama beginning circa 1972. The year 1975, named "International Women's Year" by the United Nations, marked a watershed moment for organized feminism in Mexico. A large-scale conference sponsored by the U.N. was hosted in Mexico City in June of that year, which

[35] Between 1965 and 1982 the Mexican government inflicted systematic violence against political dissidents, as well as the friends, family, and potential allies of such dissidents, seeking to quash any possibility of guerrilla movements gaining ground. Estimates suggest that "more than 3,000 people disappeared and were executed, 3,000 were political prisoners, and 7,000 were victims of torture" over the course of this period. Adela Cedillo and Fernando Herrera Calderón, "Introduction: The Unknown Mexican Dirty War," in *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*, ed. Adela Cedillo and Fernando Herrera Calderón (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

brought together feminist activists from around the world. In Mexico, the conference's high visibility served as a catalyst and second-wave feminist issues coalesced into actionable platforms in the years that immediately followed.[36]

By the late 1970s, the fight for legal abortion, access to contraceptives, and sexual education had become central tenets in the Mexican feminist movement.[37] Yet, it wasn't until the mid-1980s that broader conversations around women's health and access to education about menstruation and reproductive health began to emerge. These conversations were tied to the expansion of the feminist movement beyond the educated middle class, which occurred circa 1985, in the wake of the earthquake that shook Mexico City in September of that year.[38] Beginning in the late 1970s, militant feminist publications including *La revuelta, Cihuat: Voz de la Coalición de Mujeres,* and *Fem* published articles that addressed menstruation, reproductive health, and sexual education. But locally produced materials that were aimed at a broad public weren't published until the early-to-mid-1980s. In 1982, the organization Comunicación, Intercambio y Desarrollo Humano en América Latina (CIDHAL) published materials designed to educate women about their sexuality, sexual health, and menopausal changes.[39] These materials were followed by the earliest mainstream literature intended to educate girls about menstruation,

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[36] See more about the role the conference played in international feminism and the issues raised in: Jocelyn Olcott, "Cold War Conflicts and Cheap Cabaret: Sexual Politics at the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year Conference," *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 733–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2010.01614.x.
[37] Marta Lamas, *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*, trans. John Pluecker, Theory in the World (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.
[38] Lamas, 22–24. See more in: Eli Bartra et al., *Feminismo en México, ayer y hoy*, Casa abierta al tiempo 130 (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2000); and Alma Rosa Sánchez Olvera, *El feminismo mexicano ante el movimiento urbano popular: dos expresiones de lucha de género, 1970-1985* (Naucalpan de Juárez, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Campus Acatlán, 2002).
[39] These included a pamphlet entitled "Estos cambios nuestros," devoted to menopause, and the first edition of *Cuerpo de Mujer,* which was reprinted in 1987. Comunicación, Intercambio y Desarrollo Humano en América Latina (CIDHAL), "Salud de Las Mujeres," CIDHAL, accessed November 6, 2020, https://www.cidhal.org.mx/salud.

suggesting that menstruation and reproductive health were only just beginning to be viewed as topics that should be discussed openly across generations in the mid-1980s.[40] CIDHAL's efforts to educate women integrated information regarding reproductive health in particular with general health, emphasizing topics such as "knowledge of one's own body, nutrition, alternative medicines" and access to healthy foods and medical services.[41] A pioneering feminist group devoted to women's health and education, CIDHAL demonstrates the taboos that remained in place when it came to discussing women's bodies in the broader public sphere of early 1980s Mexico.

As organized feminism gained momentum in Mexico, so too did an incipient feminist art movement, primarily centered in Mexico City. The late 1970s and 80s brought the first explicitly feminist art exhibitions, artist contributions to radical feminist publications, and the formation of several feminist-identifying art making collectives.[42] Magali Lara participated in some of the earliest feminist art exhibitions and collaborative projects. Her work appeared in the early exhibition *Muestra Colectiva Feminista* (Galería Contraste, 1978), she co-organized the transnational project *La creación femenina* (Instituto Goethe, 1980), and she contributed to the collaborative feminist installation project *Las camas* (Festival de Oposición, 1982). In 1984, she illustrated the covers of two different issues of the militant feminist publication *Fem* magazine

[40] Some of the earliest examples of published works in this genre include: J. J. López-Ibor Aliño, *Todas las respuestas sobre la menstruación*, Biblioteca básica de la educación sexual 14 (Mexico City: Editorial Universo, 1983), which was part of a series of at least 20 books published between 1981 and 1983 that addressed sexual education, and Berta Hiriart Urdanivia et al., *¿Qué pasa cuando llega la menstruación?: Un libro para niños* (Mexico City: EDICUPES, 1985).
[41] Dora Cardaci, "Propuestas en salud innovadoras: el caso de CIDHAL," *Fem* 14, no. 91 (July 1990): 24. "Conocimiento del propio cuerpo, la nutrición, las medicinas alternativas."
[42] Exhibitions such as *Collage ínitimo* (Casa del Lago, 1977) and *Muestra Colectiva Feminista* (Galería Contraste, 1978) were amongst the earliest to be comprised of art made by artists who identified as feminists. Over the course of 1983, several feminist-identifying art making collectives formed, including the groups Tlacuilas y Retrateras, Polvo de Gallina Negra, and Bio-Arte. See more about the foundation of these groups in Araceli Barbosa, *Arte feminista en los ochenta en México: una perspectiva de género* (Mexico City: Casa Juan Pablos, 2008), 100–101.

(nos. 33 and 36). In spite of this, in the spring of 1984, she distanced herself from feminist art. In an interview published in the catalogue for her exhibition *De la misma, la misma habitación* (which featured her eponymous suite of etchings), Lara commented, "I don't intend to make feminist art, but I have the voice of a woman."[43] Her articulation here of the relationship between her artwork and feminism is carefully nuanced. Indeed, it reflects the way in which her relationship to the label "feminist" shifted and evolved over time, as the label itself did. Lara's cautious hedging indicates a larger distinction that she saw between her work and the work created by more explicitly and militantly feminist artists, such as those participating in the feminist art collectives—*los grupos feministas.* Spoken in the context of her exhibition featuring her suite of etchings of bathrooms, Lara's commentary suggests that a major difference that she saw between her work and the work of artists that explicitly identified as feminists lay within their respective approaches to presenting women's bodies.

In fact, Lara has described a divergence in her path from the other artists active in the feminist art scene around this moment. As she began to explore painting in the mid-1980s, she started to move away from the work of her feminist friends and colleagues.[44] Highlighting the differences that were emerging specifically between her approach towards representing women's bodies and that of her colleagues, Lara explained, "What interested me was how to revitalize all that I believed had happened especially with these women artists of the twenties, the forties, that spoke of the body in a way that I had understood it needed to be spoken of, but that wasn't permitted."[45] Artists like Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, Olga Costa, and Lola Álvarez Bravo had

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[43] Javier Cadena, "Charla con Magali Lara," in *De la misma, la misma habitación*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Galería Los Talleres, 1984). "No intento hacer arte feminista pero tengo voz de mujer."
[44] Lara, Interview with author.
[45] Lara. "Lo que me interesaba era como revitalizar todo lo que yo creía que pasaba sobre todo en estas artistas de los 20s, 40s, que hablaban del cuerpo de la manera como yo había entendido que se tenía que hablar, que no estaba permitido."

presented women in powerfully new ways: strong, brave, desiring, introspective, and psychologically complex. Their artworks expanded the visual vocabulary of representations of women, pushing against the misogyny rampant in the representations of women coming out of the mural movement at that time.[46] Sometimes their interventions went by seemingly unnoticed, subtly transforming what passed as permissible, but other times, their voices were actively silenced.[47]

Desire, introspection, psychological complexity—the same characteristics that this earlier generation of artists had built into their images of women were central to Lara's experimentations with presenting women's bodies in the mid-1980s. Picturing a type of interior vision is crucial to her descriptions of bodies. She has repeatedly emphasized her investment in displaying a body by way of its interior: "All my work has to do in some manner with sensation, and with the body seen from within," with "the sensation of being a body," with "how we construct a psychological body."[48] Yet this idea of interiority is held together with a visceral, physical reality in her presentations of bodies. For instance, describing a series of works entitled *El árbol del cuerpo* (1993–94), she explains that the images she created depict something that is

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[46] See more in: Mary K. Coffey, "Angels and Prostitutes: Jose Clemente Orozco's Catharsis and the Politics of Female Allegory in 1930s Mexico," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 185–217, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2005.0002.

[47] For instance, in early 1945, Izquierdo was commissioned to paint a mural cycle in the Departamento del Distrito Federal. Several months later, after Izquierdo had signed a contract, produced preliminary sketches, and even begun to test fresco techniques, the project was suspended and the contract revoked. In art historian Nancy Deffebach's close reading of both the sequence of events surrounding the suspension of the project and the sketches that Izquierdo created, she comments, "Izquierdo's images would have presented women as leaders. In 1945 this was a bold departure from the usual representation of women in Mexican murals," and that, in the end, "her subject matter prompted [Diego] Rivera and [David Alfaro] Siqueiros to censor her work." Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 113, 128.

[48] Omar García, "Ven el cuerpo por dentro," *Reforma*, October 21, 2002, sec. Cultura, Hemerografía, Museo de Arte Moderno. "Todo mi trabajo tiene que ver de alguna manera con la sensación, y con el cuerpo visto desde dentro…la sensación de ser cuerpo"; Bertha Wario, "Muestra aquí extraña flora," *El norte*, June 24, 1999, NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current. "Cómo construimos un cuerpo psicológico."

"truly human, visceral, constructed of flesh, bone, blood, semen, of all of those substances that form the body and make it alive."[49] In Lara's work, body and self are integrally related: exteriority is always the Janus face of interiority; corporeality cannot be decoupled from subjectivity.

In *De la misma, la misma habitación*, aspects of exteriority and interiority come together, creating a tension between simultaneous bodily presence and absence, bodiliness and bodilessness. Consider, for instance, a wastebasket that sits within arm's reach of the toilet in the third image of the series (figure 3.3). It is repeated in the next image (figure 3.4), and again in the image after that (figure 3.5). Like the toilet plunger and the roll of toilet paper that is torn askew, the wastebasket, as a receptacle for used toilet paper, indicates that the toilets pictured in these etchings are ready to use. Further, contextualized alongside gendered items that appear in the series—the dress or nightgown, shower cap, and pair of tights—the wastebasket also stands ready to receive disposed tampons or sanitary napkins. In dialogue with other works that the artist was making around the same time, the wastebasket contributes towards descriptions of the physical experience of occupying a specifically biologically female body.

In November of 1983, just a few months prior to making *De la misma, la misma habitación,* Lara created a series of ink paintings (figures 3.7–3.9). These paintings feature a repeated motif: a cylindrical form with a spiraling string that hangs down, quickly sketched out in black ink and accompanied by short texts painted in red. While the forms are somewhat abstracted, they strongly suggest tampons, and they are accompanied by phrases that make references to the menstrual cycle: "I'm afraid of it arriving late," Lara scrawls beneath an image featuring six of the forms lined up (figure 3.7); "with the same slowness it approaches," she

[49] Peguero, "Magali Lara y el árbol del cuerpo." "Verdaderamente humano, visceral, construido de carne, hueso, sangre, semen, de todas esas sustancias que forman el cuerpo y lo hacen vivo."

writes alongside four of the forms that are arranged from small to large (figure 3.8). Peppered with references to "la espiral al corazón," (spiral to the heart) (figure 3.7, 3.9) these paintings were clearly created in relation to a coeval, collaborative performance that occurred at the Museo Nacional de Arte (MUNAL) entitled *La espiral al corazón.* Reading them in conversation with the performance quickly alleviates any doubts that may remain regarding their content as related to matters of menstruation. Indeed, Lara and one of her collaborators, fellow Mexican artist Rowena Morales, explain that the material choices that they made in their performance, such as creating a spiral on the floor using plastic bags filled with red water and wearing red plastic gloves (see figure 3.10), "were details to complete this visceral vision, very close to the menstrual sphere, or related to gynecology that turns out to be the 'other' in this culture."[50] Lara, Morales, and their third collaborator, musician and composer Hebe Rosell, also created a set of instructions for an action related to this project, inviting participants to simulate the sensations that accompany menstruation by performing bodily gestures such as "abdominal ripping, knotting, screaming" and "gentle undulations of the body" (figure 3.11).[51] In late 1983, it seems, Lara had been thinking extensively about menstruation and the taboos that continued to surround women's bodies and women's health. In early 1984, when she made her delicately drawn suite of prints, her depictions of wastebaskets set close to toilets are a logical next step from the fast and dirty ink paintings centered on tampons and the menstrual cycle of a few months prior.

The candid explorations of the body that emerge in Lara's images in *De la misma, la misma habitación* function in close relation to Carmen Boullosa's eponymous poem. Printed on

[50] Magali Lara and Rowena Morales, "La espiral al corazón," in *Bordando sobre la escritura y la cocina: coloquio*, Estanquillo literario (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes; SEP, 1984), 88–89. "Eran detalles para completar esta visión visceral, muy cercana a un ámbito menstrual, o relacionado con la ginecología que resulta ser lo 'otro' en esta cultura."

[51] "Razgar, anudar, grito estomacal"; "suaves ondulaciones del cuerpo."

two sheets of paper that overlay the six etchings and penned in Lara's hand (figure 3.12), and included in the exhibition catalogue when Lara showed the etchings in 1984, Boullosa's poem is constitutive of the work *De la misma, la misma habitación.* "This is a series of self-portraits / of portraits in the mirror," Boullosa begins.[52] Portraits that are created "leaving aside" physical attributes such as hair or eyes, mouth or forehead.[53] Instead, she writes:

> Here there is no more than a body
> The real body,
> the body that we have, with eyes closed
> delivered by way of smell.

> No hay aquí más que cuerpo
> El cuerpo de verdad,
> el que   emenos, a ojos cerrados
> entregado al olfato.

These lines echo precisely the sentiment that I am arguing Lara's images communicate. By avoiding direct depiction of a body and instead relying upon that which surrounds a body—by describing a body by depicting the objects and spaces that are necessitated by the *bodily*—Lara is able to show precisely what Boullosa states: "el cuerpo de verdad." In her frank depictions of toilets and rolls of toilet paper, of toilet plungers and wastebaskets, of showers and sinks and soap dispensers, of clothes that must be washed and floors that must be drained, Lara gives us the unvarnished version of what it means to occupy a body in all of its fleshy, orificed, fluid-producing glory.

Body-likeness

Simultaneously to the development of a physical description of bodily experience, Lara

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[52] "Esta es una serie de autorretratos,
de retratos en el espejo"
[53] "Dejando de lado:
los cabellos
los dulces ojos
la boca comodamente acomodada
[…]
la frente"

develops a description of psychological experience—of women's interiority. At the same time that the objects and bathroom fixtures depicted in these images index a not-presently-present human body, they also issue their own body-like presence. The eerily anthropomorphic bathroom fixtures begin to take on a life of their own, occupying volumetric space, casting dramatic shadows, secreting their own fluids, inhabiting the rendered spaces. In so doing, they make the familiar and banal space of the bathroom strange.

For example, in the fifth image in the series (figure 3.5), a bathtub occupies the right two-thirds of the page. The white tub is topped by a frame—a set of poles where a shower curtain could hang, though there is no curtain present. As the viewer looks, the logic of the pictured space crumbles. Wall and floor blend smoothly into one another in a sea of light-grey aquatint and the tub floats within it, untethered. The system of shower rods merges with the plumbing of the shower which is similarly seemingly unanchored, floating in the aquatint sea. On the left, the toilet appears to sink back into the grey wall, various of its faces merging with the ambiguous space of the light-grey wall behind it and the floor beneath it. Thin, zigzagged lines appear around the edges of the tub (on the left side) and the rods atop it, seeming to animate the tub. The lines do not suggest a particular movement forward or back, but a kind of buzzing of activity or potential energy. This suggested animation is in dialogue with the three small feet that are visible beneath the tub: the tub appears on the verge of scuttling off, crab-walking hurriedly out of the frame on its too-small feet.

The careful choices in coloration also contribute to the anthropomorphism of the bathroom fixtures in the etchings. The sea of grey aquatint that appears in this fifth image similarly defines—or rather, fails to define—the spaces of all but one of the images in the series. The rough, sand-paper-like texture of the speckled grey aquatint contrasts with the rich, white

reserves of unprinted paper, of which the bathroom fixtures all consist. The tub, toilets, sinks, and mirrors are all bright spots on the page that protrude forward while the mottled, grey aquatint recedes, taking on an atmospheric perspective where the perspectival lines of the bathroom spaces are left out. The smooth, white paper, along with the dense, velvety quality of the darkest areas of the prints, such as the black seats of several of the toilets (figures 3.1 and 3.6), or the bucket and plunger (figure 3.2), take on a positive role, occupying space and making themselves present in a way that other elements in the images do not. The stall outlined in the final image (figure 3.6), for instance, or the grey wastebaskets set close to the toilets (figures 3.3–3.5), contrast with the positive volumes of the black and white bathroom fixtures.

Take, for example, the first image of the series (figure 3.1): the white toilet and toilet paper roll pop brightly against the speckled, grey background. The drain, set in the floor, gives the viewer some sense of the way that the space is receding, but along with the dark shadow that the toilet tank casts on the wall behind it, the drain is the only clear spatial marker. The white lid of the toilet is propped up, its ovoid shape with the two dark bumpers that rest against the toilet seat when the lid is closed suggestive of a face with wide-set eyes. The lid is outlined in a squiggly, zigzagged line, similar to that which halos the shower rods in the image discussed above. Again, the outline suggests an ambiguous activity: a buzzing, vibrating, kinetic potential. The black seat of the toilet stretches forward like two arms with hands curved in. The different parts of the toilet fit together at slightly askew angles: the bowl of the toilet and the black seat tilt slightly up to the right, while the base turns clockwise, towards the viewer. Like the tub that appears on the verge of scuttling away, these unsteady angles give the toilet an animated appearance, as if it were about to scoot forward on its wide base. A small puddle, thinly outlined on the left side of the base of the toilet, seeps onto the floor, activating the toilet as its own fluid-producing body.

Even as they call to mind the visceral realities of human bodies, Lara's anthropomorphic bathroom fixtures invoke the bodily in their own right. Depicted in bright whites and velvety blacks, they are visually set apart from their surroundings and occupy space in a way that other elements of the images do not. Reflecting Lara's longstanding interest in comics, the bathroom fixtures are animated through comic strip-like choices, such as marks that imply action and positions that evoke dynamism. While they hold tightly to their identities as toilets and sinks and showers, Lara's bathroom fixtures moonlight as bodies. Their anthropomorphism transforms the spaces that surround them; the bathrooms shimmer between quotidian and imaginative realms.

The bathroom fixtures function in dialogue with the blank, white mirrors that stare out at the viewer in two of the images in the series (figures 3.3 and 3.6). In each image, Lara depicts a square mirror screwed into the wall above a bathroom sink. The mirrors point straight out towards the viewer, disrupting the spatial logic of their respective contexts and contributing to the uncanny atmosphere of the interiors. As the viewer looks, the white mirrors attract their eye again and again. They are forced to consider where exactly they are positioned in the pictured space. The mirrors implore the viewer to imagine their own reflection.

Absent of visible bodies, the bodily is ever-present in these images. Viewing them is a process that does not allow one to dissociate from one's own bodily experience. In a 1983 exhibition review, critic Leticia Ocharán wrote, "The perception of the nature of the female sex that Magali Lara has, her form of exhibiting women's problems, constitutes one of the strongest blows dealt to women in order to make them conscious of their reality."[54] As Ocharán's comment

[54] Leticia Ocharán, "La mujer en tacón alto," *La guía de Novedades*, March 30, 1983, No. 197, Caja 3, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "La percepción de la naturaleza del sexo femenino que tiene Magali Lara, la forma de exponer sus problemas, constituyen uno de los golpes más fuertes asestados a la mujer para que sea consciente de su realidad."

attests, including in their contemporary moment, Lara's images demanded self-reflection. They forced women to consider the realities of their circumstances in an active way—to be "conscious of their reality." The mirrors are a site where the viewer's body overlaps with the evacuated, implied body. In other words, recalling Rita Felski's words regarding confessional literature, the mirrors become a locus for a sense of "communal female identity."[55]

When considered within the context of the Mexican feminist movement, the descriptions of physical experiences of occupying a woman's body that Lara presents in *De la misma, la misma habitación* and other works from the early 80s can be honed and sharpened into a keen, political edge. While efforts to increase access to sexual education and reproductive health care were beginning to gather momentum in 1984, Lara's exploration of menstrual matters through her ink paintings, collaborative performance, and suite of etchings was trailblazing. Along with the work of other feminist artists, Lara's artwork made visible women's issues that theretofore had been unseen, not only in visual art spaces but in the broader public arena.

But Lara's presentations of women's bodies in *De la misma, la misma habitación* go one step further. They fold descriptions of physical experiences together with psychological experiences of a body. "Simulating the protagonist, or seeming to take on the attitudes of a protagonist," a 1984 reviewer writes, the objects and bathroom fixtures that appear in the suite of etchings "turn out to be mirrors of ourselves, the viewers."[56] The reviewer emphasizes the invitation for self-reflection that Lara's images present—an invitation that is made literal in the pictured mirrors. But the bathroom scenes and fixtures also emphasize the concomitant familiarity and unfamiliarity of the depicted spaces. The small details in Lara's etchings of

[55] Felski, "On Confession," 95.
[56] "Magali Lara en Los Talleres de Coyoacán," *Excelsior*, May 9, 1984, Personal archive of Magali Lara. "Simulando al protagonista, o pareciéndosele en actitudes, ya que resultan ser espejos de nosotros que los contemplamos."

recently evacuated bathrooms present the bodily without explicitly depicting women's bodies. They invite an empathic viewing experience, making the viewer aware of their own bodily realities. As Lara put it in 1984, in these images "the bathroom becomes a stage set where the viewer becomes a character, whether they want to or not," suggesting that an empathic, almost participatory viewing experience was one of her aims.[57] Yet, far from empty, these "stage sets" are populated by fixtures that assert their own bodily significance through a dynamic anthropomorphism. The banalities of the bathrooms flicker; here and there, quotidian reality gives way to a semi-fantastical environment.

The strategies operating in Lara's etchings circumvent prescribed approaches to representing female bodies. They find an intermediary space between the extremes of overly-generalized caricature and idiosyncratic self-portraiture by leaving the body out. There is no stereotype of a woman here. Instead, there are toilets and sinks and showers, wastebaskets and plungers and ashtrays. There is the evidence of what it means to go about one's business of being a body. There is the evidence of bodily function: a woman that urinates and defecates and menstruates, that needs to wash things and to dispose of things. There is the evidence of a woman with a real body. But there is also the invitation for imaginative projection—the invitation for the viewer to see I reflected in the blank, white mirrors that face directly out at them, in the traces of the protagonist that has just stepped away, and in the bathroom fixtures themselves. There is the invitation for the viewer to consider alternate means of representing women's bodies. Lara's etchings alluded to aspects of the physical reality of occupying a woman's body that were typically kept behind closed doors. But by describing those aspects

[57] Fernando Belmont, "El baño, recreado en la pintura de Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, May 12, 1984, Hemeroteca Nacional. "El baño es entonces una puesta en escena donde el espectador se convierte en personaje, quiera o no."

obliquely, the images refuse to allow the bodily to completely subsume her presentations of women's experience. Bodily realities are crucially made visible, but also acknowledged as always coextensive with psychic experience.

The feminist body politic

In her 1984 series of etchings, Lara developed a generative approach; her images constructed an armature for alternate and expanded ways of speaking of women's bodies, including those that she identified in the work of artists of the earlier twentieth century. Her generative approach can be distinguished from many of the most visible and most militant feminist artworks created in Mexico City in the 1980s. The projects created by *los grupos feministas,* for instance, presented forceful criticisms of social constructions of gender by spotlighting gendered practices and tearing those practices apart through humor and satire. Successfully drawing attention to important feminist issues, theirs was an approach that did not necessarily offer an alternative to the stereotypes of representations of women that it sought to tear down.

In Mexico City in 1984, the feminist collective Tlacuilas y Retrateras (Women Scribes and Portraitists) created a project entitled *La fiesta de quince años.* The artists staged a multi-part, satirical *fiesta de quince años* (or *quinceañera,* as it is typically referred to in the U.S.)—a celebration traditionally held to mark a young woman's initiation into the public sphere. Their restaging presented a biting critique of gender roles and socio-cultural expectations regarding women's behavior. A variety of costumes and performances worked together to critique the cultural practices surrounding women coming of age. In one performance, artists from the collective Bio-Arte emphasized the objectification of young women that the *fiesta de quince*

años maintained in its marking of women's "entrance on the marriage market" by wearing transparent dresses that revealed their bodies beneath.[58] In another performance, artists Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante enacted stereotypical extremes of heterosexuality, presenting scenes of fairy-tale-like romance and virginal deflowering. As Mayer explains, "While Víctor [Lerma] and I kissed each other passionately with an enormous plush heart in the background, Maris wore a dress with the vagina on the outside that Rubén [Valencia] detached, leaving a trickle of blood behind. Afterwards Rubén sprayed the audience with semen from a syringe."[59] Relying upon humor, absurdity, and kitsch, these performances pointed to the ways in which continuing to celebrate traditional *fiestas de quince años* tacitly and not-so-tacitly perpetuated cultural expectations around women's behavior and female sexuality.

Throughout the 1980s, artists involved in the feminist scene who were working within the realm of performance continued to develop an approach rooted in critical, satirical humor. In the context of their collective Polvo de Gallina Negra, Mayer and Bustamante built out their critical approach through sustained performance ventures such as the ambitious *¡MADRES!* (MOTHERS!) project. *¡MADRES!* Consisted of a series of actions (e.g., both artists getting pregnant circa 1985), invitations for public participation (e.g., a contest where members of the public were invited to submit letters "with everything that they would have wanted but never dared to say to their mothers"[60]), and performances (e.g., the artists' appearance on a widely viewed television program, *Nuestro Mundo*). The project culminated in an exhibition of Mayer's drawings (*Novela Rosa, o me agarró el arquetipo* [Romance Novel, or the archetype grabbed

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[58] Mónica Mayer, *Rosa chillante: mujeres y performance en México* (Mexico City: CONACULTA/FONCA, 2004), 31. "El ingreso al mercado matrimonial."
[59] Mayer, 32. "Mientras Víctor y yo nos besábamos apasionadamente con un enorme corazón tejido como fondo, Maris portaba un vestido con el sexo de fuera que Rubén le desprendió dejando correr un hilo de sangre. Después Rubén roció al público de semen con una jeringa."
[60] Mayer, 40. "Con todo lo que hubieran querido decirle a su madre pero nunca se habían atrevido."

me], Museo de Carrillo Gil, September 1987).[61] Over the course of the project, Mayer and Bustamante rubbed up against what was deemed acceptable for public discussion. They questioned normative gender roles through humorous intervention, such as when they dressed the celebrity host of *Nuestro Mundo* Guillermo Ochoa in a prosthetic belly and christened him "Madre por un día" (mother for a day) during their appearance on his show. In the same performance, they pushed anxieties and fears of pregnancy into the limelight through their comical simulation of cravings, aches, and morning sickness, purportedly packaged in a series of pills that they gave Ochoa.[62] Even as their project carved out space for experiential discussion, it was driven by a desire to tear down prevailing stereotypes of motherhood. This can be observed in one of their mail art interventions, which described "an imaginary event in the year 5000 in which our descendants finally succeed in destroying the archetype of the mother."[63] It can also be observed in the doll that they brought along to their performance on *Nuestro Mundo* that made reference to a famous telenovela character who Mayer described as "the bad mother," and when the artists commented that their interest in discussing motherhood was motivated by the fact that "men created those [representations of motherhood] currently in circulation."[64] Polvo de Gallina Negra's project underscored the inadequacy of the representations of motherhood that existed in the Mexican cultural imaginary of the late 1980s. Their project unveiled a structure that had been hiding in plain sight—a structure that, once made visible, they could begin to dismantle through humor and satire. But it was a process of critical deconstruction: a process that would, even in

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[61] Mayer, 40.
[62] Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, *Women Made Visible: Feminist Art and Media in Post-1968 Mexico City*, The Mexican Experience (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 67–68.
[63] Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 40. "Un imaginario suceso en el año 5000 en el que nuestras descendientes por fin lograban destruir el arquetipo de la madre."
[64] Mayer, 40; Aceves Sepúlveda, *Women Made Visible*, 66.

the most ideal circumstances, culminate in destruction—"destroying the archetype of the mother"[65]—rather than generating something new.

Lara's artworks from the mid-80s, including her series *De la misma, la misma habitación,* were, not dissimilarly from Polvo de Gallina Negra's *¡MADRES!,* seeking to avoid ingrained, "archetypal" representations of women. However, in contrast to Polvo de Gallina Negra's approach, which sought to dismantle those archetypes through critical representation, Lara's images circumvented representation altogether. They do not tear down previous representations, nor do they suggest preconceived alternatives with which one might replace those old representations. Instead, her artworks offer a generative space: a realm wherein one could "[speak] of the body in a way that…it needed to be spoken of";[66] a site for feminist conversation.

Lara began to explore the bathroom as a site for feminist conversation the year prior to creating her series of etchings. She collaborated with Mexican photographer Lourdes Grobet, to create an artist's book entitled *Se escoge el tiempo* (Time is chosen / One chooses the time, 1983). The book consists of a set of photographs of bathrooms taken by Grobet, printed in black and white, with colorful, hand-drawn interventions by Lara (e.g., figure 3.13). In the book, a page of text introduces the series of images. Written from Lara's perspective and in Lara's hand, the text is signed by both artists. "Time is chosen for intimacy in a space as public as a bathroom," Lara writes, highlighting the contradictory experience of a public bathroom—the individual stalls that allow one to be simultaneously alone and not alone.[67] She goes on to comment, "When I find Lourdes's messages in the bathrooms where I already left traces of

[65] Mayer, *Rosa chillante*, 40.
[66] Lara, Interview with author.
[67] Lourdes Grobet and Magali Lara, *Se escoge el tiempo* (Mexico City: Los Talleres Editores, 1983). "Se escoge el tiempo para la intimidad en un espacio tan público como un cuarto de baño."

myself, then it becomes a conversation."[68] Here, she highlights the public bathroom as a constant through which different women move. This textual articulation is reflected in several of the images which foreground "particular traces, graffiti, and drawings, that the visitors leave behind to mark their passage through them," as one reviewer wrote in 1983.[69] Lara's interventions into the photographed bathrooms add another layer: "traces, graffiti, and drawings" of her own (e.g., figure 3.14). The images in *Se escoge el tiempo* oscillate between a conversation occurring specifically between Lara and Grobet as they hand the images back and forth and a much broader conversation between countless, anonymous women. In the overlapping of authored and anonymous marks within the pictured bathrooms, the images in *Se escoge el tiempo* evoke the simultaneously individual and shared experiences of the public bathroom and suggest the multiplicity of bodies that have moved through those spaces. They generate a hum of whispered dialogues that echo off the tiled walls; "the photos cannot be silent," one reviewer wrote, suggesting that the pages of the book unfold into "another intimate confession."[70]

In *Se escoge el tiempo,* Lara and Grobet create a record of actual conversations between women—both identifiable and anonymous women. In *De la misma, la misma habitación,* Lara builds upon the premise she and Grobet initiated in their artist's book; she explores the potential of pictured bathrooms as venues for not only recording but also provoking conversations between women. Bringing together the experiences of bodily realities and imaginative

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[68] Grobet and Lara. "Cuando encuentro los recados de Lourdes en los baños donde yo ya dejé mis huellas entonces se vuelve plática."
[69] Ocharán, "La mujer en tacón alto." "Huellas particulares, grafitis y dibujos, que dejan los visitantes para marcar su paso por ellos."
[70] "Lourdes Grobet y Magali Lara presentarán su libro Se escoge el tiempo en la galería Los Talleres," *Uno más uno*, November 14, 1983, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Las fotos no pueden estar en silencio y se les ha sacado un diálogo, que es un cuchicheo, que es otra confesión íntima."

possibilities, she develops a space that is not empty, nor incomplete, but open-ended and generative.

Her etchings of bathrooms are seemingly innocuous. Cute, even, with their plush, anthropomorphic toilets and jaunty rolls of toilet paper. Yet they admit to the realities of women's bodies. Basic, quotidian realities like menstruation that, even in the 1970s and 80s, were still in the process of renegotiating their status as taboo in Mexico. They admit to not only the exterior, but also the interior realities of occupying a body—the psychological processes that cannot be decoupled from physical ones. In creating representations of aspects of a woman's life that had been kept hidden behind the closed doors of private spaces, and by doing so in such a way that those aspects are not understood to be unique or unusual, but rather as a part of normal, daily life, those aspects are unveiled as not just of *a woman's* life, but of *women's* lives. By displaying the bodily but leaving out specific bodies, the implied body takes on a political life. The unoccupied space becomes a site for feminist conversation and community. It becomes an armature for imagining alternate forms of representation of women's bodies that account for interiority and subjectivity. It becomes the feminist body politic.

* * *

While they do not function uniquely within her oeuvre, Lara's series of etchings that make up *De la misma, la misma habitación* provide a means of exploring a key strategy in her artwork: her choice to avoid direct depictions of the body. In contradistinction to wide-ranging works that have often been classified as "political," Lara's images leave specific bodies out. Artworks as divergent as Diego Rivera's frescoed murals in the National Palace in Mexico City (1929–35) to Carolee Schneemann's New York-based feminist performance *Interior Scroll*

(1975) depend upon specific bodies to make their political statements. Rivera's mural program hinges upon a slew of recognizable, historic figures to develop its political rendering of Mexican history—Hernán Cortés, Porfirio Díaz, Emiliano Zapata, Alvaro Obregón, and Karl Marx, to name a few. Rivera's commentaries upon the Mexican political scene, its roots in the violence of the nation's colonial past, and his utopian vision of the nation's future are developed through the viewer's ability to identify those specific historic figures.[71] This approach to political commentary that centers on recognizable figures pervades the murals that were produced in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. Carolee Schneemann's iconic performance, on the other hand, centers on her own specific body: her vagina as a female-specific body part, and her own experiences that have arisen as a result of her biologically-determined identity as a woman. Standing nude on a table, Schneemann slowly pulled a small, paper scroll out of her vagina from which she read aloud. The text she read, written in the first person, described a conversation through which she elaborated the deeply-rooted sexism of the contemporary art world.[72] Again, this approach to political commentary pervaded the art scene in which Schneemann participated; artworks and performances that centered on the artist's specific body can be traced across feminist practices in the U.S. in the 1970s.[73]

Lara's images push against such approaches to narrating political issues. Lara's figures are not identifiable as either historically, contemporarily, or personally significant. Lara's figures are not even pictured. But rather than depoliticizing her images, the unpictured figures in *De la*

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[71] For an in-depth discussion of Rivera's mural and its political valences, see Leonard Folgarait, "Revolution as Ritual: Diego Rivera's National Palace Mural," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 18–33.
[72] Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 12–13.
[73] For example, other iconic feminist works that rely upon the artist's own body and manifest in a variety of mediums include: Mierle Ukeles' series of performances *Hartford Wash* (1973), Hannah Wilke's photographic installation *S.O.S. - Starification Object Series* (1974-82), and Mary Kelly's conceptual project *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79).

misma, la misma habitación are, in fact, a locus for political reflection, conversation, agency, and imaginative possibility. By "suggesting" and "insinuating" a woman's body instead of directly depicting that body, she finds space between forms of representation that are hyper-generic ("caricatures" that essentialize and stereotype women's experiences) and those that are hyper-particular (self-portraits that are easy to relegate to the realm of the idiosyncratic and anecdotal and, as a result, frequently shut down conversations around shared experiences).[74] Differently than her feminist contemporaries working in Mexico, Lara's images open up a generative space for constructing completely new visions of women's experience. By making visible the messy truths of the bodily through details scattered throughout her bathroom scenes, she presents the realities of having a body. By defamiliarizing the banal space of the bathroom through eerily anthropomorphic bathroom fixtures, she articulates an experience of the body that is not only physical, but also psychologically constituted. Her images invite an empathic form of viewing; they make the viewer aware of their own body. By figuring a body—a *real* body—without picturing it directly, Lara's series offers the viewer the capacity for political agency. The implicit body becomes a generative site for reflection on and conversation around the taboos of women's health and sexuality, still extant in early-1980s Mexico, an expression of women's interiority and psychological complexity, and an open invitation to imagine alternative means for representing women's bodies.

[74] Lara, Interview with author.

CHAPTER 4
Flower Pictures, or: "The Most Conventional Thing in the World"

In the mid-1980s, Magali Lara began to make pictures of flowers. Her investigation of the fringes of the still life genre had developed steadily throughout the early 80s, manifesting especially in images of household objects such as coffeepots and baby bottles, but it was circa 1985 that flowers began to take on a central role in her images. For much of the decade that followed, flowers and other plant life continued to motivate her practice. "When I started [painting flowers]," Lara has said, "everyone criticized me because they accused me of doing the most conventional thing in the world."[1] Compared with her earlier work, such as her collages from the late 1970s that had addressed eroticism, violence, and oppression in subtly disconcerting ways, or her drawings and performances of the earlier 80s that had confronted menstruation and taboos of women's bodies, sexuality, and health, painting flowers appeared unforgivably conservative. But Lara found something powerful in the conservative veneer of flower pictures. "What I liked was that people thought that nothing was going on in those paintings," she has said, insinuating that, of course, something *was* going on.[2]

Lara has told several different stories about how she came to be interested in painting flowers. She has described a certain type of matrilineal heritage—that her mother and her grandmother had painted flowers together, and that she wanted to be a part of that familial pastime.[3] She has also described an investment in picking up the threads of earlier Mexican

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[1] Magali Lara, Interview with author, September 23, 2019. "Cuando empecé todo el mundo me criticó porque me acusó que estás haciendo la cosa más convencional del mundo."

[2] Carlos E. Palacios, "Interview with Magali Lara," in *Intimidad del jardín: Magali Lara, Pinturas 1985-2016 (The Intimacy of the Garden: Magali Lara, Paintings 1985-2016)*, trans. Debra Nagao (Cuernavaca, Morelos: Secretaria de Cultura de Morelos; Jardín Borda Centro Cultural, 2018), 146.

[3] Lara has written, "Both my mother and grandmother had painted flowers—it was something they did together and I wanted to be included in that daisy chain of belonging." Magali Lara, *Animaciones*, trans. Richard Moszka (Puebla: Museo Amparo, 2012), 26.

women artists' projects, such as Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Olga Costa, each of whom is known for her extensive still life production.[4] But she has also located the origin of her interest in painting flowers in a specific encounter with a series of photographs by the U.S.-American fashion photographer Irving Penn. In the mid-1980s, she ran across Penn's book *Flowers: Photographs* (Jonathan Cape, 1980) and the images that he published within unveiled an alternative vision of what flowers as subject matter could do and could be. Lara comments that the flowers that appeared in Penn's book "seemed to me to have this double thing between beauty and violence, between life and death," and that they served as a locus for "the drama of life and death, of beauty in its splendor and its decadence."[5]

In *Flowers,* Penn compiles photographs that he took for holiday issues of the magazine *Vogue* that were published between 1967 and 1973. The glistening, dew-speckled close ups of flowers, richly colored and sharply defined in their isolation against the blank, white background of Penn's studio, are indeed striking (e.g., figures 4.1–4.3). Lara's encounter with the glossy pages of Penn's book must have echoed what *Vogue* readers had experienced as they flipped through their magazines each December. But the sharp focus of the extreme close ups and the array of intense coloration that the photographs present do not offer as straightforward a story as one might expect from this contribution to a fashion magazine's holiday issue. The tone of the images are often complicated by what Penn describes as his "preference for flowers considerably after they have passed that point of perfection, when they have already begun spotting and

[4] See, for example, her discussion of these artists in: Javier Cadena, "Charla con Magali Lara," in *De la misma, la misma habitación*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Galería Los Talleres, 1984); as well as in: Magali Lara and María Minera, "Lesser Forms: A Long-Distance Conversation between Magali Lara & María Minera," in *Del verbo estar: Magali Lara*, trans. Richard Moszka (Mexico City: Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2018), 163.

[5] Lara, Interview with author. "Que me pareció que tenían esta doble cosa entre belleza y violencia, entre vida y muerte"; Magali Lara, *Glaciares* (Mexico City: Sala de Arte Pública Siqueiros, 2009), 12. "El drama de la vida y la muerte, de la belleza en su esplendor y su decadencia."

browning and twisting on their way back to the earth."[6] In a two-page spread in his book (which also appeared as a two-page spread in the December 1971 issue of *Vogue*), Penn pictures a "Duke of Windsor" rose (figure 4.1). Its petals, far into the process of "spotting and browning," spread across the page, the crinkle of their dry, papery texture almost audible. The leaves that surround the blossom have begun to mold, and the fuzzy white film that covers them is shown in perfect detail. Behind the stem, another petal droops and curves in upon itself, a literal illustration of its "twisting on [its] way back to the earth." An extreme within his series of photographs, Penn's rose invites a visceral response. It trades the luscious, satiny petals that appeared in his "Rose triumphant" (figure 4.2) just two pages earlier in the *Vogue* issue for the veiny, crumbling and cracking ones; the delicate perfume of the freshly cut, dew-dropped bloom for the sickly-sweet, nose-wrinkling smell of decay. The juxtaposition of these two photographs—"Rose triumphant" and "Duke of Windsor"—illustrates Lara's description of Penn's flowers as "this double thing": the making visible of "life and death" and "beauty and violence" all at once.[7]

By 1985, Lara was using Penn's photographs as a point of departure for her own depictions of flowers.[8] Take, for instance, three works that were created between 1985 and 1987, that each investigate Penn's photograph of two "Royal Robe" poppies (originally published in the December 1969 issue of *Vogue*; figure 4.3). In her pastel drawing *Tuve* (I had, 1985; figure 4.4), Lara offers a straightforward translation of Penn's photograph. Two poppies are arranged vertically. Their bulbous green centers are topped by ruffled purple caps and their crepe-paper-

[6] Irving Penn, *Flowers: Photographs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 7.
[7] Lara, Interview with author.
[8] Five of her pastel drawings that were shown in her 1986 exhibition *La infiel* were labelled as "based on a photo by Irving Penn." Magali Lara, *La infiel: obra reciente* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil / Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1986), 11.

like, bright red petals flutter around below, like swirling skirts. While the poppies are certainly past their prime, their petals drooping downwards (as opposed to the upward-facing, conical form of a freshly bloomed Royal Robe poppy), they haven't yet reached the "spotting and browning" stage. The petals of Lara's pastel poppies exhibit the same glossy sheen that is visible in Penn's photos by way of her combination of deep blues and dark purples and the paper that she allows to show through. In her 1987 collage *Regresa a casa* (Go home; figure 4.5), Lara converts her drawing of Penn's poppies into a print. She holds onto the bright red of the poppies' petals from her earlier drawing but converts its ruffled cap into a bright yellow that is echoed in the oil pastel she adds around the flowers. She layers a vase, cut from a series of silkscreens, over the stems of the poppies, squeezing them into the too-small opening. Lara's playful additions to Penn's original photographic composition dramatize the flowers, reflecting her interest in the idea that the portrayal of flowers can truly depict the "drama of life and death."[9] The flowers tower over the vase, the wide stems and broad petals seeming to be at risk of toppling over. The bright yellow pastel surrounding the flowers draws the viewer's eye to the outline of the petals—it literally highlights them—seeming to animate the beginning-to-wilt, fluttering edges as the viewer's eye dances back and forth between the bold, printed red and the oily opacity of the thickly drawn yellow.

If Penn's photographs offer richly illustrative examples of Lara's description of what she took from them with respect to the simultaneity of life and death, it is her own interpretations of Penn's photographs where one can most clearly locate the other part of that description—the simultaneity of beauty and violence. In another 1987 collage, this one entitled *Así se dijo* (So they said; figure 4.6), Lara transforms Penn's "Royal Robe" poppies once more. She cuts apart

[9] Lara, *Glaciares*, 12.

her print and rearranges it. The poppy that appears on the bottom in *Regresa a casa* is once again displayed in a vase, though this time a larger one. The other poppy has been taken aside and a pair of scissors has cut the thick stem asunder. The bottom portion of the stem falls away, a few drops of bright red spilling from the fresh cut. Above, the bright red spurts violently from where the scissors have closed and seeps across the page. Can the red ink be read as anything other than blood? The titular phrase is scrawled beneath the vase, beside the scissors. The accent of "así" seems to punctuate the snip of the scissors closing on the flower's stem: "*so* they said." The bloody scene takes Penn's photographs that picture flowers "considerably after they have passed that point of perfection" radically further.[10] Turning away from Penn's approach to documenting the natural course of a wilting flower, Lara points to the act of violence that must precede Penn's photographs given the flowers' context within the pristine photo studio: the initial cut that wrenches the flower from its roots. She transforms the glistening dew drops into bloody gore and succinctly makes visible the metaphoric work the flowers are doing for her; in a shimmering process of transubstantiation, the flower becomes body.

Building upon the premise (launched in the previous chapter) that Lara's choice to leave out specific representations of bodies generates space for feminist conversation, this chapter considers Lara's images of flowers as a pendant to her domestic interiors. Whereas her interiors, such as the bathroom scenes of *De la misma, la misma habitación* discussed in chapter 3, rely upon not-presently-present bodies, Lara's flower pictures portray bodies metaphorically. The flowers undergo a metamorphosis, taking on the role of the body, and making bodies present without directly representing them. Abstracted, animated, and complemented by ambiguous, introspective texts, Lara's flowers destabilize the ability to interpret these images as

[10] Penn, *Flowers*, 7.

straightforward still lifes. The flower pictures articulate a relationship between body, subject, and viewer that is multifaceted and evolving. Even as, on the surface, they may appear to be "the most conventional thing in the world," Lara's flower pictures resist the traditional male gaze and, in its stead, create a realm in which a female-oriented gaze can thrive.[11]

A female-oriented gaze

Through metaphor and seriality, and by harnessing a history of the still life genre, Lara's flower pictures invite a different type of looking. This looking—this "female-oriented gaze," as I am calling it—breaks down established associations between vision and power and pushes against the assumption that the "ideal" spectator is male.[12] In developing the notion of a female-oriented gaze, I am departing first and foremost from feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's iconic 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey writes, "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly," summing up a history of depictions of women's bodies not only in film, but in the production of visual arts more broadly.[13] The male-dominated process of looking, Mulvey suggests, plays a determining role in how women are depicted. This gaze generates a feedback loop wherein women present themselves in response to those depictions and understand femininity as dependent upon the characteristics that those depictions lay out. In film studies, Mulvey's essay incited extensive

[11] Lara, Interview with author.
[12] Art critic John Berger posited this notion of the "ideal" spectator in his influential 1972 essay on the long history of the female nude in European painting. He writes, "Women are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him." John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 64.
[13] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

discussion around filmic representations of women and spectatorship.[14] In particular, it brought into focus the very lack of space for a female counterpart to the male gaze; in Mulvey's essay, "spectatorship is incontrovertibly masculine."[15] In the wake of "Visual Pleasure," scholars in film studies and art history theorized various versions of female spectatorship.[16] A central motif that emerged out of these theories from the late 1970s and 80s was a system of binary constructions around gendered viewing practices where male/female could be mapped onto "activity/passivity, looking/being seen, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object."[17] In order for a female-identifying viewer to become subject rather than object of the gaze, she would need to appropriate and thereby perpetuate the male gaze.

In the later 80s, feminist theorists began to articulate a space outside of these binaries—an "oppositional gaze" that has the potential to "disrupt" such models of viewing, as cultural critic bell hooks has described in her theorization of Black female spectatorship; or "a critical look" that refuses to be "complicit with the dominant regime" and "from which femininity is appraised, experienced and represented," as art historian Griselda Pollock has posited.[18] This type of looking breaks the feedback loop, refusing to take established depictions of women as the only truth, and legitimizing experiences that have been excluded from such depictions. It is

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[14] Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, "The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 7, no. 2–3 (December 1, 1989): 7, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-7-2-3_20-21-5.
[15] Bergstrom and Doane, 7.
[16] In film theory, for example: Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (September 1, 1982): 74–88, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74; and E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 23–35. In art history: Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Lindsay Smith, "The Politics of Focus: Feminism and Photography Theory," in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), 238–62.
[17] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 87.
[18] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 122–23; Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 87.

within this realm of the oppositional, the disruptive, and the critical that I wish to situate the female-oriented gaze for which I am arguing Lara's images allow. Lara's flower pictures push against binary constructions of spectatorship, and instead invite viewers to wander between and outside of those extreme viewing positions, and to inhabit different modes simultaneously.

Decades of production concerning theories of spectatorship have critiqued and broken down the strict, gendered binaries that "Visual Pleasure" narrated, but the underlying framework of Mulvey's argument has remained more or less intact. Mulvey's essay relies upon the premise "that the pleasure found in one person gazing at another can be used for power."[19] Or, to be even briefer about it, a notion of "vision-as-power."[20] For Mulvey, to gaze upon someone is not a reciprocal interaction; the object of the gaze has no recourse for action. In feminist, postcolonial, and critical race studies produced since the 1980s, "the gaze" has most frequently been employed to explain the dynamics of hierarchical structures and relations of power.[21] Approaching half a century since Mulvey penned "Visual Pleasure" and irrespective of disciplinary boundaries, the power of the gaze persists. In postcolonial film studies, revisionist accounts have sought to uncover the agency of filmed subjects through fleeting moments when those subjects return the gaze. Staring back at the camera, the power of their gaze, embalmed in acetate, reaches across space and time to convert the viewer's comfortable voyeurism into uncomfortable complicity—they are made into "an active witness" of colonial history.[22] Imbuing those fleeting moments of

[19] Clifford T. Manlove, "Visual 'Drive' and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 103.
[20] I draw this phrase from film scholar Paula Amad's shorthand description of Michel Foucault's theorization of the relationship between seeing, visibility, and power in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* which was first published in French contemporaneously to Mulvey's text, in 1975. Paula Amad, "Visual Riposte: Looking Back at the Return of the Gaze as Postcolonial Theory's Gift to Film Studies," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 50.
[21] Manlove, "Visual 'Drive' and Cinematic Narrative," 84.
[22] Amad, "Visual Riposte," 53, 62.

returned gaze with agency, however, risks perpetuating existing structures of vision's power. As film scholar Paula Amad writes, "Any such reversal merely substitutes, rather than overturns, the opposition…being the bearer rather than object of the gaze does not necessarily ensure the end of oppressive power structures."[23] In this respect, Amad's analysis of the dynamics of the returned gaze in early films in colonial Africa points back to the significance of bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" and its constituent "broad range of looking relations."[24] The female-oriented gaze is not a mere reversal or substitution of the existing structure of "vision-as-power."[25] It does not merely convert the unidirectional "controlling male gaze" into a reciprocal or bidirectional flow of oppressive power.[26] Rather, the female-oriented gaze requires a pluralization of looking.

Lara's images destabilize looking. The forms that populate her images invite "multiple readings," as one reviewer suggested in 1985: "they can have a double (triple? quadruple?) intention."[27] Lara "isn't interested in a finished, definitive painting," another reviewer explained; instead, her images allow for "a possibility of transforming over time."[28] Looking at Lara's images is a process of ongoing interpretation, where multiple meanings are visible at once. And further, whenever one meaning starts to emerge as primary, even more interpretations unfold. In Lara's works, "the true essence of the subject" is "always changing…with the passage of time."[29]

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[23] Amad, 62–63.
[24] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 128.
[25] Amad, "Visual Riposte," 50.
[26] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 15.
[27] Graciela Kartofel, "Caminos del arte," *Vogue México*, May 1985, Caja 2, Núm. 127, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "La múltiple lectura de las formas que garabatea, que pueden tener doble (¿triple?, ¿cuádruple?) intención."
[28] Braulio Peralta, "Magali Lara y el universo vegetal visto desde dentro," *La Jornada*, May 17, 1992, sec. Cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional. "No le interesa la idea del cuadro terminado, definitivo"; "una posibilidad de transformarse por el tiempo."
[29] Leticia Ocharán, "Magali Lara y lo cotidiano," *El Nacional*, January 2, 1983, sec. Revista Mexicana Cultural, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México. "La verdadera esencia de lo tratado…va cambiando siempre en la realidad al paso del tiempo."

To interpret Lara's works is to embrace their inherent instability and plurality.

In her flower pictures, the metaphorical means of representation is key to creating this plurality. The very nature of a metaphor depends upon an inherent duality: two meanings that unfold simultaneously, one literal and one figurative; two subjects that are simultaneously made present. "For the metaphor to work," writes philosopher Max Black, "the reader must remain aware of the extension of meaning—must attend to both the old and the new meanings together," i.e., to both the literal meaning of a phrase or an image, and the slippery figurative meaning that the phrase or image implies when it is recognized to be operating metaphorically.[30] In the case of Lara's flower pictures, the viewer is made simultaneously aware of both a literal depiction—flowers as flowers—and a figurative meaning—flowers as bodies. More than flickering back and forth between two meanings, though, the metaphor offers some aspect that is uniquely communicable in its particular form; there is something that is lost when a literal paraphrase attempts to explain metaphoric meaning. Flower and body at once, the imaged object in Lara's flower pictures is unhinged from a stable system of meaning.

Further, Lara's flower pictures engage in a networked process of meaning-making. The same flowers appear again and again—now in pastel, now silkscreened, now collaged—their relationships to bodies evolving in each image. Looking is no longer knowing or understanding, as each glance makes meaning anew. It is this repeated disruption of looking as knowing—this repeated disruption of "vision-as-power"[31]—that enables the female-oriented gaze. Lara's flower pictures seem to take up literary scholar and cultural theorist Jacqueline Rose's notion of "repetition as insistence": "the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten—

[30] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 39.
[31] Amad, "Visual Riposte," 50.

something that can only come into focus now by blurring the field of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition take place."[32] Lara's flower pictures destabilize the relationship between viewer and imaged object. Her repeated metaphoric descriptions "blur" the imaged object, making it ontologically unstable. They deconstruct the monolithic gaze and return it to an ongoing and multifaceted process of looking. Here is where I locate the female-oriented gaze: when looking becomes a process of continually making, unmaking, and remaking imaged object into subject; when looking becomes a process of affirming subjectivity.[33]

Flowers as bodies

In one discussion of female spectatorship, feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane posits fantasy as a realm which can become "a space for work on and against the familiar tropes of femininity."[34] She writes, "The feminist demand of the cinema cannot be to return our gestures to us, nor to make them more adequate to the real (this type of mimesis is always a trap)."[35] Lara's flower pictures make a similar sort of claim. It is not by picturing a woman's body that the realities of women's experience can be expressed. Rather, it is a fantastical, alchemical transfiguration of flower into female body that allows Lara to affirm women's subjectivity and explore women's experience to a degree of complexity that mimetic imagery disavows. Rather than *representing* bodies, Lara's flower pictures *present* them. Through likeness but also

[32] Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," in *The Jacqueline Rose Reader*, ed. Justin Clemens and Ben Naparstek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 223.
[33] I'm drawing here from bell hooks' analysis of the film *Passion of Remembrance* created by the Sankofa Film and Video Collective. hooks writes of the film characters, "They display their bodies not for a voyeuristic colonizing gaze but for that look of recognition that affirms their subjectivity—that constitutes them as spectators." "The Oppositional Gaze," 130.
[34] Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 183.
[35] Doane, 183.

unlikeness, through making visible but also making perceptible by other means, Lara's flower pictures establish bodily presence.[36]

Flower pictures have long had a metaphoric relationship to bodies, but Lara brings something particular to her images. Coming to prominence near the turn of the seventeenth century, European flower painting had established a rich range of associations with flowers, including abundance, luxury, and sensation; morality and vanity; and mortality and the fragile, fleeting nature of life.[37] In Lara's work, while flowers wither and droop, those gestures do not serve as *memento mori*—as reminders of our own bodies' susceptibility to time—but instead animate her flowers. In her interpretations of Irving Penn's photographs of flowers, Lara takes abstract license. As she translates the photos into drawings, and then silkscreens, and then collages, she smudges and blurs edges, she recolors, rearranges, and reconfigures. Her choices do away with photographic realism and push the flowers into the realm of the fantastical. She transforms those flowers into active and independent bodies.

Her silkscreen *Aún* (c. 1987; figure 4.7) transforms a two-page spread from Penn's book (figure 4.8). In Penn's version, two tulips are photographed separately in front of a bright white studio background, dew drops clinging to their petals. On the left, a pale peach "Blushing Bride" extends diagonally from the bottom corner, while across the binding, on the right, a pale pink

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[36] My thinking here has been shaped by a variety of sources: the work of art historian Anne M. Wagner regarding bodily readings of Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings in "O'Keeffe's Femininity," in *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 29–104; art historian Carol Armstrong's discussions of the bodily in relation to Tina Modotti's photographs of flowers and otherwise in "This Photography Which Is Not One: In the Gray Zone with Tina Modotti," *October* 101 (Summer 2002): 19–52; and art historian Carolyn Dean's analysis of metonymy, "unlikeness," and presence in the art of Pre-Hispanic Incas in "Metonymy in Inca Art," in *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects*, ed. Rupert Shepherd and Robert Maniura (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 105–20.
[37] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 51; E. de Jongh, "The Interpretation of Still-Life Paintings: Possibilities and Limits," in *Still-Life in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. E. de Jongh (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1982), 31.

"Greenland" tulip stretches up. In Lara's version, the two flowers are pushed close together. Their petals gently graze. Pale peach has been swapped for bright red, pale pink for yellow, and the stiff, straight stems of Penn's tulips have been exchanged for darker, wobblier ones. Mint green leaves stretch out from each of Lara's tulips. They closely echo the forms of the leaves in Penn's photos, but they each have been lengthened. The red tulip's leaf reaches out long, just barely touching the stem of the yellow tulip. On the right, Lara has shifted the leaf over slightly and extended it to reach further upwards, almost to the top of the blossom. The resonance between Lara's silkscreen and Penn's page spread remains clear and strong, but the changes she has made in color and arrangement transform Penn's pristine, dewy blossoms into animated forms. The red tulip gently pats the yellow tulip. The yellow tulip raises up its leaf.

Lara's tulips are pared down in comparison to Penn's photographs. The swathes of solid color are emptied of the delicate gradients and satiny texture of the petals that Penn captures with his camera lens—details that seem to make the sweet scent of the tulips almost palpable. And yet there is a different sort of depth contained within Lara's seemingly simpler imagery. Writing in 1986 in response to some of Lara's earliest exhibited flower pictures, journalist Perla Schwartz commented, "The figures that populate Magali Lara's pictures are minimal, as if by stripping them down, each one of those figures acquires greater expressive force, as if each one of them implicitly carries a fragment of her infinite, rich, varied world, capable of being interpreted in a thousand and one ways."[38] Even as she flattens out Penn's tulips, she deepens their interpretive potential. Abstraction allows her to explore an expanded field of meaning.

[38] Perla Schwartz, "La infidelidad según Magali Lara," *El Universal*, May 15, 1986, sec. Cultural, Hemeroteca Nacional. "Son mínimas las figuras las que pueblan los cuadros de Magali Lara, como si desnudándolos adquirieran mayor fuerza expresiva cada una de las figuras que los pueblan, como si cada una de ellas llevara implícito un fragmento de su mundo infinito, rico, variado, capaz de ser interpretado de una y mil maneras."

In her pastel drawing *Orquídea* (1985; figure 4.9), Lara takes much less license with Penn's photograph than she does in *Aún*. The coloration and composition of the pastel drawing is almost identical to the photographed pair of "Brassavola nodosa" orchids (figure 4.10). The smooth, curved lines of Penn's orchids, however, become distinctly Lara-like in her drawing: wobbly and wavering; hurried and wholly handmade. Once again, the minor shifts transform Penn's hygienic orchids into animated forms. The central, spade-shaped white petals take on a plush, voluminous quality. They teeter atop the deflated stems that appear too impossibly insubstantial to support their weight. The long, thin, golden petals wave wildly, as if trying to help the flowers remain aloft. Lara's flowers "substitute human presence but only to transmit humanity's attributes more effectively," art historian and critic Luis Rius Caso observed, writing specifically with regard to the series of pastel drawings that included *Orquídea*.[39] For Rius Caso, Lara's flower pictures "pulse" with vivacity and originality despite their "apparent simplicity."[40] Smudgy and stripped-down as they are, these orchids are able to invoke "human presence"; their animacy—wobbling, wavering, pulsing—enables them to compellingly communicate aspects of human experience.

In Lara's translations of Penn's photographs, the invocation of the bodily is twofold: the animated forms of her flowers become bodies, but her own body—her hand as maker—is also inseparable from these images. Consider her collages that respond to Penn's pair of "Royal Robe" poppies once again. In *Regresa a casa* (figure 4.5), the print of the two red poppies serves as the base for the collage. The silkscreened vase is pasted on top, and the paint and then oil pastel applied upon the collaged surface. The arrangement of the poppies in *Regresa a casa*

[39] Luis Rius Caso, "Aproximaciones a la obra de Magali Lara," *La orquesta*, June 1986, 56. "Sustituyen a la presencia humana pero sólo para transmitir con más eficacia sus propios atributos."
[40] Rius Caso, 57.

provides insight into the making process of *Así se dijo* (figure 4.6). In the latter, Lara incorporates a print of the poppies of the same edition, but it no longer serves as the base of the collage. Instead, she has first pasted a faintly printed navy vase upon a white support. Next, she has made additions in pastel or crayon, completing the vase and drawing a pair of scissors in the lower left, and applied the light mauve and aqua washes that surround the vase along with the bold, central splatter of red. Finally, she has cut out the two printed poppies and pasted them on top of the collaged ground, in a different configuration. As in *Aún* and *Orquídea,* Lara's red poppies invoke the bodily by way of their animated appearance; their fading petals flap and flutter and swirl around their bulbous centers, and the lower flower spews crimson blood. But the bodily is also invoked by way of the pair of scissors, which have just closed upon the lower flower's stem. The implied hand that held the scissors and performed the cut has been evacuated. In conversation with her collaged reconfiguration of the red poppies, Lara's drawn scissors in the collage serve not only as the implement of violence in the bloody scene where flower transforms into body, but also as a record of the literal process by which the collage was made; the paper stem of the flower was quite literally snipped, and as the maker, Lara was no doubt responsible for this act. Her hand, already suggested through the delicate, wavering lines of the printed poppies and the hurriedly scrawled phrase "así se dijo," takes on a more substantive presence that is felt but not seen.

* * *

Lara's transformations of Irving Penn's photographs offer insight into the conversion of the traditional male gaze into one that is female-oriented. Penn was a U.S.-American fashion photographer, and his name has become inextricable from that of *Vogue* magazine where he

worked for over sixty years. He was hired to design covers for *Vogue* in 1943, and quickly began to realize those designs through his own photography.[41] His first *Vogue* cover, which ran in October 1943, was the first color photograph he had ever taken and it marked the beginning of his career as a professional photographer.[42] Notably, that first cover was a still life—a genre with which Penn experimented throughout his career. In this respect, the flower photographs from which Lara was working fit quite neatly into his larger body of photographic work in fashion and advertising.

Lara did not encounter Penn's photos within the slick, glamorous pages of late 60s and early 70s *Vogue,* but rather within the 1980 book that gathered color prints of the flowers he had photographed between 1967 and 73. Nevertheless, considering the flower photographs alongside his other work makes visible their continuity and complicity in perpetuating Penn's role as a purveyor of the male gaze—a gaze that one of Penn's *Vogue* colleagues described as "imposing" and "relentless."[43] The flower photos rely upon similar tactics to the fashion photos through which Penn made a name for himself in the late 40s and early 50s: the same crisp silhouettes and high contrast (e.g., compare figures 4.11 and 4.12); the same spareness and tight focus on palpable, sharply defined details (e.g., compare figures 4.13 and 4.14). Though Penn was constantly looking for ways to work outside of straight fashion photography, his images, even as they pushed against some mid-century standards, largely abided by expectations of the genre.[44]

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[41] Maria Morris Hambourg, "The Heart of the Matter," in *Irving Penn: Centennial*, by Maria Morris Hambourg and Jeff L. Rosenheim (New York: Published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 15–17.
[42] John Szarkowski, *Irving Penn* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 21.
[43] Alexander Liberman, "An American Eye," *Vogue*, October 1991, 304.
[44] For instance, Penn's use of minimal backdrops contrasted with many fashion photographers' preference for elaborate sets, and his subtle nods towards the artifice of the photo shoot—his inclusion of camera wiring, fraying carpets, and bits of detritus in his frame—became a key aspect of his signature style. This latter aspect, however, was notably absent in his flower photographs. Maria Morris Hambourg, "Existential Portraits, 1947–48," in *Irving Penn: Centennial*, by Maria Morris Hambourg and Jeff L.

In short, Penn's photographs, like most women's fashion photographs, enact a male gaze as a means of "producing and securing a female subject who desires to be desired by men."[45] While women may have been *Vogue*'s and therefore Penn's target audience, the photographs were composed in order for women to imagine themselves inside the clothes, being looked at and admired by men.

In the flower photos, the elaborate artifice that surrounded their production maintains this male gaze. The photographs seem to suggest an effortless embrace of flowers in all of their stages, from bud to bloom to wilting decay. But many of the pictured flowers were flown across the world in order to be photographed in Penn's studio, and as they quickly withered under the hot studio lights, they were spritzed with water (the "dew drops" visible in several of the photos taking on new, suspect meaning) or simply cast aside in favor of another, fresher specimen.[46] In the glossy, published versions of these images, the sharp focus of these close-ups magics away the scaffolding surrounding the fragile blooms; photographic realism obscures the intense control that Penn asserted over the composition of the images. While Penn's flower photographs do not claim a purely objective or scientific view, they do seem to encapsulate wonder at the majesty and diversity of nature that falls flat when the discarded blooms and overnight shipping containers no longer lie outside the frame. If realism "is the ideology of invisible power, power to render and control with the pretense of the absence of rendering and controlling," Penn's reliance upon the camera's crisp, mediating lens obfuscates his "relentless gaze" and the power it asserts over the construction of these images.[47] The images suggest that to examine these flowers

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Rosenheim (New York: Published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 75.

[45] Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 713, https://doi.org/10.1086/448653.

[46] Penn, *Flowers*, 6; Hambourg, "The Heart of the Matter," 31.

[47] Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199; Liberman, "An American Eye," 304.

through the mechanical eye of the camera is to examine something authentic, true, and complete—that to gaze upon these flowers is to know them.

In contrast, in Lara's renderings, uncertainty is embedded in the very surfaces of her images. Quite literally "blurring the field of representation" that Penn's pristine photographs establish in her smeary pastel lines and flat planes of silk-screened color, Lara's flower pictures disrupt the relationship between looking and knowing.[48] In Lara's flower pictures, there is no pictured body, yet there are bodies made present by other means. Here and there perhaps there is a glimpse of visual likeness between body and flower, but bodily presence does not depend exclusively or primarily upon that likeness. Flowers stubbornly continue to look like flowers. They hold on to their literal meaning, yet simultaneously, they generate figurative meaning. In her translations of Penn's photographs, Lara performs an alchemical transformation. Through abstraction and animation, flower becomes flesh, blossom metamorphoses into body. And through a transparency of facture—the hand-worked lines, a recounting of process—body is made present, even when just out of view.

Pluralizing looking

In the culmination of his book-length study of the still life genre, art historian Norman Bryson emphasizes the gendered nature of still life from sixteenth-century Dutch painting onward. In the final sentences, he writes:

> For as long as painting's mode of vision would be constructed by men, the space in which women were obliged to lead their lives would be taken from them and imagined through the values of the "greater" existence from which they were excluded. As the category of the nude pictured women's body from the outside and re-fashioned it according to the logic of another point of view, so still life pictured the space of women from the outside and imposed on it the values of another world.[49]

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[48] Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," 223.
[49] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA:

The genre of still life, even as the most acceptable of genres for women to paint from its beginnings, was no more able to avoid the male gaze than the epitome of that gaze: the depiction of the female nude. Yet, the still life practices of artists working in the first half of the twentieth century, including Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, offer evidence to the contrary. As art historian Nancy Deffebach has argued, using still life as a means of expressing eroticism, Kahlo "bypassed the Western tradition of the female nude created primarily for a male audience."[50] By "bypassing" the male gaze, Kahlo took a step towards articulating, instead, a gaze that was female-oriented. Especially in the context of post-Revolutionary Mexico, Kahlo's intervention into the still life genre was no small achievement. Together with other women artists of this generation working in Mexico, such as painters María Izquierdo and Olga Costa and photographers Tina Modotti and Lola Álvarez Bravo, Kahlo "pictured the space of women" not from the outside, but from her own particular perspective. In the work of these artists, "the values of another world" are not imposed, but rather, in different ways, they each present their own values, as women, and invite other women to look with them.

Building upon the interventions that these artists working in the earlier twentieth century made into the still life genre, Magali Lara's flower pictures also bypass the male gaze and, instead, generate a locus for a female-oriented gaze.[51] Her metaphoric images destabilize any singular mode of viewing, promoting a pluralization of looking and creating space for the articulation of complex, female interiority.

Harvard University Press, 1990), 178.

[50] Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 146.

[51] Lara has spoken explicitly about the way that Kahlo's painting practice allowed her to renegotiate her understanding of the relationship between "women and nature" that flower paintings had traditionally advanced. She has also indicated the influence of U.S.-American painter Georgia O'Keeffe. Lara, *Animaciones*, 27.

Far from the first and far from the last artist to turn to the still life in order to circumvent the male gaze, the necessity for a site that invited a different type of looking was no less urgent in mid-1980s Mexico City than it had been in the 1920s, 30s, or 40s. Artists working in Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century turned to the genre of still life "at a time and place in which…its status was at its nadir," Deffebach has pointed out.[52] The sweeping narratives of the Mexican muralists hinged upon the representations of specific, recognizable, historic figures. Deffebach explains, "The muralist movement effectively reasserted the hierarchies of the Renaissance, in which history painting reigned and still life lacked status."[53] In taking up the still life genre in the midst of the muralist movement—the genre of painting with the longest durée of permissibility for women artists—artists like Frida Kahlo were able to assert dynamic interventions into the field of modern Mexican painting, and to do so in a way that appeared completely natural and acceptable. In Deffebach's words, "Kahlo employed the seemingly bland genre of still-life painting as a forum for discourse on serious, vital, and unexpected issues."[54] In her explorations of the work of Mexican women painting in the earlier twentieth century, Lara saw the potential embedded within "the seemingly bland genre of still-life painting."

Though the supreme status of history painting in Mexico had crumbled by the 1980s, the avant-garde practices that then reigned still largely foreclosed expressions of women's experience. The early 80s Mexico City art world was led by *los grupos.* Experimenting with a wide range of ephemeral, guerrilla tactics, this wave of artist collectives sought to operate outside the domain of either the art market or traditional art institutions. In spite of the anti-institutional, anti-commercial aims that led these artists to turn to collective forms of making, *los*

[52] Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 31.
[53] Deffebach, 131.
[54] Deffebach, 133.

grupos replicated the hierarchical structures that had long dominated the Mexican art world. Reflecting on her experiences as a member of Grupo Março, Lara has explained that *los grupos* were "structured in a very patriarchal way, with a leader and his followers," and that women artists in particular "were often looked upon as 'disciples' of the male leaders."[55] Her description suggests a system that functioned similarly to the practices of the mural movement, which consisted of extensive teams of artists that all worked under the direction of a single painter—most frequently one of *los tres grandes,* whose celebrity status completely overshadowed the other artists' contributions. Such a system meant that the issues that women artists wanted to address were often shunted aside, the "male leaders" ultimately driving the direction of the practice. While the strategies and structures of *los grupos* may have evolved in an attempt to democratize the art world, Lara's reflections on her experiences in Grupo Março suggest a failure to achieve that aim. Indeed, Lara described Março's self-proclaimed leader, Sebastián, and the group's overall structure as "a bit authoritarian," and the frustrations that resulted were a motivating factor for her departure from the group.[56] The radical urban interventions and guerrilla tactics employed by *los grupos* failed to provide a venue for addressing issues of women's experience in her art. The efforts of earlier twentieth-century women suggested that pursuing the genre of still life would not prevent her from doing so. As Frida Kahlo had done before her, Lara could raise "serious, vital, and unexpected issues" by painting "the most conventional thing in the world."[57]

Consider Lara's collage *Así se dijo* (figure 4.6) once more, this time in juxtaposition with

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[55] Edward J. McCaughan, "Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence: Feminist Artists in Mexico," *Social Justice* 34, no. 1 (2007): 52–53.

[56] Olivier Debroise and Magali Lara, "Entrevista a Magali Lara (transcript)," n.d., 30, B87 069, Fondo La era de la discrepancia, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Un poco autoritario"

[57] Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 133; Lara, Interview with author.

a pair of paintings that Frida Kahlo made in 1937: *Tunas* (Cactus Fruits; figure 4.15) and *Recuerdo* (Memory; figure 4.16). As Kahlo scholar Salomon Grimberg has argued, the similarities in palette and compositional strategies of these two paintings suggest that Kahlo was likely working on them simultaneously, and that they might be considered “companion pieces.”[58] In *Tunas,* three prickly pear cactus fruits (*tunas*) sit on a plate. They are in different stages of ripeness, the pale yellow-green fruit in the back the least ripe, the mottled yellow and red fruit on the left in an intermediary stage, and the deep red on the right verging on the overripe, its fleshy interior visible through a long cut that suggests it is responsible for the smudges of blood-red juice that have oozed onto the plate and even beyond, to the ambiguous drapery below. *Recuerdo,* on the other hand, is a full-length self-portrait. Kahlo’s figure is divided across three outfits, each one floating and frontal, as if she were a paper doll. Atop the central figure are Kahlo’s head and neck, and beneath are her legs, standing on a divided ground, one foot on land and the other at sea, encased in a slipper-like sailboat. The central figure appears torso-less, her arms having been distributed between the other two outfits, and a stake drives through a hole where her heart should be, but where the viewer sees straight through to the blue sky behind her. Instead, a massive heart lies at the figure’s feet, its arteries gushing blood that runs in rivers over the grassy landscape. As Grimberg suggests, the coloration of *Tunas* and *Recuerdo* are very resonant: they share a pale blue sky populated with puffy clouds in the top half of the background which transitions to a rippling blue below; the mossy green that edges the white plate in *Tunas* is repeated in *Recuerdo* in the grassy landscape and the Tehuana-style dress; and both paintings are punctuated by a bright red form—the oozing fruit in *Tunas* and the gushing heart in *Recuerdo.* If the stains of red juice that smear the plate and drapery in *Tunas* did not

[58] Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes* (London: Merrell, 2008), 50.

recall blood on their own, paired with the blood stains smeared across the landscape in *Recuerdo,* the metaphor becomes unavoidable, leading Grimberg, for one, to describe *Tunas* as "brutal" and "the goriest" of Kahlo's still lifes.[59]

Though Lara doesn't offer her viewer a "companion piece" to *Así se dijo* that would make the metaphor of flower as body as irrefutable as Kahlo's does, the resonance between the blood-red stains in Kahlo's *Tunas* and that of Lara's poppy is strong. As Kahlo's oozing fruit begins to pulse and pump before the viewer's eye, Lara's fluttering flower becomes flesh.

But the differences between Lara's *Así se dijo* and Kahlo's pair of paintings offers another useful line of inquiry. The transformation of Kahlo's cactus fruit into heart depends upon her own image and her own story. The fruit becomes not just any human heart but her own heart. Lara's collage, on the other hand, offers no identification. The flower is flesh, but there is no indication that it is anyone's flesh in particular. In distinction from many of her works, in fact, the phrase written at the bottom of the collage is in the third person, the subject left unmarked: "así se dijo," which can be translated as the impersonal "so they said" or "so it was said," but also as the reflexive "like so, she told herself," or alternatively, "like so, he told himself," "it told itself," or even "you told yourself." And while this snippet of text situates this saying/telling in the past, the image places the viewer in the present: the viewer is made witness to the violent act; the scissors have only just closed on the flower's stem; the bottom portion of the stem is still in the process of falling away from the other half, and a few drops of red are still spilling from its angled end. In each of Kahlo's paintings, in contrast, the violent act has already occurred. And of course, it already has. For if the viewer understands the flesh of the cactus fruit in *Tunas* to stand in for Kahlo's own flesh, the cut that sliced the fruit open lengthwise in *Tunas* and the

[59] Grimberg, 50–52.

occurrence that left Kahlo's figure gruesomely impaled in *Recuerdo* can both be attached to the bus accident that occurred in real space and real time, and really left Kahlo impaled by a pole and in need of over thirty surgeries during the course of her life.[60] Kahlo's paintings tell a story that the viewer must only observe from the outside; it is Kahlo's own story, and it is unavoidably tied to her particular body by way of specific biographical details and direct representation of her body—her now-iconic visage. The story that is in the midst of unfolding in Lara's collage, on the other hand, leaves the viewer's location completely open-ended. While the flower becomes body, it does not become the body of anyone in particular, and, as I have argued with respect to the implied presence of Lara's hand just out of frame, the flower certainly does not insist upon a reading as her own body. As it wavers between flower and body, between particular and generic body, between identifiable and anonymous body, between "they" and "it" and "she" and "he" and "you," Lara's poppy is unhinged from stable meaning. It cannot be controlled or consumed or understood in one glance. It requires a pluralization of looking.

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Considered in dialogue with her earlier investigations of Kahlo's art practice, Lara's flower pictures also engage in an effort to articulate female interiority and subjectivity. In the late 1970s, Lara created a series of collages and photocopies that incorporate reproductions of Kahlo's work. In one work from this series (figure 4.17), she addresses Kahlo's *Las dos Fridas* (The Two Fridas, 1939; figure 4.18). One of only two large scale paintings that she ever made, Kahlo painted *Las dos Fridas* two years after completing *Tunas* and *Recuerdo* and revisited several of the themes and elements she had introduced in that pair of paintings on an exploded

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[60] Hayden Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 62.

scale. She examined more deeply the relationship between the two pieces of her personality that had begun to emerge on the right side of *Recuerdo.* In each painting, the pair of figures are situated close to one another, such that the white skirt of the figure on the left overlaps with the chartreuse, Tehuana-style skirt of the figure on the right. In *Recuerdo,* the two figures are pictured erect, arm in arm, while in *Las dos Fridas* they are pictured seated on a bench, holding hands. Kahlo quite literally fleshes out the juxtaposition of these two aspects of herself in the later painting; whereas her figure is distributed between the three outfits in *Recuerdo,* in *Las dos Fridas* there are two complete self-portraits, and the red ribbon that interlaces the figures in the former becomes a blood vessel in the latter that connects the two bodies. The gushing arteries of the too-large heart laid upon the grass in *Recuerdo* is converted to a single, burst blood vessel that the figure on the left—the Frida in Victorian-style dress—attempts to stymie. A steady drip of blood spills upon her white skirt while she tries to clamp the vessel closed with a surgical hemostat.

In her photocopy, Lara crops Kahlo's painting and prints it as a negative image. She focuses in upon the center of the canvas, showing the two figures' laps, interlaced hands, and the objects that they each hold—the hemostat, and a locket. Along the top, she adds a series of white arrows pointing down, and along the bottom, a single arrow, outlined in white, that points directly to the place where the skirts of the two figures overlap. Eliding the double views of Kahlo's face and heart, Lara homes in upon the places where these two versions of Kahlo rub up against one another—where knees knock and hands clasp. Her interpretation of the painting suggests an interest, quite early on in her practice, in the ways in which interior complexity might be mapped.

Created circa 1978, the series of collages and photocopies focused on Frida Kahlo are

some of the only images that Lara has made that include the direct depiction of faces or bodies. While photographs and photocopies of faces and bodies are also prevalent in her *Ventanas* series (1977–78) and the collages that appeared in her exhibition *Magali Lara: Infancia y eso* (1980), their inclusion in her artwork waned by the early 1980s. The image that incorporates *Las dos Fridas* foreshadows Lara's sustained investigation of representing interiority and the role that objects might play in those representations. The careful inclusion of the locket (which contains a tiny picture of Diego Rivera as a young boy) and the hemostat resonate with a representative strategy that relies heavily upon domestic objects that Lara had explored from the very beginning of her practice and which she would continue to vigorously interrogate after putting aside the incorporation of photographs and photocopies. Indeed, the relationship between Lara's exploration of scissors in her artist book *Tijeras* (1977) and the hemostat in Kahlo's painting merits some mention. More striking, though, is the relationship between the scissors snipping stem asunder in Lara's collage *Así se dijo* and the hemostat clamped on blood vessel in Kahlo's painting. Not completely stemmed by the hemostat, the blood vessel continues to drip onto the white dress of the figure on the left; it mimics the pattern of red flowers embroidered along the hem of the skirt and, as the viewer looks closer, flower petals and blood splatters begin to blur (see detail in figure 4.19). This dialogue between *Así se dijo* and *Las dos Fridas* furthers the transfiguration for which I am arguing. The relationship between body and flower in Lara's collage is felt viscerally when considering it alongside Kahlo's canvas. The stem is the vein through which the flower receives water and nutrients gathered from the soil by the plant's roots. Those life-giving materials transform into blood in *Así se dijo,* not only by way of their crimson coloring, but also through the metaphor enacted in the striking, visual echoes between Lara's composition and Kahlo's iconic, double self-portrait.

But in addition to furthering the process of transubstantiation, reading *Así se dijo* in light of *Las dos Fridas* invites the possibility of reading an expression of complex interiority into Lara's collage—the type of interiority that Lara was already considering in relation to this image in her photocopy made circa 1978. Building simultaneously upon Kahlo's self-portrait and still life practices, Lara's flower pictures rely upon botanic bodies in order to depict that which remained inarticulable with respect to women's experience in the mid-80s Mexico City avant-garde, as male artists continued to quash women's agency. Lara turned back to the strategies that women artists of the earlier twentieth century had relied upon as they sought to express female interiority and subjectivity.

In Kahlo's painted fruit and flowers of the early 40s, the still life genre became a means to express female sexuality and desire outside the circuits of Mexico's post-Revolutionary cultural imaginary. In 1941, Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho and his wife commissioned a series of still lifes from Kahlo.[61] In response, she produced *Naturaleza muerta* (Still Life, 1942; figure 4.20), a small, round painting on copper that displays an elaborate arrangement of fruits and flowers and is framed by a flower garland. At the center, an orange squash is halved, dramatically displaying its seeds and fibrous innards. Upon receipt, the first lady, Soledad Orozco, purportedly found Kahlo's painting "indecent" and "personally offensive" and sent the painting back, refusing to hang it in the dining room of the presidential palace for which it had been commissioned and denying Kahlo payment.[62] Amidst the fleshy pleats of the mushrooms, the rounded forms of the pears and plums, and the exposed interiors of the orange squash and white guanábana, Soledad Orozco found something insupportably improper. Two years later, Kahlo painted *La flor de la vida* (Flower of Life, 1944; figure 4.21), featuring an

[61] Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*, 83.
[62] Grimberg, 82–83.

otherworldly crimson flower that appears to merge botanical and human reproductive faculties.[63] Eroticism seems to bubble right on the surface, the "overt sexual symbolism" of the painting resulting in immediate censorship; when Kahlo's painting was exhibited as part of the 1944 *Salon de la Flor,* it was hung by itself in a room that was only opened for visitors upon request.[64]

The offense of Kahlo's still lifes stems from their celebrations of female sexuality and erotic pleasure as an end in and of itself. As had been the case prior to the Mexican Revolution, in the post-Revolutionary period, as art historian Mary Coffey succinctly puts it, "Motherhood was the only acknowledged form of female citizenship."[65] Motherhood—or at least "good motherhood"—was held up in contrast to prostitution and the debates around health and hygiene that surrounded prostitution in the 1920s and 30s.[66] Moreover, starting in 1936, the State began actively and officially encouraging women to bear children under the General Law of Population that was instated that year.[67] Kahlo's painting practice displays the consequences of this singular path to valuation. Her powerful depictions of gestation and childbirth, but also miscarriage and abortion, are a manifestation of the societal disavowal of forms of female contribution to the nation beyond motherhood and the violence that it did to a woman such as Kahlo who was physically unable to bear children.[68] The sensuality present in her still lifes works in dialogue with her frank images of the messiness of motherhood; her flowers and fruits argue for a

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[63] Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 145.
[64] Deffebach, 145.
[65] Mary K. Coffey, "Angels and Prostitutes: Jose Clemente Orozco's Catharsis and the Politics of Female Allegory in 1930s Mexico," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 207, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2005.0002.
[66] Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 196.
[67] Gustavo Cabrera, "Demographic Dynamics and Development: The Role of Population Policy in Mexico," *Population and Development Review* 20 (1994): 108–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/2807942.
[68] For examples of her depictions of gestation and childbirth, see the paintings *Mi nacimiento*, 1932; *Mis abuelos, mis padres y yo,* 1936; and *Moisés,* 1945. For examples of her depictions of miscarriage and abortion, see the paintings *Henry Ford Hospital* and *Hospital*, and the lithograph *Frida y el aborto,* all from 1932.

valuation of women's bodies and women's sexuality that did not necessarily culminate in reproduction.

Kahlo's still lifes expressed an eroticism that solicited censorship and offense. But they also elicited praise that seems rooted in the very same qualities that would have suggested that eroticism. In her contemporary moment, her still lifes were acclaimed for being "full of fire," "vital" and "lively," and for their capacity to "flourish in the vibrations of their coloring."[69] Whereas her self-portraiture was often dismissed as "anecdotal"—as a visual version of her tragic but idiosyncratic autobiography—her still lifes were applauded for their "intrinsic value."[70] Under the cover of the quaint, decorative genre of still life and the veneer of scientifically precise rendering, Kahlo expressed flagrant erotic gestures.

The spirit of Kahlo's still lifes—their advancement of rebellious conversation by very way of their adherence to the genre, their ability to appear both demure and defiant at once—reveals the promise that Lara saw in making pictures of flowers. She takes up the "seemingly bland" and "conventional" genre of still life in order to address "serious, vital, and unexpected issues."[71] Her flower pictures incite a pluralization of looking, and they articulate complex interiority. As looking becomes a process that is multifaceted and plural, the imaged object is destabilized. With each glance, Lara's flowers are remade, and their previous renditions are unmade. They are never completely determinable. When ontological instability and complex interiority coincide, interpellation begins.

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[69] Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*, 82; José Moreno Villa, "La realidad y el deseo en Frida Kahlo," *Novedades: México en la Cultura*, April 26, 1953, 753110, ICAA Documents of Latin American and Latino Art; Paul Westheim, "Frida Kahlo: Una investigación estética," trans. Mariana Frenk, *Novedades: México en la Cultura*, June 10, 1951, 753102, ICAA Documents of Latin American and Latino Art.
[70] Moreno Villa, "La realidad y el deseo en Frida Kahlo."
[71] Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 133.

Affirming subjectivity

In the spring of 1986, Lara showed a group of flower pictures in her exhibition *La infiel* (The unfaithful) at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, including several of the pastel drawings she had made in response to Penn's photographs of flowers. Disrupting the binary constructions imposed by the traditional male gaze, the flowers that appear in these artworks refuse to adhere strictly to either activity or passivity, to either looking or being seen, to either voyeurism or exhibitionism, to taking on the role of either purely subject or purely object.[72] The images waver, flicker, sputter, and blur, repelling any singular meaning. In the context of the exhibition, the flower pictures' repeated disruptions become insistence.[73] As the viewer moved through the gallery, taking in flower after flower, "the gaze" would have been interrupted. Unhinged from stable systems of looking as knowing, looking becomes an ongoing process of interpellation wherein subjectivity is not only demonstrated, but affirmed.

The exhibition *La infiel* took its title from a poem written by Lara's close friend and frequent collaborator Carmen Boullosa, and it recounted a story which was told in four parts.[74] The first three parts consisted primarily of interior scenes populated by clothes and shoes, glasses of water, cups of coffee, and flowers in vases. The strangely rigid clothes that gape open and the pairs of shoes that lie waiting for an occupant suggest a constriction that is reflected in the words that surround them—words that speak of fear and enclosure and suffocation.[75] In one especially

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[72] Here I'm referring back to the list of binary constructions offered by Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference*, 87.
[73] Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," 223.
[74] "Un mensaje de feminidad en la muestra de Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, May 11, 1986, Microfilm, Hemeroteca Nacional; Lara, *La infiel: obra reciente*, 10–11.
[75] For example, Lara writes in one work, "To get out of this fear enclosing me like rubber, like a diving suit," quoting the poem "Hypotheses: City" by Margaret Atwood. Gutierre Aceves, "El ritual de los objetos," in *La infiel: obra reciente*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil / Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1986), 6. "Salir de este miedo que me envuelve como goma, como traje de buzo."

powerful drawing, *Irse* (To leave, 1985), a pair of wilting flowers, each in its own glass vase, is accompanied by the phrase "To leave, to leave, to leave even once" (figure 4.22). Snipped from their roots and imprisoned in their vases, the flowers are left to slowly wither away. In the fourth and final part of the exhibition, entitled "*La huída"* (The escape), flowers took on a central role as subject matter. The exhibition culminated with a series of pastel drawings of flowers (figure 4.23), including Lara's pastel responses to Irving Penn, such as *Tuve* (figure 4.4) and *Orquídea* (figure 4.9) discussed above. In contrast to the images that appeared earlier in the exhibition, the flowers pictured in this final section shed the implied rigidity and constriction. Alone on their blank backgrounds, their stems continuing beyond the frames, the flowers are free to sway and dance. They express an autonomy and an individuality that the constricting clothes, oppressive rubber gloves, and confining glass vases do not permit. As one reviewer wrote in response to *La infiel,* Lara's exhibited images articulated "aspects of her own living condition as a woman that thinks and feels, as a woman that, in spite of the countless taboos that surround her, wants and has to be herself."[76] Another described the way that her flowers in this exhibition embodied "women…that struggle with the intensity and independence of their memories, their ghosts, their inner turmoil."[77] Lara's flower pictures push against tropes of how women are expected to behave—against docile submission on the one hand, and against the "mythic" expectations of women behaving badly on the other, such as "the myth of the siren," as the third section of the

[76] Schwartz, "La infidelidad según Magali Lara." "Aspectos de su propia situación vital como mujer que piensa y siente, como mujer que a pesar del sinnúmero de tabús que la rodean, quiere, debe ser ella misma."
[77] Lourdes Andrade, "Apología de la ausencia," *Punto* IV, no. 192 (July 7, 1986): 20. "Mujeres…que se debaten con la intensidad y la independencia de sus recuerdos, de sus fantasmas, de sus conmociones internas."

exhibition was entitled, or “Medea or Andromeda or Hecuba,” as Boullosa writes in her poem “La infiel.”[78]

In the drawing *Irse*, the flowers in their glass vases appear passive, powerless to do anything but wilt. However, the words that accompany the image make visible a dynamic emotional activity—a powerful yearning, an internal struggle that challenges absolute passivity. In *Tuve,* a different sort of disruption takes place as words and image interact. The word “tuve” (“I had”) is scrawled beside the two fluttering, red poppies. It floats at an ambiguous distance from the two flowers, its relation to the image completely uncertain. It is a fragment, both subject and object undefined: who is “I”? and what did I once have, but have no longer? The pictured flowers flit back and forth between subject and object, neither and both. In *Orquídea*, even without any text the image destabilizes clear-cut binary constructions. Out of frame and left to the viewer’s imagination, the flowers’ stems oscillate between freshly snipped and still rooted in the ground. Are the orchids actively growing? Are they passively waving in the breeze? Why not both at once?

Critical responses to Lara’s artworks featuring botanic imagery that were exhibited in the years following *La infiel* reflect their slippery iridescence. “Lara’s delicately painted plant imagery hints at personal or sexual awakening and pain,” one reviewer wrote in 1990.[79] “Her trees have the two extremes that, in general, exist in her work: one, which deals with pain, partly anguished, as of uneasiness, and the other very sensual, erotic,” wrote another in 1994.[80] Lara’s

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[78] Carmen Boullosa, “La infiel,” in *La infiel: obra reciente*, by Magali Lara (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil / Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1986), 7.
[79] Janice T. Paine, “Exhibit Belies Stereotypes,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 12, 1990, NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current.
[80] Raquel Peguero, “Magali Lara y el árbol del cuerpo,” *La Jornada*, May 16, 1994, sec. Cultura, Hemerografía, Museo de Arte Moderno.“Sus árboles tienen los dos extremos que, en general, tiene su trabajo: uno, donde trata el dolor, una parte angustiosa, como de desasosiego, y otra muy sensual, erótica.”

images of flowers, trees, and other plants simultaneously allude to the seemingly contradictory sensations of pleasure and pain. Another reviewer, also writing in 1994, commented that Lara's work "finds the balance…between the external (nature) and the internal (the body)."[81] And in 1998, another wrote that, in Lara's artworks, "sensuality is found in opposition to and complementing dramatic quality; grandiosity with fragility; the sublime with the quotidian; the collective, in short, with the intimate."[82] These critics, writing in response to exhibitions that took place over the course of almost a decade, each describe the ways in which Lara's botanic imagery complicates binary oppositions. They describe her artworks as finding space between extremes or as suggesting opposing extremes simultaneously.

Lara's own words also suggest that finding space between extremes was part of her thinking as she began to make pictures of flowers. In early 1987 she explained, "I…returned to conventional themes like flowers, still lifes, family histories, trying to let go of the fear of it seeming decorative or superficial, in this era where violence is the latest fashion."[83] Avoiding graphic displays of violence, Lara sought something in between explicitly violent images and images that were merely "decorative or superficial." She saw a means of showing what she described as the "other face" of violence: a subtler, "more harmonious, let's say 'calm,'" side of

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[81] Sylvia Navarrete, "Magali Lara: El Árbol del Cuerpo," *La Jornada*, June 5, 1994, sec. Jornada Semanal, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Encuentra el equilibrio…entre lo externo (la naturaleza) y lo interno (el cuerpo)."
[82] Carlos Blas Galindo, "Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, May 9, 1998, sec. Sábado, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "La sensualidad se halla contrapuesta y complementada con la dramaticidad; la grandiosidad con la fragilidad; lo sublime con lo cotidiano; lo colectivo, en fin, con lo íntimo."
[83] Magali Lara, "Autorretrato," *Fin de siglo*, February 1987, No. 142, Caja 2 Revistas originales; MLEP.2.1E.16, Fondo Magali Lara / Elso Padilla, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM. "Yo...regresé a los temas convencionales como las flores, los bodegones, las historias de familia, tratando de quitarme el miedo a parecer decorativa o superficial, en esta época donde la violencia es la última moda."

violence that could be found within those “conventional themes.”[84] Together with the flower pictures that were shown in 1986 as part of the exhibition *La infiel*, the words surrounding Lara’s work—her own words in the months that followed and the critical responses to other exhibitions that featured botanical imagery in the years that followed this first exhibition of her flower pictures—demonstrate the ways in which those images pushed against binary constructions of spectatorship and instead solicited interpretation that was multifaceted and ever-changing.

Lara explained that the artworks that made up *La infiel* recounted a story that “isn’t a biography, but a compilation of experiences of my friends.”[85] Her images sought to articulate, reflect upon, and legitimize real, shared experiences. But she also sought to do so through a critical, disruptive, oppositional approach. As she commented in 1984, a year prior to making the series, she was “interested in understanding not only feminine vision, but also questioning and legitimizing new practices, new realisms that allow[ed] for reexamination of the everyday, of history.”[86] She was looking for strategies that would enable a reimagining of women’s experience, both historically and contemporarily, both broadly and minutely. Such strategies relied upon sustained disruption to established practices of looking—“repetition as insistence.”[87] In the mid-1980s, Lara spoke repeatedly about the importance of alternative art spaces and exhibitions. She proposed that art spaces operating outside of the Mexican State’s monopoly on cultural production could bring artists with alternate visions and proposals to the fore, and could

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[84] Angélica Abelleyra, “Carece de crítica la plástica en México: Magali Lara,” *La Jornada*, October 14, 1986, sec. Cultura, Hemeroteca Nacional. “La violencia tiene otra cara…más armónica, digamos ‘tranquila.’”
[85] “Un mensaje de feminidad en la muestra de Magali Lara.” “No es una biografía, sino una recopilación de experiencias de mis amigas.”
[86] Adriana Malvido, “No sólo queremos tener una visión femenina del mundo; buscamos un realismo que permita revisar la historia: Magali Lara,” *Uno más uno*, February 24, 1984, PRES023_84, Museo Universitario del Chopo. “Nos interesa entender no sólo la visión femenina, sino también cuestionar y legalizar prácticas nuevas, nuevos realismos que permitan revisar lo cotidiano, la historia.”
[87] Rose, “Sexuality in the Field of Vision,” 223.

open up new modes of viewing, radically expanding audiences.[88] She argued that woman-focused exhibitions would enable women artists to "strengthen and animate one another" and would "legitimize and dignify voices that have not been taken seriously," and her sentiments were echoed by other women artists during this time.[89] As the images that emerged the following year suggest, it was buried within "the most conventional thing in the world" that Lara found space for alternate explorations of vision.[90] Destabilizing any singular mode of viewing, Lara's flowers are in a constant process of subject formation. Deconstructing myths of womanhood and finding ways to "strengthen and animate," "legitimize and dignify" a multiplicity of real, lived experiences, Lara's flower pictures affirm subjectivity.[91]

Conventionality circa 1985

The stakes of Lara's choice to explore the conventional genre of still life were extreme in mid-1980s Mexico City. On the morning of September 19, 1985, a massive earthquake shook the city. It was followed by a substantial and sustained aftershock in the evening of September 20th.[92] The seismic events reduced hundreds of buildings to rubble, damaged many thousands

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[88] In a 1985 article, Lara spoke of the significance of the newly inaugurated Museo Rufino Tamayo that was operated independently from the State for the first several years that it was open. She emphasized the museum's capacity to produce quality exhibition catalogues and television programs that would enable a broader public to engage closely with artworks. Angélica Abelleyra, "El Museo Tamayo Abre Sus Salas a 17 Artistas de Hoy En México," *La Jornada*, July 12, 1985, sec. Cultura, Centro de Documentación Museo Rufino Tamayo.
[89] Silvia Ramírez de Aguilar, "Magali Lara, Fanny Rabel y Nunik Sauret. La mujer en las artes plásticas," *Excélsior*, February 25, 1984. "Hay que organizar exposiciones solamente para mujeres, para que así se pueden dar fuerza y ánimo unas a otras"; Malvido, "No sólo queremos tener una visión femenina." "Legalizar y dignificar voces que no se han tomado en serio."
For an example of another artist's discussion of these issues, see Adriana Malvido's conversation with Mónica Mayer in "El arte feminista, ni moda ni estilo; es simplemente 'un instrumento más de lucha,'" *Uno más uno*, March 2, 1984, AVJ-3216, Caja 21, Archivo Ana Victoria Jiménez, Universidad Iberoamericana.
[90] Lara, Interview with author.
[91] Malvido, "No sólo queremos tener una visión femenina."
[92] The principal event, which occurred on September 19th, lasted for 4 minutes and the magnitude was

more, killed at least ten thousand people, and left an estimated half a million homeless.[93] The government's response to the devastation was hugely inadequate, spurring citizens to take disaster relief into their own hands and catalyzing rapid growth in a vast network of grassroots movements. In the wake of the earthquake, artistic responses reflected upon the ruinous landscape and the utter failings of the Mexican State to provide relief to its people. While surprisingly sparse, especially when compared to the work produced in response to the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, responses to the earthquake ran the gamut of the era's most prevalent artistic tendencies.[94] They ranged from the burgeoning "neo-conceptualism," exemplified by antagonistic installations, to the ascendant "neo-Mexicanism," typified by flashy, figurative paintings that combined elements of national symbology—frequently culled from the visual vocabulary of the so-called Mexican School of Painting—with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

The 1987 Salón Nacional de Arte Plástica illustrates the potent resonance of those artworks that directly addressed the devastation in the wake of the earthquake. In the painting section, Rubén Ortiz Torres's canvas *El fin del modernismo* (The end of modernism, 1986; figure 4.24) won first prize, while in the short-lived Alternative Spaces section, first prize went to the installation *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas* (Propping up our modern ruins, 1987; figure 4.25) created by Gabriel Orozco, Mauricio Rocha, and Mauricio Maillé. In the former, Ortiz Torres paints a scene in the midst of the earthquake. Before an unsettling, bright yellow sky, a modernist building is rent in two, the portion on the left in the process of crumbling

measured at 8.1 on the Richter Scale. The largest aftershock, which occurred the next evening, lasted for 1 minute and the magnitude was measured at 7.3. José da Cruz, *Disaster and Society: The 1985 Mexican Earthquakes*, Meddelanden Från Lunds Universitets Geografiska Institutioner 116 (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1993), 112.
[93] da Cruz, 118–34.
[94] For an overview of artistic responses to the 1985 earthquake and an analysis of their sparsity, see Ignacio Padilla, *Arte y olvido del terremoto*, Estuario ensayo (Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca: Almadía, 2010).

as smoke and rubble swirl. In the foreground, a lamp post leans sharply, positioning the viewer at street level. *El fin del modernismo* is one of several paintings that Ortiz Torres made in response to the earthquake between 1985 and 1987, and, in its titling, it speaks directly to his broader evaluation of the earthquake; "In Mexico," Ortiz Torres wrote in 1987, "we are able to locate the end of modernism at 7:19am on September 19, 1985, with the destruction, by the work of god and nature in the face of the economic crisis, of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing complex and other buildings."[95] In *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas,* the artists installed a series of wooden posts that spanned floor to ceiling in a gallery at the Museo de Arte Moderno. The scaffolding, convincingly seeming to provide structural support to the building, operated in dialogue with the extensive, make-shift scaffolding that remained visible throughout the city more than two years after the earthquake.

Although these works represent opposing extremes in the predominant artistic tendencies of the late 80s, the artists affiliated with neo-Mexicanism and neo-conceptualism respectively, they make similar sorts of commentary. Each work points to the toll that the earthquake took on the architecture of the city, and the symbolic relationship of that physical destruction to the damage sustained by the Mexican people in the nation's attempt to rapidly modernize. In each case, the message is sharply poignant. These artworks reverberate with the staggering photographs of the earthquake, perhaps most particularly with Mario Antonio Cruz's documentation of the Edificio Nuevo León in the Nonalco-Tlatelolco housing complex (figure 4.26). As Ortiz Torres's above-cited invocation of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco suggests, Mario Pani's 1960s housing complex was emblematic of Mexico's mid-century modernization effort. Flanking

[95] Rubén Ortiz Torres, "La arquitectura de la postmodernidad," *México en el arte* 16 (Spring 1987): 34. "En México el fin del modernismo lo podemos situar a las 7:19 horas del 19 de septiembre de 1985, con la destrucción, por obra de los dioses y la naturaleza ante la crisis económica, del complejo habitacional Nonoalco-Tlatelolco y otros edificios."

the Plaza de las Tres Culturas where the Tlatelolco massacre took place on October 2, 1968, the housing complex also came to represent—quite quickly after its completion—an almost incomprehensible unveiling of the Mexican State's failings. Cruz's documentation of the destruction of the Edificio Nuevo Léon on September 19, 1985 makes tangible the connection between these two devastating moments—68 and 85—and their definitive roles in the Mexican cultural imaginary. In the two prize-winning artworks of the 1987 Salón Nacional, architectural failings are leveraged as symbols for the unfathomable scale of the earthquake's impact upon the Mexican populace.

Absent from the architectural scope of the works of Ortiz Torres and Orozco, Rocha, and Maillé is the specificity of the impact that the earthquake had upon Mexican women and the resulting radical reorganization that the feminist movement underwent in the years that immediately followed. In the 1970s, the Mexican feminist movement had largely been confined to the sphere of middle-class women. While the economic crisis of the early 1980s had increased many activists' investment in supporting working-class women, it wasn't until September 1985 that a truly multi-class women's movement was built.[96] In the wake of the earthquake, the exigency of improving conditions for working-class women, who were massively and disproportionately affected by the devastation, was made painfully visible. As a 1986 bulletin commented:

> The earthquake of September 19, 1985, which left some 40,000 garment workers without work, 800 workshops destroyed, and 1600 women dead, brought to public light the conditions under which these women work in this trade without minimum wage, without rank, without benefits, with temporary contracts, and in unacceptably overcrowded conditions.[97]

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[96] Marta Lamas et al., "Building Bridges: The Growth of Popular Feminism in Mexico," in *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*, ed. Amrita Basu and C. Elizabeth McGrory, trans. Ellen Calmus, Social Change in Global Perspective (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 335–37.

[97] "La tribuna: un boletin trimestral sobre la mujer y el desarrollo, No. 29" (Centro de La Tribuna

As the walls that they had been hidden behind crumbled, the conditions under which these women worked were suddenly exposed. In the months that followed, these women organized, forming the September 19th Garment Workers Union, fighting for fair wages and humane working conditions. And in the years that followed, groups of working-class women such as this one took on leading roles in organizing key mobilization efforts within the broader-based women's movement and pushing forward an agenda based on a new, "popular" feminism.[98]

The contrast between *El fin del modernismo* and *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas* and Lara's flower pictures is stark. Reading Lara's 1987 collage *Así se dijo* in light of the earthquake's continued omnipresence in Mexico City that year, as illustrated by the two prize-winning works at the Salón Nacional, sheds light on descriptions of her flower pictures as "extraordinarily modest" gestures, as "feminine," and as, indeed, embodying "the most conventional thing in the world."[99] Lara's flower pictures do not address the upheaval and reorganization of working-class women's lives following September 19, 1985.[100] They do not

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Internancional de la Mujer, Segundo trimestre 1986), 33, AVJ-4372, Caja folleto 006, Archivo Ana Victoria Jiménez, Universidad Iberoamericana. "El terremoto del 19 de septiembre de 1985, que dejó un saldo de 40,000 costureras sin trabajo, 800 talleres destruidos y 1,600 mujeres muertas trajo a la luz pública las condiciones en que trabajan las mujeres de este gremio sin salario mínimo, sin antigüedad, sin prestaciones, con contratos eventuales y en condiciones de hacinamiento inaceptables."

[98] Starting in 1986, groups including the September 19th Garment Workers Union organized demonstrations for International Women's Day, Mother's Day, and the Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which had traditionally been organized by middle-class feminist activists. Marta Lamas, "El movimiento feminista en la década de los ochenta," in *Crisis y sujetos sociales en México*, ed. Enrique de la Garza Toledo, vol. 2 (México: Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Humanidades, UNAM, 1992), 559.

[99] Jordi Galdes, "Magali Lara ventanea cuando pinta," *La Plaza*, November 19, 1993, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Vélez, Gonzalo, "Los Árboles-Cuerpos de Magali Lara," *Uno más uno*, May 28, 1994, sec. Sábado, Archivo Activo, Mujeres artistas, Fondo Mónica Mayer, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo UNAM; Lara, Interview with author.

[100] Lara did, however, demonstrate her support for the September 19th Garment Workers Union in the wake of the earthquake in other ways. For instance, she participated in a benefit exhibition for the union in October of 1986 wherein artists created clothing designs that were then incorporated into the union's repertoire. "Realizaron Exposición de Ropa Para Beneficiar a Costureras del Sindicato Nacional 19 de

pretend to be anything but fine art, primed to hang on a gallery wall where the women most affected by the earthquake would never see them. Even considering them within the context of feminist production, Lara's flower pictures function differently. They operate, for instance, in contrast to the powerful chorus of voices that speak up in feminist journalist Elena Poniatowska's book *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake.*[101] With the help of a team of 17 other writers, Poniatowska gathered testimonials on a broad scale, amplifying a multiplicity of individual voices and piecing together a representation of the collective experience of the earthquake. As in her crowd-sourced narration of the Tlatelolco massacre, each account is given in the first-person, but names and places are left out such that the experiences merge into a single, forceful collective. If *El fin del modernismo* and *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas* engage with the crumbling concrete and shattered glass made viscerally visible in Cruz's photograph of the Edificio Nuevo León on September 19, Poniatowska's accumulation of individual accounts invites consideration of what might lie behind each of the gauzy curtains still hanging in the windows of the apartments that were, as of 7:19am, no longer homes.

These are not the type of politics that drive Lara's practice. Not the macropolitics of Ortiz Torres's painting and Orozco, Rocha, and Maillé's installation. Not the grassroots mobilization of Poniatowska's book. While the emphasis that her artworks place upon personal and intimate views has some resemblance to the informant-based approach that Poniatowska embraces in *Nothing, Nobody*, Lara's artworks do not hinge upon disaster or catastrophe. In fact, they refuse to hinge upon disaster or catastrophe. They stubbornly interrogate the utterly mundane.

Septiembre," *El Nacional*, October 20, 1986, sec. Sección Metropolitana, Hemeroteca Nacional.

[101] Elena Poniatowska, *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*, trans. Aurora Camacho de Schmidt and Arthur Schmidt, Voices of Latin American Life (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). Originally published as *Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988).

In the wake of the 1985 earthquake, Lara's flower pictures forged ahead with a mission to present the complexity and contradiction of women's experience every single day. In their emergence from her own, lived experiences, and experiences that she shared with other women, they are inherently middle-class, and they are inherently of the art world. All of this is exactly what makes the politics embedded in her images different. They do not address The Political, but rather, issues and experiences that continued to be deemed too inconsequential to merit address within the realm of political art. In their multifaceted representations of women's interiority and relationships to their bodies, her flower pictures are poised to take a step towards subtly empowering women through the creation of a site that invites a different type of looking. In mid-1980s Mexico, this type of empowerment was not the most urgent issue. But Lara's choice to continue, after the earthquake, rigorously exploring the capacity of flower pictures is consistent with her nuanced approach to politics and the long, slow fight to which her works continue to contribute.

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Over the course of the twentieth century, Mexican women had made great strides. They had made broad political gains, including finally obtaining the right to vote in 1953. They had chipped away at inequality within the art world, gradually receiving more mural commissions and State-sponsored retrospective exhibitions.[102] Nevertheless, in the mid-1980s, women artists remained vastly underrepresented in the Mexico City art scene and artwork that addressed women's experience continued to be sidelined.

[102] For an in depth discussion of the history of women artists commissioned to paint murals, see Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, *Eclipse de siete lunas: mujeres muralistas en México*, Colección Destiempo (Mexico City: Artes de México y del Mundo, 2017).

Magali Lara explored routes that could circumvent the stubborn patriarchal structures of the Mexico City avant-garde. She studied alternate historical sources and promoted alternate exhibition venues. She pursued a new framework for portraying women's experience and women's bodies. She sought to understand and reimagine "feminine vision."[103] She aimed to "strengthen and animate," to "legitimize and dignify" women's voices and women's experiences.[104] So she began making pictures of flowers.

Launching her exploration of flowers from the striking series of flower photos that fashion photographer Irving Penn produced in the late 60s and early 70s, Lara's flower pictures engaged with metaphor, bodily presence, and "the gaze" from the start. In her translation of the photographic image to pastel drawing, silkscreen, and collage, she transforms Penn's steady camera lens and the penetrating male gaze that looks through it. Through metaphor and metamorphosis, through erring, abstracting, and animating, Lara's flowers become bodies. But they also refuse to let go of their identities as flowers. Like Frida Kahlo's still lifes, which were alternately championed and censored, which inspired both esteem and outrage, Lara's images destabilize any singular interpretation. And as it had done for Kahlo before her, the "seemingly bland" subject matter of flowers gives Lara license to explore something more profound, and to do so in a way that "bypasses" the male gaze.[105] Now flower, now body, now neither, now both, Lara's images pluralize looking. Her serial treatment—both her repeated translations of the same flowers in different mediums and her tactic of exhibiting her flower pictures as a group—becomes insistence; that which had been "hidden but not forgotten…can only come into focus

[103] Malvido, "No sólo queremos tener una visión femenina."
[104] Ramírez de Aguilar, "Magali Lara, Fanny Rabel y Nunik Sauret"; Malvido, "No sólo queremos tener una visión femenina."
[105] Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 133, 146.

now by blurring the field of representation."[106] The imaged object—the flower—is blurred, abstracted, and ontologically unstable, and as a result, female subjectivity comes into focus.

Making pictures of flowers in Mexico City circa 1985—especially after September 19, 1985—may have appeared unforgivably conventional. It may have appeared as though "nothing was going on in those paintings."[107] But if vision structures power, fostering a new way of looking is no "decorative or superficial" task.[108] In these images, Lara produces an iridescent sort of imagery—an imagery that refuses to adhere to any singular mode of viewing. Bodies, made present by both visual and extra-visual means, evoked through both likeness and unlikeness, resist the fixed, direct gaze and instead invite a different sort of gaze—one that is multifaceted, one that is female-oriented.

[106] Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," 223.
[107] Palacios, "Interview with Magali Lara," 146.
[108] Lara, "Autorretrato."

Conclusion

In a recent interview, Magali Lara explained, "For me, all of my work has to do with the possibility that visuality has, an ambiguity that never allows you certainty."[1] In her images, ambiguity and uncertainty abound. But so too does possibility.

Since 2013, Lara has been exploring how to represent uncertain futures. In a series of works entitled *El Futuro* (The Future, 2013–15), this exploration manifested in large-scale oil paintings, artist's books, etchings, and dozens of small gouaches that relied upon a series of black and blue and occasionally gold circles of varying sizes (e.g., figures 5.1–2). The circles are often squeezed or squished into oblong, imperfect shapes, or strung close together like beads on a chain, and they are built up out of swirling, spiraling, repetitive gestures. While she had begun exploring these circular forms in 2011, the artist locates the beginning of her investigation of them in relation to uncertain futures within a specific experience in 2013, where a sudden wave of panic overtook her vision: "I felt that a darkness surrounded me, that I couldn't distinguish the horizon…that black hole took up everything."[2] This circular, insatiable black hole became a way of articulating the unknowable nature of what lies ahead.

Yet, for Lara, the discrete, circular figures that populate the images that she started to make following this experience, and which constitute the series *El Futuro,* are not what these compositions are about. "The real theme is the white that's behind them," she explains.[3] In her

[1] Adriana Estrada Álvarez, *Magali Lara en su taller*, MP4, documentary (UAEM Facultad de Artes and Producciones Cuadro Negro, 2021). "Para mí, todo mi trabajo tiene que ver con la posibilidad que la visualidad tiene, una ambigüedad que nunca te permite una certeza."
[2] Magali Lara, "Obras: Tema - Futuro," personal website, Magali Lara, accessed March 17, 2022, http://www.magalilara.com.mx/?accion=tema&cat_id=35. "Sentí que una oscuridad me envolvía, que no podía distinguir el horizonte…ese hoyo negro ocupaba todo."
[3] Sonia Sierra, "Magali Lara lleva 'El futuro' a Indianilla," *El Universal*, March 7, 2016, sec. Espectáculos, Access World News – Historical and Current. "El tema real es el blanco que hay atrás."

oil paintings, that white is "a color that's very worked and moves with the light…there are things that appear and disappear."[4] Layers of creamy oil paint and shimmering varnishes glisten against glimpses of the luminous white of the primed canvas that lies beneath.[5] Here, the phenomenological uncertainty of her worked and re-worked white ground operates in dialogue with the interpretative uncertainty that drives her artistic practice. Beautiful and terrifying, iridescent and unstable, Lara's vision of the future is open to endless possibility.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the very ambiguities, uncertainties, and endless possibilities of Lara's artworks enable a type of political communication. In contradistinction to many of the practices that have defined political art in twentieth-century Mexico, her artworks do not address political issues in explicit or didactic ways. Rather, her artworks confront viewers on emotional and affective levels and, as a result, those viewers are compelled to engage with the subtly feminist content that undergirds the imagery. Through obsessive investigations of objects and spaces that she repeatedly pictures, Lara engenders an intimate relationship with her viewer. No longer addressing a general public but rather one of her intimates, she can broach topics such as female sexuality and eroticism, and interiority and inner life. Presenting confusing relationships between images and hand-scrawled snippets of ambivalent text, she slows her viewer down. They linger over her images, struggling to make sense of what they are seeing. Caught up in the process of looking, they become emotionally invested, and are lured into attending to domestic spaces and tasks that typically slide by unnoticed. In her choice to describe women's bodies obliquely—to avoid depicting them directly, but to nevertheless make them feel present—she generates space to discuss alternate means of representing those bodies. Their very

[4] Sierra. "Un color muy trabajado que con la luz se mueve…hay cosas que aparecen y desaparecen."
[5] Lara has mentioned that the layers of varnish were an important part of her painting process in this series. Conversation with author March 28, 2022.

status as not present creates an opportunity to capture a different sort of presence. Her images allow for the expression of the messy, physical realities of occupying a woman's body, including bodily processes like menstruation, but also the ways in which those physical experiences are inextricable from psychic ones. They destabilize the relationship between looking and knowing, allowing for expressions of female subjectivity that embrace contradiction, complexity, and evolution.

Ambiguity and uncertainty are integral to affective experiences. Neither a process that is completely conscious nor autonomic, neither completely active nor passive, affect allows for holding multiple possibilities in suspension.[6] This is where affect's political potential lies: its capacity to hold onto dissensus and a diversity of thought. Following philosopher Jacques Rancière and political theorist Chantal Mouffe, dissensus is a necessary and constitutive part of the political. Creating space for dissensus allows those with different political ideologies to disagree with one another without seeking to utterly annihilate the other side. It allows for each to recognize the legitimacy of others' opinions rather than dismissing them out of hand as inherently flawed or unacceptable.[7] In a society of consensus, there is no route to reimagine the system of dominant ideology; only through dissensus can that ideology be questioned, undermined, rethought, and remade.[8] Dissent will always exist. But as Mouffe points out, dissent is prone to erupt into violence when there are no existing channels for its expression.[9] Thus, establishing channels that acknowledge, enable, and perhaps even encourage dissensus can contribute to democratic and emancipatory political projects.

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[6] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 32; Brian Massumi and Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation*, no. 3 (October 2009): 12.
[7] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 20–21.
[8] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 48–49.
[9] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 21.

Lara's images, inspiring affecting experiences and motivated by "an ambiguity that never allows you certainty," enable dissensus.[10] They allow viewers to hold onto multiple points of view, and to be open to viewpoints that shift and change over time. Beds and lipstick prints and scissors acquire a variety of intimate associations as they accumulate over the course of Lara's serial investigations. The juxtapositions between text and image set meaning in motion, imbuing seemingly straightforward scenes of familiar, domestic interiors with uneasy sensations. Bathrooms appear simultaneously uninhabited and fully occupied by animated, body-like bathroom fixtures. Images of flowers flicker between still life and portraiture, evincing a plurality of meanings. Encouraging a variety of interpretations and opinions from the very start, Lara's images spark dialogue and deeper engagement rather than resistance.

This dissertation has proposed that Lara's artwork is political because it contributes to a feminist political project, and that its primary mode of contribution to that political project is making perceptible aspects of women's experience that, in 1970s and 80s Mexico City, had been hidden, ignored, or erased. Through the generation of affecting experiences, Lara's artwork pushes discussions that were relegated behind closed doors into the public sphere. Her images compel viewers to attend to aspects of women's lives that had been repeatedly rendered invisible, and they invite reconsiderations of entrenched ways of representing women's bodies and entrenched expectations about women's behavior. Accounting for art's affective power—the affecting qualities of art together with affect's power to effect change—allows for a recuperation of the processes that Lara's artworks set into motion as political acts.

But accounting for art's affective power opens up possibilities beyond the renegotiation of visibility in the here and now. One of art's strengths is that it can make visually manifest

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[10] Estrada Álvarez, *Magali Lara en su taller*.

content that lies outside of our present reality. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz observes that social and political change depend upon "the creation of new frameworks, new questions, new concepts by which social change can move beyond the horizon of the present."[11] She suggests that theory is crucial for these processes of creation. But art, too, can contribute to such processes. Art isn't beholden to the present. It can merge our present reality with the fictional and the fantastical. It can help to realize theoretical concepts by making those concepts easier to envision. If, as Grosz writes, "The goal of every radical politics" is "a future different from the present," art can contribute towards helping viewers to conceptualize and thereby actualize that other future.[12]

The swirling black hole of Lara's vision of the future (figure 5.3) points to the completely unknowable possibility of what lies ahead. Its enormous scale—the canvas more than eight feet tall—threatens to engulf the viewer. As they approach, it takes over their vision. Its endless depth and circular, cyclical nature combine with the uncertainty and instability of looking that unfolds within the white background in order to suggest a "moment of doubting, of dreaming, of imagining."[13] The looming darkness of an uncertain future can be paralyzing, but its uncertainty also contains the possibility of something profoundly different than our bleak present. Something art can help us to envision.

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[11] Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Feminist Theory: The Dreams for New Knowledges," in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck, Breaking Feminist Waves (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.
[12] Grosz, 15.
[13] Magali Lara, *La mirada oblicua* (Mexico City: Casa del Lago Juan José Arreola, Centro Cultural Universitario UNAM, 2014). "Momento de dudar, de soñar, de imaginar."

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