A Wall of One’s Own: 
Latinas Reclaiming Spaces, Subverting Economies, Empowering Communities

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Abstract

This article analyzes issues of gender, space, and ethnicity in three different pieces: Coco Fusco’s performance A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America (2006), the mural painting Latino America (1974) by the Las Mujeres Muralistas group, and the Venas de la Mujer installation (1976) at the LA Women’s Building by the Las Chicanas group. Though created in two different temporal contexts, the three pieces are connected by Virginia Woolf’s idea of the space as “room of one’s own,” and thus share an understanding of the complexity of issues, such as female creativity, the portrayal of/appropriation by women of spaces traditionally considered to be masculine, and the ephemerality of certain artistic media. By studying the three pieces in their geographical, social, and artistic context, I intend to demonstrate that issues denounced by the Chicano Civil Rights Movement (also known as El Movimiento) and the Feminist Movement in the 1970s are still unresolved in 21st century America.

Keywords: Coco Fusco, Las Mujeres Muralistas, Venas de la Mujer, space, gender, Latinas.

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Fifty years after the promise of the Long Sixties, categories essential to the Civil Rights Movement such as gender or ethnicity, seem to be more contested and as pertinent as ever in contemporary America. Performances by Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco, while clearly rooted in the 21st century, can be illuminated by their comparison to pieces from the 1970s: at a time when both a feminist and a Latino consciousness were being created, these pieces touch upon similar topics, share a common political intent, are equally affected by and dependent on issues of ephemerality, and are deeply concerned with the portrayal and essence of femininity and Latinidad. In the following pages, I intend to analyze Coco Fusco’s A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America (2006) and its connections to the work of two groups of women artists from the 1970s: Las Mujeres Muralistas, working in San Francisco, and the collaborative art installation Venas de la Mujer, exhibited in the Los Angeles Woman’s Building in 1976. Virginia Woolf’s 1929 “A Room of One’s Own,” an instigation for women to find spaces of their own for creativity, is central to Fusco’s piece, and also resonates in the media.

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1 This article was written as part of the research conducted for the Project “Troubling Houses: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature” (FFI2017–82692–P), MINECO/AEI/FEDER, UE), funded by the Spanish Government and the European Union.
(walls) and venues chosen by other Latina artists, as all of them navigate issues of representativity, gender, ethnicity, the creation of art, and its permanence in their communities.

Spectators attending Fusco’s performance piece *A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006) may be surprised by her appearance in military gear and her ode, before the start of what looks like a military briefing, to the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, who is pronounced as a model of emancipated, empowered womanhood in a “loving lyrical tribute ... that sounds like an early American religion hymn” (Muñoz 137). While the association of female independence and military discipline is in itself problematic, it is in the third section of the performance that the “room” of one’s own in the title becomes apparent. This room is not a home or a domestic space, but an interrogation room where a male prisoner is being tortured by a woman: the ironic undertones of the title, thus, refer not only to the room itself, but also to ideas of “owning” the space and to what the “power” of women in such a room could be.

Fusco’s piece came out a couple of years after photographs and videos of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo surfaced, showing female soldiers as interrogators and perpetrators of violence, specifically using sexual harassment on Muslim men. The piece is, therefore, a response to the concerns of uncomfortable viewers (including Fusco, who was disturbed by such images), trying to reconcile the “empowerment” of women in the military with the fact that said empowerment is happening in spaces of torture. For Fusco, the images from those prisons go against the long-standing feminist tenet of women as victims (Beckman 127), not agents, of violence.

The demands that Woolf puts forward in her seminal piece “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), such as female empowerment through economic independence and a space one could claim one’s own, are displaced by Fusco: from a tranquil setting, where women could create art, to a claustrophobic setting of torture and violence, where women are seen as destructive, following orders and using their femininity as a weapon to extract information from male prisoners, using sexual innuendos as “special tactics by female interrogators” (*A Room* 144). Fusco presents herself to the audience in military attire, trying to explain to her audience the rationale behind the use of “women’s weapons” to interrogate suspects. The piece adopts the setting of a press conference, and uses familiar formats (slides, video) and an argumentative rhetoric, all of which tries to portray normalcy and reminds the audience of the civilized setting of a lecture hall. The audience is informed that, “At the onset of the new millennium, American women finally have what they need to demonstrate their prowess” since “the War on Terror offers an unprecedented opportunity for the women of this great country [America]” (*A Room* 143). Spectators watch the interrogation scenes through a simulated CCTV, a technology that guarantees safety and distance from the interrogation room, while exploiting the voyeuristic, spectacle-like quality of torture by broadcasting what is happening inside the room. The domains of private and public, which have dominated much of the discourse about gender inequality, are thus questioned alongside the idea of “empowerment” they suggest. Fusco explicitly reminds the audience of how it was “the great British writer Virginia Woolf who argued that every woman had to have a room of her own in order to manifest her strengths” (*A Room* 142). However, in her performance, empowerment seems to be equated with violence and harassment, and the female “strengths” (*A Room* 142), the
“special tactics” mentioned above, rely on an explicitly sexual interpretation of femininity that Fusco has described as “the phenomenon of instrumentalized female sexual violence” (“Artist’s Statement” 139) with interrogators using tactics that go “from sexually inflected insults all the way to stripping down to sexy lingerie under the uniforms and rubbing their genitals against these men” (“Operation Atropos” 83). Fusco acknowledges that there are no pictures of women doing this, but there are testimonies both by women interrogators who were party to such events or by those who witnessed them: Fusco’s intention is, then, to capture the ephemeral use of space by performing “this material, which is politically volatile, but also dramatically powerful” (“Operation Atropos” 83).

From the room as a private space of liberation and creativity imagined by Woolf, where men and distractions were barred, Fusco takes us to a CCTV space of exposure and shame, where the woman is an agent, but only by abusing men, exerting “vicarious power” by following orders, with the surveillance cameras recreating what Fusco recognizes as a “theater of cruelty,” following Stephen Eisenman’s book The Abu Ghraib Effect2 (Copeland 5). The female soldier is shown invading the personal space of the prisoners, in what can only be read as a very disturbing idea of the “empowerment” of women in what Fusco calls the “New America,” but also performing, i.e. the piece is placing itself in a “mass cultural tradition of theatricality and display” (Copeland 5). Fusco has stated that while torture is “indeed painfully real,” it is the elements of theatricality and performance in it that produce results, emphasizing how a large number of interrogators in the military have dramatic performance backgrounds (Fusco and Ritz 154). In real-world interrogation rooms, Fusco and Mike Ritz explain, “much thought is given to items (props) within the room, lighting, and sound to create an atmosphere for the source that is conductive to talking” (156). In her performance, Fusco describes these spaces as “simple rooms, furnished with nothing more than a desk and a couple of chairs ... sanctorum of liberty, [where] American women are using their minds and their charms to save American lives” (A Room 143). The artist is clearly creating a comparison between Woolf’s ideal room as a space conductive to creativity, a space that isolates women from the ever-distracting realities of the domestic world, and the artificial setting of the interrogation chamber, where a very different kind of “narrative” is created in the interaction between interrogator and prisoner. By making the interrogator be female, Fusco is, on the one hand, replicating the contemporary reality of the “disproportionately high number of women involved in areas of the military that are not combat related ... [such as] intelligence” (“Operation Atropos” 83), but also emphasizing how, even in the military, the strengths that women can act out are highly sexualized, with “sexual harassment as a particularly gendered and culturally specific strategy designed to break Muslim men” (“Operation Atropos” 83).

Fusco’s interest in performing this specific appropriation of space addresses issues of both gender and ethnic representation in a very specific geographical setting. As she stated at the end of a Q&A session for a presentation of her film Operation Atropos (2006) at Exeter University, commenting on her training with US Army interrogators to prepare for A Room of One’s Own, “I

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2 Fusco is adapting the term from the title of one of the essays, “Stages of Cruelty,” included in Eisenman’s book.
am not just a woman and a minority, I’m also an American. And this is what it means to be an American for me at this point in time: to look at this dilemma and to try and understand it” (“Operation Atropos” 92). Fusco’s belief in an America that integrates gender and ethnicity echoes previous artistic efforts to define Latinas as creators in their communities and in the country as a whole. I would, therefore, like to follow my analysis of space, economy, and power by reflecting on two groups of women artists, who were also concerned with the idea of one’s own space as a creative venue, and with the connections between the artist and the community (both in a local, national, and transnational sense). I will be using the work of two different groups of artists working in the 1970s: Las Mujeres Muralistas and the artists who were part of the exhibition *Venas de la Mujer*. Both groups were working in the Los Angeles/San Francisco area and used visual arts (in the shape of mural painting or installation pieces) to appropriate different spaces (walls or art centers), spaces associated with the public, masculine sphere, so as to provide alternative visual representations of women.

The group of artists known as Las Mujeres Muralistas first appeared in public in 1974, when they were commissioned by Mission Model Cities to represent Latinas/os in a mural in the Mission District. One of the most important visual media employed by Latinas/os in the 1970s, so much as to be labelled “a mural movement” (Zetterman 7), walls served a number of different functions in the community: first, they provided much-needed color and artistic value to spaces and neighborhoods which had been conceived of as utilitarian and were often not backed up by sophisticated architectural projects or urban planners. Secondly, their audience were the inhabitants of the community, not outsiders or groups from other parts of the city (as is the case nowadays with the murals in the Mission District being toured as tourist attractions). Finally, and because these walls were painted by members of the community for members of the community, they could breach topics not encountered in other (public or private) spaces of artistic representation. The commissioned piece, *Latino America*, which no longer exists—as Cary Cordova points out, this was “a fate common to many exterior murals: the building owners whitewashed the painting away in the 1980s” (*Heart* 274)—was painted on the walls of Mission and 25th Street. The initial group of four professionally trained artists and art school graduates (Patricia Rodriguez, Graciela Carrillo, Consuelo Mendez, and Irene Perez, assisted by Xochitl Nevel-Guerrero, Ester Hernandez, Miriam Olivas, and Tuti Rodriguez) asked for the cooperation

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3 As Zetterman indicates, although Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Francisco, working in the Mission District, were the best-known group, there were other similar groups: “Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Diego, Las Mujeres Muralistas of del [sic.] Valle of Fresno, and Mujeres in the Grupo de Santa Ana” (7).

4 A number of titles have been suggested for this piece, which appears named differently in various articles and studies. Though *Latino America* is the name that appears in the statement accompanying the inauguration of the piece, scholars often use the term “Latinoamérica” or “Panamerica.” Cordova addresses the underlying meanings in each of these latter terms, with the first indicating the full array of countries included in what is understood as Latin America (which does not include the United States), and the second implying a transhemispheric quality that comprises both Americas, North and South. I will side with Cordova in using the original name, *Latino America*, not only because it was the one originally used by the authors, but also because its use (without the accent) sends a strong political message about the redefinition of Latinas/os in the United States, “suggesting how Latinos are reinventing America as a nation, as well as articulating a larger kinship to the Americas” (*Heart* 294).

5 For an in-depth analysis of the activism of Carrillo, Pérez and Rodriguez, see Cordova (2005).
of women artists from Venezuela and Puerto Rico in an attempt to create a piece that was representative not only of the Latino US experience, but also of the whole of “latinoamérica” as its name suggested. The first mural created as a joint effort by a group of US-Latinas, Latino America could of course be analyzed as part of the rich tradition of mural painting, first defined by Diego Rivera, but with specific female characteristics that I will analyze later. Most of the important murals by Las Mujeres Muralistas were painted in the Mission District (a total of eleven murals) and became, for a while, part of the vibrant dialogue in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement about the definition of the role of the Latino community in the United States. The Mission District, described by Cordova as “a microcosm of Latin America” (Heart 270), was at the time starting to feel the effects of an early process of gentrification, something that “mobilized activists and artists on many fronts” (Heart 270). Cordova argues that the murals transformed the District both physically and psychically, and defined the neighborhood. Similarly, the transformation of walls into canvases protected older buildings “that might otherwise topple to development interests outside the community, or fall victim to internalized destruction such as graffiti” (Cordova, “Hombres y Mujeres” 360).

In the 1970s, gentrification was not, however, the only threat to these communities. There was a real sense of danger looming over the Latino community and California became the stage for many a demonstration organized by the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War, denouncing the disproportionate number of Chicanos involved in the conflict. As Judith Baca states, it was that specific climate that made many artists “step out of our studies and ... paint our first murals. It was a logical move ... by making statements more articulate than graffiti we could reach the community with our murals” (“Judy Baca” 69). California seemed, in this sense, to be the perfect place for the conjunction of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement (El Movimiento) and the Feminist Movement.

Mural painting is in itself a counter-discourse to the economy of the art world. Murals cannot be “owned” in the traditional sense, they cannot be collected and, even when ownership can be claimed, the access to the pieces is rarely “limited or controlled by the owner” (Baca, “Judy Baca” 70). Many muralists do not even consider themselves to be creating something that can be part of the art market; instead, they see their creations “apart from financial incentives, reflecting ... [their] desire ... to work in their communities and bring art to the people” (Cordova, Heart 279). The collaborative effort in the creation of a mural “confuse[s] an art world primarily concerned with crediting and marketing the individual creative genius” (Baca, “Judy Baca” 70). Also, the communal effort defies the traditional economic forces of art, in that the community becomes the “trustee,” responsible for the protection and survival of the piece. As Baca states, with the murals in the Mission District, “the community always had the final word because in every case the mural was left in the community’s trust for protection” (“Judy Baca” 71). This fact alone is something that raises issues of ephemerality and conservancy, issues that I will analyze later in my discussion of performances and installations. Aware of the walls being created by people for their people, artists would, even in their use of color, go against the taste of other parts of the city and other communities, turning images themselves into a political act of reinforcement.
for the community. Thus, Baca comments on how murals, painted in what was considered to be “Mexican colors,” would come across as “violent” by “Anglo viewers with tastes trained to subtler palates” (“Judy Baca” 70).

The appropriation or redefinition of public spaces (i.e. walls) by Las Mujeres Muralistas was, in general, seen by their community (the primary audience for the murals) in positive terms and, in the recollections of most of these women, the community was a supportive force. With their cohesive, positive message, their murals “seemed to heal some of the community’s wounds” (Rodriguez 85). As was the case with male muralists when revealing their own work, there were statements that provided context for the work, but these women’s statements tended to be much briefer. The statement for Latino America, signed by all four main authors (Carrillo, Mendez, Perez, and Rodriguez), clearly identified the mural as being a feminist vision, both in relation to its context and its creation. It emphasized that women, although not often considered to have the potential to be “public” artists, can in fact work at a man’s level (specifically, with mural art, they may engage in physical work, such as putting scaffolding together and climbing to paint). The four artists also stated that the work went beyond the level of individualism and entered the level of the collective, with an emphasis on collaboration, ultimately explaining how there was “no leader, ... no director” (Rodriguez, qtd. in Cordova, Heart 293), something that was an inspiration to women seeing “how they worked, how they collaborated, together” (Cordova, Heart 291). The statement for Latino America addresses the reality of women muralists: they were often not being supported by men (mural artists themselves) in the community, who thought that they were appropriating a kind of art which was suitable, even if just for its physicality, only for men.

Apart from appropriating a “masculine” medium and public space, most criticism towards Las Mujeres Muralistas suggested that their art was not political enough. Most murals painted by men in the Mission District presented themes that were pertinent to the Chicano and Latino experience from a male point of view, and looked into the past to pay homage to male Mexican muralists. Thus, while many of the men painters were “Vietnam veterans [and] their murals tended to be gloomy and filled with war scenes, guns and violence ... the women [were criticized] for being too apolitical and optimistic” (Albayrak). However, the celebration of beauty in life in the murals by Las Mujeres Muralistas, considered by some to be “feminine,” reflected the preoccupations of the community, albeit in a different way. Where “the guys” were painting political leaders and military heroes, Las Mujeres Muralistas and similar groups of female artists celebrated everyday women as the basis of community life, or reinterpreted traditional Mexican and Latino female myths6 in a contemporary setting, honoring real women, endowing them with mythical elements, and trying to provide a positive image of Latino communities and cultures. Cordova disagrees with what she sees as a myopic reading of the work of Las Mujeres Muralistas, a reading that follows “a pan-American aesthetic, where highly visible images of women and emphasis on

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6 For more on female presence in communal life, see Preserve Our Heritage (1977) by Cecilia de la Torre, Julieta García, Yolanda M. López and Las Mujeres Muralistas, and Women Hold Up Half the Sky (1975) by Celia Rodriguez, Irma Lerma Barbosa, Antonia Mendoza, Rosalina Balaciosos and Barbara Desmangles. Both murals are in the Chicano Park in San Diego.
ceremony, celebration, caretaking, harvest and a continental terrain worked towards the creation of a new mythology” void of any political intent (Heart 295). As María Ochoa asserts, these readings were produced by a social context where “promoting the vernacular of people’s lives was not considered political, even though this representation transgressed the images produced for the nation” (154). To Cordova, however, the work by Las Mujeres Muralistas was not at all “escapist of political content,” as it has been traditionally interpreted, but rather “grounded on the overriding political discourses that were shaping the community’s identity” ("Hombres y Mujeres” 366). Also, as Baca states, all early Chicano murals were indeed of a political nature since “one could not take a public wall and paint about Chicano culture in an Anglo-dominated city without its being a political act” (“Judy Baca” 70). Latino America, a commissioned work of art, did have to comply with certain requirements by the commissioner, Mission Model Cities, who explicitly stated not wanting “blood or guts or revolutionary guns” (Cordova, Heart 306). The request was also in line with the group’s larger ideas about what was representative of quotidian life and the community as political: the representation of ordinary women in their everyday life, as opposed to larger-than-life representations of leaders or war scenes in other murals, served a number of deeply political purposes, such as the creation of a community and even the subversive nature of local economies in a globalized setting. In Latino America, for example, the portrayal of indigenous and mestiza/o cultures served both to celebrate the homelands of the different local sub-communities, and also to celebrate “the survival of various cultures in spite of Spanish colonialism,” uniting the different national groups in a “Third World” coalition (Cordova, Heart 297). Other murals, such as Para el Mercado (24th Street/South Van Ness), were peopled by women (caretakers, harvesters, buyers, and sellers) celebrating local economy based on agriculture, while serving as an ad for “Paco’s Tacos,” a block away from a McDonald’s, which produced an interesting contrast between activities connected to local markets and the capitalist domination of fast food chains. Similarly, the parallelism that Latino America crafted between the Indian peasants in Latin America and the inner city poor in the United States denounced similar inequalities in class and economic status in a transnational world, celebrating (or suggesting) local, “feminine” economies as an alternative, using “Latin American indigenous images to assert strategies for survival in the US” (Cordova, Heart 373).

One last point raised by the analysis of the work Las Mujeres Muralistas created as a group is that, as many other murals of the time, they no longer exist. Connected to the apparently innocuous content of the art (which was, however, deeply political), Cordova signals how “street murals often steer[ed] away from explicit controversy, so as not to provoke vandals” (Cordova, “Hombres y Mujeres” 369). This is something that might keep the art from being more obviously political than other paintings which have indeed survived, such as the Homage to Siqueiros (1974) mural inside the Bank of America branch in the Mission District, also produced at the time Las Mujeres Muralistas were painting. Intended as a specifically political mural, Homage to Siqueiros (painted by local artists Jesús “Chuy” Campuzano, Luis Cortázar, and Michael Rios, who called themselves “Los tres muralistas”) has been analyzed as overtly political, both in what is explicitly represented (i.e., the words by organizer César Chávez, “Our sweat and our blood
have fallen on this land to make other men rich”) and in what is not (e.g., a reference to the Symbionese Liberation Army that was in the original sketches, but was finally not painted at the commissioner’s request). However radical it may seem for Homage to Siqueiros to be inside a bank, because of its explicit opposition to capitalism, a mural in a private space (and specifically in a financial institution, as the mural is insured for over a million dollars) would certainly be better protected from the weather, erosion and vandalism than a painting on a street wall. Cordova argues that quite often viewers (and also critics) have seen the difference in how murals, such as Norte America, had to be less political to be preserved as “a product of gender [rather] than physical context” (Heart 305). The question of ephemerality is one that I will also cover in my analysis of Venas de la Mujer, as ephemerality stands in opposition to the over-generalization of grand gestures or political statements, associated with the masculine (therefore, worthy of being preserved and remembered in their epic quality), and in line with the simple, quotidian, domestic life, associated with the feminine (and not deemed worthy of specific celebration or remembrance).

The only surviving painting by Las Mujeres Muralistas, Exotic Fantasy World (24th Street Minipark), could be considered to be a testament to this group as creators of what Sidney Plotkin calls “enclave consciousness” (7), a “we-feeling” (15) of solidarity against an external force threatening the community. As Karen May Davalos asserts, in the process of creating the murals, Las Mujeres Muralistas with “their rigorous physical activity challenged the norm of the passive, weak and demure Chicana ... [and] visually enter[ed] the actual work of women into public discourse” (64). There are, however, issues of ethnicity running along issues of gender here. As will be the case with the other collective I will analyze later, and due to issues of double discrimination also in the artistic world, Chicana artists were often left out of shows organized by Anglo women, but also out of exhibitions by Chicano artists. Wesley Pulckka mentions the exhibition First Front: Vanguard of the Chicano Movement in Northern California (1994), as an example of celebrating the protest art of the 1960s and the 1970s in which female artists were not included. Even more, in Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement by Eva Sperling Cockcroft. John Pitman Weber and James Cockcroft, Para el Mercado is wrongly attributed to a male muralist, not to Las Mujeres Muralistas. Despite the tendency in the past, now being corrected by a number of Latina/o historians and arts scholars, to underestimate female artistic possibilities, in Las Mujeres Muralistas’ statement for Latino America we can find echoes of the artistic independence demanded by Woolf: “Throughout history there have been very few women who have figured in art. What you see before your eyes is proof that women, too, can work at this level. That we can put together scaffolding and climb it” (Cordova, “Hombres y Mujeres” 365). It is only in this context of female independence connected with the community that the work of Las Mujeres Muralistas can be fairly assessed: as a form of neighborhood activism, as a “natural defense against forces that work to flatten places into spaces and to dissolve communities into aggregates of individual citizens” (DeLeon 139).

Let us turn our attention briefly to another collaborative work by Latinas: the exhibition Venas de la Mujer by the self-named group “Las Chicanas” (Judy Baca, Isabel Castro, Judith
This collaborative art installation was shown in the LA Woman’s Building from September 16th to October 15th, 1976. Judith Baca explains how this was “one of the first times women exhibited together as Chicanas, and within the venue of a feminist situation” (“Interview”). As is often the case with installations (and, as argued earlier, with murals such as the ones painted by Las Mujeres Muralistas), the ephemeral quality of the work and the problems associated with recognition and value have resulted in nothing being left of the exhibition but fragmentary evidence—a few photographs, a short interview (of less than ten minutes) with the artists, where parts of only some of the installations are visible, and one written description.

In Venas de la Mujer, the different artists placed themselves within the context of an exhibition gallery and in the crossroads that Latina women were often forced to inhabit at the time: between Chicano sexism and Anglo dominance. **Venas de la Mujer** as an art show not only appropriated male-dominated media, but the Las Chicanas group also chose a space (the LA Woman’s Building) that went against the androcentric bias of most art venues, thus representing the appropriation of yet another public space (the art center) by women. Michele Moravec and Sondra Hale analyze what they call the “erasure” of **Venas de la Mujer** as compared to other significant feminist works, such as Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979). While the Woman’s Building has historically included few names and exhibitions by women of color, and even if, as Zetterman affirms, there are “several documented accounts of racism among white feminists against non-white feminists” (6), it was still a more welcoming venue than most, considering the kind of art that the Las Chicanas group was creating. In areas like Los Angeles, however, political intention was only one of the many elements that differentiated Anglo American from Chicana art. Zetterman mentions how the different audiences, the different economic circumstances of the artists, and the “access to financial support and the geographical division of the city, that limited the mobility of Chicana/o artists, resulted in a spatial division of their art scenes, with the feminist Anglo American art scene located in western Los Angeles and the Chicana/o art scene concentrated to the east of Los Angeles River” (7). The **Venas de la Mujer** exhibition intended to address precisely that divide and the exclusion of Chicana artists from wider artistic circles, while also denouncing “the gender imbalance and patriarchy within Chicano artist groups” (Davalos 28). One of the members of the Las Chicanas group, Judy Baca, had at the time of the exhibition a long history of noticing how most activities in the Woman’s Building were attended by white women, and felt at the time tensions having to do with issues of gender within her own community, whereby she was asked to decide on just one side of her identity: “people kept saying, You’re woman first! And you are Latina second! Right? And in the movimiento it was, You’re Latino first, and you’re a woman second!” (“Interview”). This placed Chicana artists in a situation where they had to “respond to shifting needs and interests, hoping to

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7 The Woman’s Building in Los Angeles first opened its doors in 1973. Originally headquartered at 743 S. Grand View Street, it was relocated in 1975 to the 1914 Beaux Arts building at 1727 N. Spring Street. A non-profit arts and education center closely connected to the Women’s Movement, the Woman’s Building offered an experimental space for women artists to display their work outside traditional, male-dominated institutions. The gallery and performance space closed in 1991.
produce visual representations that related to a social position unrepresented in the larger feminist art movement of the 1970s” (McKelligan 111). The announcement for the exhibition was a photograph of the artists, each representing a myth associated with Mexican women (La Llorona, La Catrina, Malintzin, La Pachuca, or La Adelita). It, thus, exemplified the reinterpretation and subversion of traditional, reductive myths of Chicana feminine identity, and construed the symbolic empowerment of the artists and their creations through specifically Latina iconography as a means of contesting patriarchy and racism.

In the individual installations, the domestic, the economic, the social and the political were brought together, questioning the gender division of public and private spheres and the different economies associated with each of them. Hernandez’s altar piece played on what Amalia Mesa-Bains has called “Domesticana,” i.e. the use of “techniques of subversion through play with traditional imagery and cultural material” (160). In other words, the association of altars with femininity unveils the power dynamics behind traditional gender divisions, while the public display of the altar undermines its private status as a symbol of domestic economy. A complementary piece by Baca, a vanity table with a mirror where she performed her transformation into a streetwise Pachuca, also played on the ideas of altars and domesticity that Hernandez’s piece represented. Both works enacted the transition of women from their private space and selves into the public space and identity.

The piece by Isabel Castro showed Chicano Movement posters graffitied by the artist with messages affirming the importance of women in the community, while Baca’s mural had tags by female members as the center of the piece. Both artists countered the official, predominantly male discourse of Chicanismo at the time by appropriating materials (graffiti paint) and techniques (tagging as a way of demarcating territory) associated with the masculine. In them, women symbolically reclaimed the walls and transcended their often-secondary role in the movement, even in its problematic offshoot: gang culture. Olga Muñiz’s piece also played on the ideas of public and private economies, with the shadow of a seamstress at work. Muñiz denounced submerged economy in sweatshops and the false entrance of women in the public space of the workforce, and underscored the promise of “a room” that is little more than a prison cell, where illegal work conditions sustain a capitalist and alienating economy.

In all their variety, the individual pieces come together in their understanding of women as “veins” in the community, giving vitality to it. Also, the different ways of denouncing invisibility, submission, marginality, and displacement attest to the centrality of women in the community, in a way that mirrors the work of Las Mujeres Muralistas. Similarly, the use of performance

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8 In Chico Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition, Gaspar de Alba analyzes the curatorial practices in the CARA (Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation) exhibition, which toured a number of major US cities between 1990 and 1993. While initial plans for the exhibition included Mexico City and Madrid, problems with funding and inclusiveness limited the number of venues. Considered to be one of the major exhibitions about Chicana/o art in mainstream art circles, Gaspar de Alba analyzes how there were approximately twice as many Chicanos participating in the show, and how some of the collectives were shown in small showcases that modeled domestic home altars, a display often associated with the feminine and with domesticana as a genre. Gaspar de Alba reflects on how this could be problematically interpreted as “male appropriation of a space and a discourse traditionally manipulated by women” (70).
(specifically in Baca’s piece) as a medium also anticipates Fusco’s artistic weapon of choice: the barriers between the public and the private are blurred in the performative act (of transformation in Baca’s case; of interrogation in Fusco’s), an act which brings private rooms and spaces charged with hypersexualized violence associated with views of femininity in the public sphere.

Recent political and social events in the United States are forcing us to reassess the long-term sustainability of political victories gained from the Civil Rights Movement, when it comes to categories such as gender or ethnicity. Ideally, the optimistic, positive work by Las Mujeres Muralistas, and the more aggressive and explicit Venas de la Mujer exhibition (both produced four decades ago), when compared to Fusco’s ironic piece (produced a decade ago), should signal the advancement of women in society, as it comes to the natural uses of public space by women (beyond ideas of “appropriation” of it), and to the economic independence and empowerment of women both as individuals and as a collective group. However, A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America unveils with its unique, ironic voice the distressing truth that many of the rights that women, and specifically Latinas, were negotiating in the 1970s may still be unresolved for a large number of women. By questioning where our own rooms are, what they stand for, and how complicated the meanings of women’s power and independence are when they enable women to become torturers, Fusco recognizes that the real meaning of a room of one’s own is open for debate. At the same time, she denounces how the economic and spatial independence provided by such a room may still be an unattainable dream for many women in what Fusco calls the “New America.”

Works Cited


---. *Operation Atropos*. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2006.


