

Imagining the cyborg in Náhuatl: Reading the videos of Pola Weiss through Haraway's Manifesto for Cyborgs

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By 1985, when Donna Haraway's essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s," presented the cyborg as a hybrid between organism and machine and an alternative model of feminine subjectivity, the Mexican independent media producer Pola Weiss had been challenging normative female experiences and relations between self and technology through her video work for nearly a decade. In this article, I propose to explore Weiss's work through the lens of Haraway's in order to collaborate with recent efforts to locate Weiss's practice more meaningfully in the histories of media arts. By placing particular attention on Weiss's conceptualization of her camera as a hybrid coupling between organism and machine, I use Haraway's Manifesto for Cyborgs to suggest a frame in which to understand Weiss's practice as critique of the dominant intellectual traditions and conventions of representation that have produced and reproduced hierarchies of race, class, sex, and gender difference in Mexico. In doing so, I also explore how Weiss's experiments with televisual images challenged normative female experiences and relations between self and technology. Ultimately, in proposing Haraway's work as a vehicle through which to understand the work of Weiss, I also seek to find affinities between the two women as they inhabited parallel worlds and shared similar concerns.

Introduction

In the mid 1970s, when the Mexican television industry began to incorporate video as a broadcasting technology and video art was developing as a new artistic medium in the country, Pola Weiss began to experiment with video technology to propose new ways of thinking about televisual images and broadcasting. In 1978, she declared herself to be a teleasta, a producer of experimental televisual images (Weiss, 1978b), and from then until she took her own life in 1990, she produced a series of television programs and videos in which she experimented with live dance performance, visual poetry, music, and visual effects. She conceived each of her videos as an act of giving birth, and her camera as her daughter—her *escuincla* (from the Náhuatl word for daughter) (Mendiola and Moreno, 1999). By using the video camera as an extension of her body and adopting television broadcasting as a conceptual model to reach audiences outside of the art world circuits, Weiss developed a unique approach to video. She combined the predominant articulation of video art as a medium of self-knowledge (Krauss, 1976, pp. 50–64) with a concern for exploring video's relation to television broadcasting and the medium's aesthetic and technical qualities (Hernández et al, 2014, p. 15). Through this approach, Weiss sought to break with the media border—the separation between real experience and the reality structured by a medium (Spielmann, 2008, pp. 2–6)—in order to interpellate critical and embodied viewers (Garibay, 1984). Much like her contemporaries, including the US-based, Japanese-born artist Shigeko Kubota, Weiss was attracted to video because of its lack of history, which, as Midori Yoshimoto (2005, p. 187) has described, afforded many 1970s female artists a clean slate, allowing them to launch their careers without the burden of an existing male tradition or established categories and genres. Like Kubota, Weiss invented her own categories to explain her practice and self, which overflowed existing frameworks.

During her lifetime, Weiss participated in various international exhibitions in venues across Europe and the Americas (Torres, Exposiciones, 2013), and developed connections with several video artists, including Kubota (Fernández, 2005, pp. 16–17; Kubota, 1979). Despite these achievements, her work is relatively unknown both in Mexico and abroad. It has been only recently, in the context of the bequest of her personal archives to the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City, that various scholars have turned their attention to her work (Aceves, 2014; Giunta, 2013; Eder, 2010;

Hernández et al, 2014). In this article, I propose to explore Weiss's work through the lens of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (2000, pp. 291-324, hereafter *Manifesto for Cyborgs*), in order to collaborate with efforts to locate Weiss's practice more meaningfully in the histories of media arts. By placing particular attention on Weiss's conceptualisation of her camera as a hybrid coupling between organism and machine, I use Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs* to suggest a frame through which to understand Weiss's practice as critique of dominant intellectual traditions and conventions of representation that have produced and reproduced hierarchies of race, class, sex, and gender difference in Mexico. In doing so, I also explore how Weiss's experiments with televisual images challenged normative female experiences and relations between self and technology. By providing a close reading of Weiss's embodied relation to her video camera, I suggest how she metaphorically transformed her creative process into an act of copulation with her escuincla, something akin to what Donna Haraway would label cyborg sex—couplings between organism and machine that transgressed any previous form of intimacy (Haraway, 2000, p. 292). For Haraway, the cyborg was a hybrid between organism and machine, "a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (2000, p. 291). As a critique of techno-scientific discourses, one of the central objectives of Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs* is a call for a broader political project aimed at transgressing boundaries and undoing the dualisms and essentialisms in dominant intellectual and cultural traditions that have dictated the construction of hierarchies of difference. Following Haraway's call, I discuss how Weiss's act of naming her camera an escuincla and using it as a prosthetic to extend the vision of her white, middle-class female body could also be read as an act that speaks to an interest in undoing longstanding colonial racial and class hierarchies present in Latin American societies. The word escuincla, from the Náhuatl *itzcuintli* (a dog without hair, or a child) is commonly used in colloquial Mexican Spanish as pejorative term to refer to an indigenous or dark-skinned female street beggar or as shorthand for nuisance. As I will explain, Weiss's use of her escuincla as an extension of her own body was one of the strategies she used to break the media border, one that metaphorically allowed the Other to see and be seen. However, like any other attempt at representing or speaking for the Other (Spivak, 1988), Weiss's approach was not free from contradictions. Weiss's conceptualisation of her camera as her escuincla was an oppositional, ironical, and paradoxical strategy—not unlike that in Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs*—through which Weiss challenged normative female experiences by developing a hybrid between herself, her camera, and the Other (both the object of representation and the indigenous Other).

In the context of the 30-year anniversary of the publication of Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, my concern in this article is also to find "lines of force and affinity" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 4) between Weiss's work and Haraway's manifesto. While the trope of the cyborg is present in Latin American cultural production and, following Haraway's conceptualisation, has been used as a lens through which to analyse the cultural production of diverse Latin American artists (Brown, 2010; Arboleda, 2014), by proposing to seek lines of correspondence between Haraway and Weiss, I explore how they inhabited parallel worlds and engaged with similar problems. I endeavour to collaborate in reconciling tensions and boundary concerns within distinct intellectual geographies while simultaneously opening up the repertoire of female figurations that emerged in the late twentieth century—or, in Haraway's words, to explore "simultaneous breakdowns that crack the matrices of domination in order to open up geometric possibilities" (2000, p. 311). The objective is not, however, to position Weiss as *avant la lettre* in relation to any of the academic discourses to which the *Manifesto for Cyborgs* has given rise or to the manifesto itself. Rather, the purpose, in Chela Sandoval's terms, is to collaborate with projects that seek to end academic apartheid (2000, p. 3) by exploring how Haraway's contemporaries explored relations between self and technology as critique of dominant social structures during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

ArTV: The Birth of a Teleasta

Pola Weiss Álvarez was born in Mexico City in 1947, the elder of two daughters in a middle-class family. Her foreign last name came from her father, an engineer of Alsatian origin who may have immigrated to Mexico to escape the war; her mother, Emma Álvarez, was Mexican (Mendiola and Moreno, 1999). In

1975, Pola Weiss graduated from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), one of the most prominent universities in the country, with degrees in political science and communications, having produced Mexico's first thesis to incorporate video (Torres, 1997, pp. 61-63). According to her sister Kitzia, Pola became interested in moving images at an early age (Torres, 2012), however, Weiss came of age at a time when the television industry was being consolidated as the most powerful medium of communication, one that was transforming not only the way people communicated, but also intellectual and political fields of action (García, 1989). Weiss's interest in televisual images and the development of her unique approach to video need to be located in confluence with a local and international geography in which television broadcasting was becoming the predominant means of mass communication and the most effective means to influence public opinion and reinforce heteronormative gender roles.

Since its beginnings in the 1950s, the television industry in Mexico had been in the hands of the private sector. By the 1970s, the control of an industry that was becoming so influential had become a point of public debate. In 1972, the government of president Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970–1976) launched a series of reforms to counter the growth of private investment in the sector. These reforms were part of a package of populist strategies aimed at re-establishing president Echeverría's popularity and that of the ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as both had been severely damaged after the 1968 student massacre in La Plaza de Tlatelolco in downtown Mexico City. At stake was the role the state would play in the production of cultural and educational programming and its role in controlling private broadcasters' airtime and commercial and foreign programming (Miró, 1997, p. 66).

As a result of a complicated series of political manoeuvres, three main actors were consolidated as producers and broadcasters of television programming in Mexico during the 1970s: the state, through the purchase of television channel Canal 13 (1972); Televisa (1973); and UNAM, through TV UNAM, a closed network television production station that began to broadcast on an open network in association with Televisa in 1976 (Fernández and Paxman, 2000, p. 256). At the time, in Mexico, as elsewhere, advances in broadcasting technology such as satellite networks and the use of video technology, introduced to the country in 1968 and in 1970, respectively, expanded information's reach and the velocity through which it could be transmitted via television broadcasting (Fernández and Paxman, 2000, p. 196-197). The three main television institutions in Mexico were open to experimenting with the newly available video technology and eagerly opened their doors to a new generation of media professionals—including women (Aceves, 2014, pp. 102-113).

The inclusion of women in television broadcasting was inextricably related to the emergence of transnational second wave feminisms and the hosting of the United Nations first World Conference of the International Women's Year (IWY) in Mexico City in the summer of 1975 (Aceves, 2014, pp. 50-89). As early as 1971, several feminist collectives in Mexico City had taken to the streets to demand the decriminalisation of abortion and an end to the discrimination against women at all levels of society (Jaiven, 1987, p. 76). Like other second wave feminists, Mexican collectives also demanded a change in the ways mass media manipulated gender roles and objectified female bodies. In response to their demands, and a year prior to the hosting of the IWY conference, president Echeverría secured equal rights legislation for women in 1974. One of the resolutions of the UN's IWY celebration and the subsequent Decade of Women (1975–1985) was to promote the appointment of women to decision-making posts in the media industry in order to transform the ways in which the media tended to reinforce traditional attitudes and portrayals of women that were both degrading and humiliating (Aceves, 2014, p. 63).

In Mexico, these resolutions were partially implemented by both public and private broadcasters, which boosted the participation of women in the field. The recently established state-owned Canal 13 fostered the participation of women as anchors and producers (De La Lama et al, 2001, pp. 5-6). In the private sector, several female reporters gained popularity as television personalities during the 1970s (González de Bustamante, 2012, p. 200). Simultaneously, as mentioned earlier, feminist activists in Mexico, as elsewhere, made the demystification of mass media representations of female bodies one of their main targets (Aceves, 2014, pp. 131-169). Although Mexican television broadcasting was still a masculine field in the 1970s, women's participation in mass media radically increased during that decade; in the aftermath of the IWY conference, women in Mexico were not only accessing political posts across

different political parties (Jaiven, 1987) but also gaining leadership positions in various professional fields, including mass media.

While Pola Weiss never joined a feminist collective nor declared herself a feminist, she chose the production of televisual images as her medium to re-write, re-tell, and displace normative representations of the female body and the legacies of colonial conceptions of race and class difference, and to propose alternative uses of television broadcasting. As a student, Weiss began to collaborate with both the state-owned Canal 13 and Televisa. In 1974, she travelled through Europe to visit several broadcasting companies—including the BBC in England, VPRO in the Netherlands, OFRATEME in France, and RAI in Italy—to research the artistic and experimental uses of television (Torres, 1997, pp. 61-63). This research trip influenced Weiss's thinking on the possibilities video afforded to television broadcasting. For instance, in her bachelor's thesis, she proposed the use of video in the production of television programming outside the commercial parameters that defined Mexican television at the time. She believed:

The televisual order that had been mostly used to manipulate and alienate human consciousness could equally be used in the opposite manner; that is, by using the same technology, to slowly invert the meaning of the messages and eliminate the ideological alienation that such messages produced by making efficient use of the marginal spaces opened up by mainstream, academic and state media corporations. (Weiss, 1975, p. 10)

In seeking to take advantage of the spaces already opened up by television broadcasting and using the same technology to counter ideological alienation, Weiss's approach was different from other critiques of media in the region. At the height of the Cold War, commercial television was predominantly viewed in Mexico—as in the rest of Latin America—as a weapon of American imperialism (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1973). Unlike in Euro-North America, where video technology was affordable and provided a direct means of documenting a range of oppositional movements (Drew, 2007; Dougherty, 1998; Jean, 2011), most independent media collectives that emerged in Latin America at the time adopted film and photography to produce a range of documentary productions (Burton, 1999, pp. 3-5) to unveil the workings of imperialism. Following the tenets of Getino and Solana's Third Cinema (Martin, 1997) many of these collectives proposed to use film and photography as communication tools to raise consciousness about social issues. They conceptualised these media as "weapons of social transformation" (Mandoki, 1981, pp. 41-42). Such weapons, however, were often wielded in highly gendered ways. Whereas the vast majority of images and films produced by this generation of committed artists (for example, the work of filmmakers Getino and Solanas, Coperativa de Cine Marginal, or the photographs of Nacho López) glorified the masculinity and heroism of revolutionary fighters or portrayed the miseries and precariousness of Latin American realities; women were mostly represented as companions of revolutionary leaders, as sexualised ethnic beauties, or as victims of class and racial disparities. An exception was the work of Colectivo Cine Mujer, a Mexican feminist film collective established in 1975 that produced 16 mm films addressing sexual and domestic violence against women (Aceves, 2014, pp. 328-348). Weiss' approach broke with the conventions of representation established by these independent media collectives. She did so not only by working closely with both private and public media corporations, but, as I will explain, by producing images and representations of female bodies that challenged normative conventions of representation. For instance, her video *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad* (1978), shown at the Nuevas Tendencias February Biennale held at Mexico City's Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM) and proposed for broadcasting, was not only censored for commercial television, but also surprised the emergent artistic community with its frontal female nudity (Carrasco, 2011). In *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad*, Weiss superimposes images of a nude female body with urban scenes. The body of Vivianne Blackmore, the model, is seen from the front; her breasts are exposed, and she is performing undulating movements that vary in speed according to the rhythm of the soundtrack (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Pola Weiss, *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad*, 1978.
Courtesy of Fondo Pola Weiss, ARKEHIA, MUAC- UNAM.

Mónica Mayer, a young and self-identified feminist artist at the time, recalled years later:

I was surprised by the fact that [*Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad*] showed a real woman, with scars and cellulite. It made me laugh to see her breasts bouncing to the sound of the bells, and I was surprised to see the frontal shots of her pubic area. (Mayer, 2009)

Rather than presenting female bodies as victims of oppression or objects of representation, Weiss produced televisual images that showed how women could take pleasure in the act of looking and being looked at. As a self-identified middle-class televisual producer (*teleasta*), her incorporation of nude, dancing female bodies, which at times blended into images of herself through chroma-key and layering effects—see, for example, *Autovideoato* from 1979 (Fig. 2)—playfully mocked Mexican media censors, who, at the time, identified the difference between pornography and eroticism as whether a nude female body was shown moving or still (Bustamante, personal communication, August 6, 2010).



Fig. 2 Pola Weiss, *Autovideoato*, 1979.
Courtesy of Fondo Pola Weiss, ARKEHIA, MUAC- UNAM

Moreover, at a time when feminist critiques of visual representation hinged on Laura Mulvey's (1989, pp. 19-25) conceptualisation of the male gaze as a fixed subject position which objectified women's bodies, and feminist anti-pornography debates equated desire with "a male trap that automatically objectifies and oppresses women" (Dolan, 2012, p. 80), Weiss's video explorations went beyond the fixed binary construction of the object/subject of representation and idealised depictions of female sexuality. For instance, other female artists who, at the time, were also questioning the fixed subject/object relation in the process of representation (for example, Leslie Labowitz and Hana Wilke) evaded the question of male desire and sexuality by equating the female body with nature and spirituality (Dolan, 2012, pp. 78-80). Weiss did not avoid a confrontation with sexuality; rather she confronted it through a constant blurring of subject/object positions. In shifting positions as both the subject that produces images of nude female bodies and her own body, Weiss evoked pleasure and desire in the act of looking and as constitutive of the act of representation while, at the same time, dismantling essentialist and heteronormative gendering of sexuality. Through these constant shifts of subject/object positions, Weiss explored multiple, intersectional, and relational forms of representing the self, pointing to what Amelia Jones describes as "the failure of representation to offer up the self as a coherent and knowable entity" (Jones, 2006, p. xvii).

These constant shifts of subject/object positions also led Weiss to create alternate televisual realities where couplings of self and Other shifted and alternated. For instance, in her videodanzas, which consisted in live events in public spaces in which she combined performance and video, Weiss transformed her video camera into an eye or a limb as she danced with it in her hand, filming her movements. Simultaneously, her camera broadcasted her movements through video signals transmitted to monitors and reflected through mirrors. During these videodanzas, the interplay of projections and reflections from monitors and mirrors fractured the spatial and durational sequence of Weiss's performances. At the same time, through visual effects and the incorporation of live feedback, Weiss alternated positions between the subject who produced the images and the object represented in those images, and between her camera, her body, and the bodies of the spectators caught in the act of looking (whose images were reflected in mirrors and incorporated into the video through live feedback). Weiss'

blurring of the locations of the object and the subject created simultaneous lived experiences: her body dancing and filming, her movements being reflected in mirrors and projected back to monitors through live feedback, and spectators filmed in the act of viewing her performance and being integrated into the video performance through live feedback and reflections in mirrors. By merging her body with that of the spectator through the use of live video feedback and visual effects, Weiss altered not only the subject/object relation in the matrix of representation, but produced, in a cyborgian fashion, an alternate televisual reality in which couplings of self and Other shift and alternate. In doing so, Weiss follows one of the boundary breakdowns Haraway distinguishes in the *Manifesto for Cyborgs*—"the boundary between the physical and non-physical" (2000, p. 294)—by creating an analog virtual screen space in which the object and subject of representation can co-exist and be merged into one through analog visual effects. Weiss's videodanzas were events during which the separation between mind/body, and between subject/object, could be suspended momentarily.

Before I turn to a close reading of Weiss's conceptualization of her camera as her daughter, I would like to briefly discuss Weiss's encounter with Japanese-born, U.S.-based Shigeko Kubota and trace some important correlations between the work of the two artists. On July 17, 1975, while Weiss was finishing her bachelor's thesis on the uses of video as an alternative medium to commercial television broadcasting, she met and interviewed Kubota at her home studio in Mexico City (Fernández, 2005, pp. 16-18; Weiss, 1975). It is not clear what brought Kubota to Mexico City that year. Conflicting information exists as to whether her presence was related to the UN's IWY celebration in Mexico City in the summer of 1975, or whether it was related to her participation in one of the video art exhibitions organized in Mexico City at that time. As mentioned earlier, Weiss's approach to video was developed in confluence with the development of video art as a discipline. Although video technology in the 1970s was out of reach for the majority of artists in Mexico, the art community organised several efforts to introduce the emergent medium of video to young generations of artists outside the television industry in Mexico City. Two exhibitions in particular—Video Art Nueva Estética Visual, an exhibition held at MAM in 1973, and the "IX Encuentro Internacional, I Encuentro Nacional de Videoarte," held at Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (MACG) in 1977—introduced the vanguard of US-based video and experimental television artists and Latin American video producers to Mexican audiences, including Ed Emschwiller, William and Louise Etra, Nam June Paik, and Shigeko Kubota. Weiss was involved and actively participated in the 1977 exhibit organized by the Argentinian Jorge Gulsberg. In the show, Weiss exhibited *Flor Cósmica* (1977), a playful experiment with visual effects to the rhythm of Chick Corea's "Return Forever."

The meeting with Kubota marked an important transformation in Weiss's approach to video (Aceves, 2014, pp. 371-385). The video recording of the interview produced by Weiss (Weiss, 1975) already shows her particular interests in exploring and contesting the limits and possibilities of video and television broadcasting. With an audience present, Kubota and Weiss spoke about different approaches to video making (video art and video installation) and about Kubota's experience as a female artist in Japan and New York. However, beyond disseminating Kubota's experiences, Weiss used the interview to present her own views about video and television broadcasting to a Mexican audience—mostly UNAM students. During the interview, Weiss interrupts the conversation to ask the audience if the recording of the interview is playing live in the monitors placed behind Weiss and Kubota. She asks someone (an assistant, perhaps) to distort the image so that the intended viewer thinks that his/her television is not working properly. Then the camera focuses on Weiss, who talks to the viewer (not the live audience, but the intended viewer of the recorded interview) and explains that video art consists of distorting images (the clear image that the television decodes and presents to the viewer). Video art, she continues, consists of creating feedback, image distortions, and colour alterations by playing with brilliance and contrast (Weiss, 1975).

Weiss travelled to New York City in the summer of 1976 to learn more about video art in the United States. It is not clear whether she met Kubota in New York, but there is some evidence that they remained in touch (Kubota, 1979), and, as discussed elsewhere, Weiss's and Kubota's work shared similar concerns (Aceves, 2014, pp. 371-385). Both artists were invested in developing categories to understand their media explorations. While using video's capacities to mix and fuse a wide range of practices and conventions of representation, they also transformed traditional female forms of expression. For instance,

following their interests in using video as a tool for self-knowledge, they both championed video as a medium akin to diary writing, what Kubota labeled videodiary (Yoshimoto, 2008, pp. 186) and Weiss referred to Autovideoato (1979). In using video to transform the female experience of diary writing, they transgressed traditional gendered conceptions of technology as male and diary writing as female (Sargent-Wooster, 1991, p. 28). Most significantly, both artists feminized the process of art-making by conceiving their production as an embodied act akin to that of giving birth (coincidentally, both artists had miscarriages and as a result were unable to have children). They did so not only by adopting the video camera as a prosthetic of their own bodies but also by conceptualising the camera as daughter and using video as a tool for female empowerment. Most famously, in 1975, Kubota declared “video [to be] the vengeance of the vagina” (Jacob, 1991, p. 6). In her Video Poem (1969–1976), a video installation which incorporated parts of Kubota’s personal and professional lives, she stated: “I travel alone with my Portapak on my back, as Vietnamese women do with their babies” (Roth, 1991, p. 74). As I will discuss, Weiss, like Kubota, claimed her vagina as the site of video production, linking her experience as a televisual producer with female bodily experiences and video-making as a female task. In convergence with Kubota’s development of hybrid categories to name her practice, such as videosculture (Jacob, 1991, p. 6), Weiss would go on to develop a range of hybrid genres and metaphors to describe her practice. Through playful neologisms and metaphors, she conceived of herself as an audiovisual guide—a “Venusina”—whose mission was to “extraPOLAte,” or make the viewer see images, “interPOLAte,” or interrupt the viewer to disrupt the narrative, and “POLArize,” or invite the viewer to reflect on what he/she saw (Weiss, 1981). Throughout her career, Weiss produced scripts and documentaries for television and private clients in combination with more experimental video and performance work. At times, these different approaches to video making were indistinguishable. At other times, she made clear attempts to construct a vocabulary to understand different approaches and uses of video and television broadcasting through different neologisms like autovideoato (self-portraits), videodanza (video dance performances), and artVEing (video interviews).

The Cyborg in Náhuatl

When she returned from New York, Weiss established her television production company, arTV (1978). In that same year, she declared:

Television is the mother of video ... It is proper then to conceive of television as art, an art television, televisual art, or, as I have decided to name my productions, thanks to their mass communication capacity: arTV. (Weiss, 1978, pp. 19–20)

With this declaration, Weiss outlined her approach to video as oriented toward both an exploration of intimate and personal aspects and the medium’s undeniable relation to mass media and its public (Hernández et al., 2014, p. 21). However, Weiss’s declaration also included a perhaps more revealing, and controversial, conceptualization of how she envisioned her arTV project. ArTV, Weiss said, was an art form fostering large-scale transformations that would shape a new man: “ArTV is an instrument for today’s man; the cosmic man” (Weiss, 1978, p. 20).

Some years later, Weiss would further elaborate on her concept of the “cosmic man” as an embodied critical media viewer in touch with his/her feelings—a sensorial being that further complicated dominant regimes of visibility that separate the act of viewing from other sensorial experiences (Garibay, 1984). However, in adopting this rhetoric, which at first glance aligned her with the male heroic avant-gardes, Weiss was simultaneously provoking the predominant masculine orientation of the art world in the same manner in which she had pushed the boundaries of female representation by showing an undulating nude female body. In order to understand Weiss’s practice as a powerful critique of dominant intellectual traditions and conventions of representation that have produced and reproduced hierarchies of difference in Mexico, I now turn to a close reading of Weiss’s participation in the 1978 February Biennale at MAM in Mexico City and suggest that her use of the cosmic man also points to her interest in developing a critical approach to video through her freestyle, and at times problematic quasi-ironic, reliance on an

avant-garde tradition of looking at the past to develop an artistic discourse that will internationalise the local.

Weiss's concept of the cosmic man is reminiscent of the term "cosmic race," coined by the Mexican post-revolutionary intellectual José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) in his essay *The Cosmic Race: The Mission of the Iberoamerican Race* (Vasconcelos, 1925). Written in the 1920s, at the beginning of the post-revolutionary period, Vasconcelos' essay foretold the coming of a spiritual and aesthetic new age in Latin America in which racial barriers would lose their force and ongoing racial mixture would lead to the cosmic race. Vasconcelos' concept of the cosmic race was related to the nationalist project of indigenismo, a set of reforms and practices that attempted to integrate indigenous cultures in the development of a national narrative in order to construct a modern national identity (Lomnitz, 2001). As many have argued, indigenismo was a process of internal colonisation and expropriation, whereby the image of the Indian emerged as the source of mythical originality and the basis of national identity (Warman, 1975; Lomnitz, 2001). Indigenismo glorified indigenous cultural heritage as a relic of the past and erased the living indigenous communities. At the heart of indigenismo was the concept of mestizo, a hybrid race constituted through the mixture of Amerindian and European races, or, in the words of Vasconcelos, the cosmic race. Vasconcelos's cosmic race, as many have argued, was a response to the Darwinian and Spencerian racial orthodoxy espoused by the defeated Porfirian regime (1876–1911) (Alonso, 2004, p. 464). Vasconcelos proposed to embrace the potential of the hybrid by following Mendelism, which he viewed as a more appropriate "biological philosophy" (Alonso, 2004, p. 464). As secretary of education from 1921 to 1924, Vasconcelos played a crucial role in the construction of a national imagery based on the promotion of what Alonso (2004, p. 463) calls "mestizo aesthetics," encouraging the development of public art and the Mexican heroic avant-garde—the Mexican School of Muralism—which in turn helped to visualize and promote the values of indigenismo.

Technologies of vision and the emergent discipline of anthropology also played a key role in the promotion of indigenismo. After the emergence of anthropology as both an academic discipline and an amateur practice of many local and foreign intellectuals and artists, the post-revolutionary government set out to civilize indigenous communities and teach elite sectors of society to revalue their Indian heritage (Warman, 1975). To this end, anthropological expeditions were organised to all regions of the country in order to photograph, study, and educate indigenous communities. Anthropology became the scientific discourse that legitimised and underwrote the post-revolutionary project of national construction through shifting discourses of indigenismo (Warman, 1975; Lomnitz, 2001). Photography and cinema not only visualised and gave material weight to this anthropological discourse, but were also the most effective means through which these discourses were popularised. Photographs and films were circulated widely, and their creators not only reproduced anthropological discourse, but also actively participated in the construction of a sense of national identity based on the folklorisation of indigenous culture and the erasure of living indigenous communities. By the 1970s, television broadcasting was seen by both the private and the public sectors as the most effective means to influence public opinion and reinforce heteronormative and folkloric imaginaries of national identity (Soto, 2007).

Read in this context, Weiss's use of the term "cosmic man" to predict the coming of age of a new sensorial being through arTV is a utopian re-engagement with the indigenista tradition. However, it is also a powerful and ironic provocation aimed at the masculine intellectual genealogy that crafted and dictated the state policies of indigenismo and one of its most iconic conceptual offspring, the cosmic race. In using the term, Weiss sought to position her work as a valid intellectual undertaking—an endeavour which she also pushed for after her appointment as a professor at the faculty of communication and journalism at UNAM, where she supported and fought for the production of several video-theses (Naranjo et al, 1977).

To fully understand her concept of the cosmic man as another strategy through which she attempted to update conceptions of hybrid couplings (*mestizaje*) by proposing an embodied relation with technologies of vision—or, in Haraway's terms, a hybrid coupling between organism and machine—it needs to be read in the context of her conceptualisation of her camera as her *escuincla*. It is perhaps in her graphic manifesto printed in the catalogue of the 1978 February Biennale at MAM that accompanied the

exhibition of her videos *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad* and *Somos Mujeres* that Weiss mostly clearly and openly describes her embodied relation to her camera.

In the graphic manifesto, Weiss claims the vagina as the site of video production through wordplay and image collage and declares her self-sufficiency and independence as a female video producer. On the first page of the graphic manifesto, we see the silhouette of a woman (clearly Weiss) carrying a camera and videotaping another woman (also Weiss), who stands with her legs open. The phrase, “I inscribed poems in her body, and in her vagina I ejaculated images” emanates from her vagina (Fig. 3).

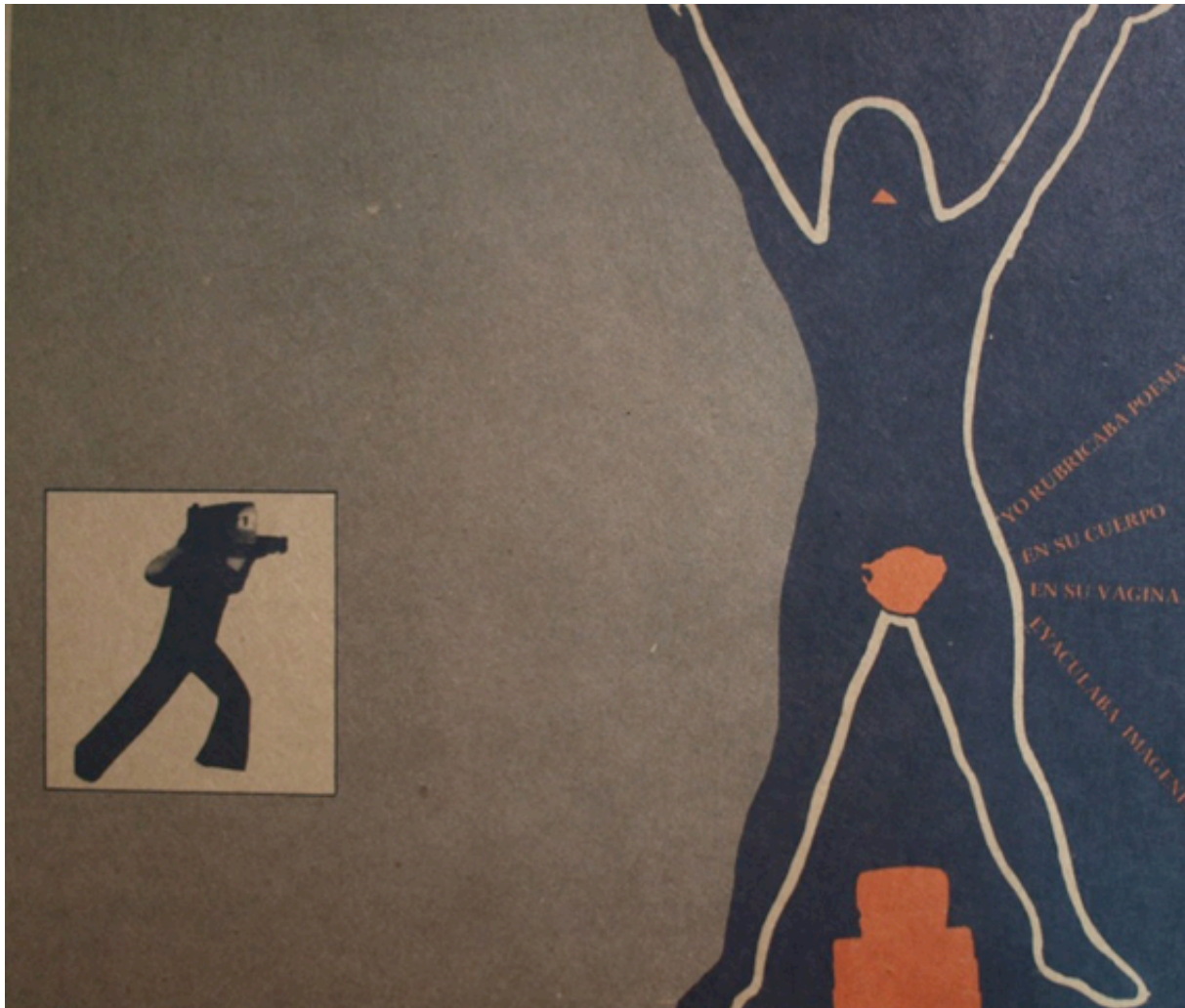


Fig. 3 Salon 77 Bienal de Febrero Nuevas Tendencias, 1978
Courtesy of Mónica Mayer.

Below, on the floor, another camera films the letters coming from the vagina. In this visual poem, Weiss is the artist, the object, and the subject of the gaze. She claims complete authorship of both the inspirations (the poems) and the creative production (ejaculation of images). The following and last page of the manifesto is an image of Weiss carrying a television monitor with the logo of her company, arTV, with a typographical composition as background that reads: “city, women, analogy, city.” This last page serves to frame the videos Weiss included in the exhibition, which were meditations on the relations between different kinds of feminine bodies and the urban landscape (Fig. 4). As discussed earlier, her video *Ciudad-Mujer-Ciudad*, in which she merged images of a dancing nude female body with images of the urban landscape, was not well received in commercial television broadcasting circles and surprised the emergent generation of feminist artists. In *Somos Mujeres*, which, in response to the theme of the

Biennale was also a response to the effects of urban development in people's lives (MAM, 1978), Weiss also proposes a strategy that clearly puts her in dialogue with the policies of indigenismo and speaks of another strategy through which she attempted to break the media border by blurring the distinction between object and subject of representation.



Fig. 4 Salon 77 Bienal de Febrero Nuevas Tendencias, 1978
Courtesy of Mónica Mayer.

In *Somos Mujeres*, Weiss's psychedelic video effects blend images of modern buildings with those of poor women begging on the streets holding children in their arms. The soundtrack intermixes dialogues in indigenous languages with the weeping sounds of women and children. One camera takes the point of view of a child being carried on her mother's back. By using a tilted angle and subjective camera perspective, Weiss places the viewer in the position of the indigenous child, the *escuincla*. By allowing her own *escuincla* (her camera) to act as a prosthetic device for multiple bodies (hers, the spectator's, and the Other's—in this case, the indigenous child)—Weiss went a bit further than previous attempts at developing hybrids (*mestizos*). She gendered the process of *mestizaje* as female by merging her female body and that of her daughter (an *escuincla* rather than *escuincla*, the male form of *escuincla* in Spanish).

A reading of *Somos Mujeres* and Weiss's graphic manifesto in relation to her concept of the cosmic man casts Weiss's strategies, like Haraway's cyborg (2000, p. 295), as perverse and dangerous fusions that are both unfaithful to their origins and not afraid of their contradictory standpoints. By using the word "man" in her conceptualisation of the embodied being that would emerge through her approach to televisual images, by appropriating the verb "ejaculate" to describe her process of creation, and, last but not least, by making a technological device an integral part of her hybrid coupling, Weiss creates a hybrid

that looks more like a monstrous cyborg in which all elements can shift positions regardless of their gender, nature (organism/machine), social class, ethnicity, or position (subject = object = camera). Weiss' monstrous hybrid coupling suggests a way out the maze of dualism through which we have explained our bodies and ourselves (Haraway, 2000, p. 316). Weiss's attempts at breaking the media border by creating embodied hybrid media producers are not free from contradiction. Like any other attempt at speaking for or representing the Other, Weiss's attempts are only oppositional inasmuch as they are located vis-à-vis other oppositional projects of her time that, in seeking to end the dominant patriarchal and imperialistic structures, were invested in sustaining fixed subject positions. In this light, video technology provided Weiss with an alternate space in which a utopian project abolishing class, ethnic, gender, and racial divisions could be realised—albeit according to her own desires. Weiss's attempts to break the media border and interpellate the viewer were at times patronising and idealistic experiments. Nonetheless, Weiss' approaches to video offer not only an alternative to dominant expressions of Latin American utopian impulses, but also an alternative to late-twentieth-century female figurations. Weiss' figuration is contradictory. It unsettles the binaries that once connected man to technology and woman to nature. It avoids any direct affiliation to feminism or to an artistic discipline or movement. It proposes a different way of conceiving intellectual activity through moving images and television broadcasting. Hence, Weiss' figuration is not unlike the oppositional consciousness that Chela Sandoval ascribed to “women of colour” (Haraway, 2000, p. 296) which Haraway likens to the political identity of the cyborg and thus the basis for the development of political kinships constructed from affinities rather than natural identifications (Haraway, 2000, p. 296). For Haraway, by way of Sandoval, the political identity of “women of colour” unlike the category of women “marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship” (Haraway, 2000, p. 296). Weiss' oppositional consciousness, like that of women of colour, is not based on natural or fixed political identifications, but rather constructed through an ongoing search for a new way of being in the world by developing contradictory fusions using the tools that mark her as other. (Haraway, 2000, p. 311).

Since the publication of *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, Haraway's oeuvre has been concerned with the articulation of a kinship of feminist figures “that could guide us to a more liveable place, one that in the spirit of science fiction” Haraway has called “elsewhere.” (Haraway, 2004, p. 1). In a similar fashion, Weiss imagines this elsewhere in Nāhuatl by creating a hybrid coupling with her escuincla and carving a space of opposition to patriarchal structures and fixed binaries outside the realm of US academia or US women of colour. In doing so, Weiss' figuration anticipates Haraway's revolutionary cyborgian logic in as much as it opens up the realm for locating and imagining political kinships outside the predominant Euro-US centric spaces articulated in *Manifesto for Cyborgs*.

Conclusion

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval (2000, pp. 2-3) searches for lines of force and affinity—that is, an impulse to decolonize sex, gender, race, and ethnic hierarchies—between the work of what she calls “postcolonial US third-world feminist criticism” and canonical Western postmodern cultural theorists, including Haraway. In this paper, I attempted to move further by moving outside the US as the focus of academic production and legitimisation, whether postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, or postmodern. As Marsha Meskimmon (2007, p. 325) put it, in order to decolonize the impact of feminism(s), the development of a critical geography that links geopolitical networks of exchange with the movement of concepts, ideas, and aesthetic agency in, of, and from time and space is needed as a strategy that makes it possible to both expand our knowledge of the global parameters of “feminist [art]” and interrogate the concepts through which we define its limits. Following Sandoval's and Meskimmon's methodologies, in this article I mapped out lines of force and affinity between Haraway and Weiss. By reading Weiss's videos alongside Haraway's cyborg manifesto in the context of the 30-year anniversary of its publication, I explored how Weiss's approach to video resulted in productive experimentation that altered what counted as female experience in 1970s Mexico and opened up the repertoire of female figurations that emerged in the late twentieth century.

Weiss's embodied relation to her escuincla was not only incestuous, a metaphorical mother-daughter transgression, but also, read alongside Weiss's other strategies to break the media border, an implied act of miscegenation with the Other and a powerful critique of the dualisms that characterised Western thought. Naming her camera her escuincla, and endowing it with an indigenous identity, Weiss showed that she was invested in making the Other see while pointing to the potential to see like the Other offered by video. And while Weiss's strategies were as idealistic and patronising as deep-rooted Mexican practices of seeing, her attempts did result to some extent in productive experimentation that altered normative female experiences while launching a powerful critique of patriarchal and heteronormative values. Weiss' experiments with video evoke the existence of fractured identities, shifting subject/object positions, and potent mixtures between self and Other. Much like Haraway's cyborg, Weiss' embodied relation to her camera was a messy and contradictory project. It pointed to the creation of utopian televisual realities in which shifting couplings between self and Other, machine and organism, could co-exist in and through the same mass-media technology invested in producing heteronormative values. Weiss' act of endowing televisual images with the power to call forth a new "cosmic man" needs to be understood as part of her project of re-conceptualising and transgressing established hierarchies of difference through the production of arTV. Weiss' oeuvre is a situated exploration of the potential of technologies of vision to transgress established hierarchies of difference and, as I attempted to show in this paper, is in dialogue with Haraway's cyborg.

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