

\*This text is part of the book "A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina" edited by Precarias a la Deriva (Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2004)

## **Mom, I want to be an artist!**

*Notes on the status of some workers in the image production field, here and now.*

María Ruido

### **Representation as communication and as (re)production of reality(ies)**

You should better take a competitive examination, baby.... as smart as you are ... you could get any career ...I do not know ... you might have a vocation, but you could also do it as a hobby, don't you? ... It's up to you ... but you'll die of hunger!

This was (and still remains), more or less, the reaction of our closest (especially if we are born in the bosom of a working class family with a distant or nonexistent relationship to any field of cultural production) to the answer to our uncertain future career.

The truth is that in the current conditions of production of representation within the Spanish state, practically in all its aspects (especially in the most critical and/or less commercial ones), some of their dark expectations are met. In what mom was wrong, however, is in thinking that instability, deregulation and limited or lack of remuneration for the work done would only affect those "creative", "less serious" jobs that, in many cases, didn't/doesn't have even the social consideration of "employment" and that also appeared linked to forms of life, at least, "irregular" and rather unfavourable for social promotion.

Even so, we persevere, and after a period of studies more or less related to image or self-taught education, we are immersed in a work without timetables or recognition, often without a contract, a "job" which is not considered as "employment", a sort of "indefinite volunteering" that leans on a dubious and egotistic conception of talent from which we are expected to get tired of sooner or later.

At best, we will be able to cope, with enormous tiredness, with forced moonlighting, unfolding our time in "wage-earning employment" and "what I really consider my work", and if, in addition, we are women (and paraphrasing the American collective Guerrilla Girls) we will "be lucky" to choose between motherhood or time for ourselves and an absorbing career,

without holidays or bonuses, a continuous exam in which you are always starting.

Although it is quite clear that the entire audiovisual sector (from advertising or design to news production or documentaries in the media, from commercial cinema to imaginary production within the art field) shares very significant common elements, we should make some distinctions between its different aspects, as well as underscoring to what extent the situation of women in various fields of representation remains contentious.

Due to space reasons, and as within this book the matter of working conditions in the communication field has been tackled by other colleagues, after a brief joint analysis, I will focus this short essay on my closest experience, precarity and its effects within the field of artistic production, a territory defined by certain sectors of the "art institution" as a "space of freedom", full of possibilities that, as soon as it is known and analyzed, it appears as one of the most anachronistic, hierarchical, sexist and classist working areas that still persist. Not in vain, as some Marxists or the always lucid Teresa de Lauretis would have pointed out once, representation is a privileged apparatus of generation / dissemination of ideology that has to be controlled in all its aspects (from production to reception devices).<sup>1</sup>

Elaborating images is a political activity, framed in various manners in the production system, which generates added values in both economic and symbolic field.

Whether as a transmission of information, as a brand or image of a merchandise or service, whether as a representation of the world or of the artist's subjectivity, producing representation is a work of communicative and symbolic action where the parameters of class, race, gender, sexual preference, etc ... are activated at their maximum level, and that is why it involves important censorship and self-censorship frames, well internalized by those who are devoted to it.

Representation does not "reflects", but builds (our position in) the world, and stands on well-defined codes (continuity, consistency, teleological order generated by temporal and spatial conventions, -for example, the ellipsis or shot/countershot-, clear delimitation between "fictional" and "real", dichotomist distribution between the subject as observer and the observed-object, darkening or denial of the construction mechanisms and of the historical frameworks of concepts and visual forms...) that we are destined to

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<sup>1</sup> See Lauretis, Teresa de: " Technology of Gender" in the book by the same author *Diferencias*. horas y Horas, Madrid, 2000.

reproduce if we do not make an effort to problematize the gaze, to transit the thresholds of that defined as "visible", to question the simplification and naturalization of legitimizing visual order as the only possibility.

Constructing images becomes, within this structure, a mere conniving (re)presentation (conscious or unconscious) of significant and significances, both narrative and symbolic, the only ones that appear as possible to be "understood" and "accepted" by the public, accepted by the established circuits (either the media or the artistic ones), the only ones that we can even try to imagine, thanks to the persistent consumption and prevailing feedback of our immense tide of audiovisual merchandise, that causes an infinite "homogeneous variation" of bodies, actions or narrative solutions, always convergent.

The representation generated by this accepted framework is, ultimately, doomed to (re) produce and (re) embody stereotypes and narratives, to elaborate encysted and reifying products, which institute paralysation, dullness and fascination as tools, ensuring exploitation and visual objectification instead of opening the door to a possible reciprocity, to a "participative representation", or quoting Martha Rosler<sup>2</sup>, which transits between the borders of the "eye" and the "mirror", of the active and the passive.

The reactivation of formulas and reactionary behaviours or the attempt to regenerate the boundaries between "high" and "low culture" since the 80s in the Western visual proposals (from cinema to TV, from fashion to video art) as a way to isolate or neutralize possible responses to the "imperative eye" (from the feminist art or audiovisuals to the analysis that overcome postmarxist economic positions by going in depth into the criticism of cultural production as a merchandise intersected by generic standards, ethnic, class...) talk about the enormous difficulty of thinking oneself outside the "approved visible" and its distribution networks, and about the lack of challenges to the univocal gaze, even in the seemingly "experimental" art world.

To this fear and to the impossibility translated into self-censorship, the silence in the reception must be added, thanks to the close links between production, distribution and consumption, a difficult access circle and even more complex rupture, which makes almost unthinkable the presence of non-reproductive visual constructions, except when acting as slight "politically correct" raids

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<sup>2</sup> See Rosler, Martha: "If you lived here" in the book Blanco, P, Carrillo, J, Claramonte, J & Exposito, M. (eds.): *Modos de hacer. Arte crítico, esfera pública y acción directa*. Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca, 2001.

producing a very specific symbolic capital gain (an illusion of false conflict or apparent plurality, for example) or when they are about to be properly assimilated and deactivated—a constant process—by the hegemonic codes.

Although it is true that the social influence of television or commercial cinema is not comparable to the different art forms and supports, the conditions of the so-called “visual codes manipulation” coincide in some aspects.

Both in the merely communicative framework as well as in the creative one, the audiovisual workers are subjected to extreme conditions of flexibility, emotional looting, mobility, insecurity and brutal competition, characteristic of the immaterial production, while a total deregulation of working hours / leisure time and a complete confusion of one and other sphere (especially if we do part or the whole work at home) are imposed over our bodies and our lifestyles.

We work always and everywhere: at home, at the office, at the production company or at the agency. But we all have also learned how to capitalize our experience and to subject our needs to the imperatives of a task which presents the “vocational addition” (you're doing what you want, don't you?) and therefore it requires our full commitment.

(Almost) all of us have concluded that the gaze and hegemonic representation of the world is patriarchal and hetero-normative, and therefore, speaking from a gender position as a political variable, involves an extra effort, a strategic effort that should be added to that we have already made to try to camouflage our eyes in order to produce visual images within the hegemonic order (and this is also valid in the field of teaching and in the image and devices analysis, where you will be, at least, branded as “lacking of objectivity” if you show some of the feminist theory contributions); and, moreover, some of us have learned that what it is presented as natural, coherent and logical is, in fact, a classist composition, where it is assumed as normative an arbitrary and hierarchical visual framework which is no more than a difficult and costly to achieve background, especially if your first visit to a museum was during the end of the year excursion at the primary school.

Even though, as it was mentioned before, the construction images in any field shares these and other common aspects, the production conditions, the personal commitment or responsibility in the generation and dissemination of those is, obviously, very different when you work in the field of artistic production or in a small or large media or design company.

Image elaboration in the field of communication is regulated by the frameworks of the business groups in which those images are going to be transmitted and their distribution is part of the production of a broader

institutional narrative, while, at the same time, they are impregnated with the velocity and immediacy of the media (dynamism, lightness, innovation...): the media imaginary has an influence and a diffusion that the image within the art institution does not have, but it is also forgotten and consumed sooner. As a "mirror" of the world that produce them, they confuse reality with its representation to reaffirm the standardized roles and identities producing the sensation of a system with no fissures or interstices, locked, continuous and teleological, where "that is the way things are and that is how we have narrated them".

The workers of these media are doomed to constant negotiation, both conceptual and formal, with the production and transmission framework and with themselves, and they know that their manoeuvre capacity is small (but significant, especially because of their social influence and their diffusion ability, we must not forget about this...). The fundamental importance (and difficulty) of these representations lies in its huge impregnability in uses, stereotypes and daily corporealnesses.

Considering this context, the responsibility of media workers in relation to the production and distribution of these products is relative: in their products, censorship and the limits of the visible are often previously imposed, as it occurs to most of the workers in the commercial culture industry. Here, the self-censorship is experienced as an internalization of the business mechanisms and profitability.

Their working conditions, although they carry the weight of a professional "vocation", usually include a scheduled payment and a stipulated regulation, even though the contractual forms are becoming progressively weaker (contract for a specific work, eternal contracts as practitioners, endless hours of preparation, improper layoffs...) and more "performative" (the imagination, the subjectivity and the body coming into play more frequently, especially in the audiovisual media ...).

As we already noted, precarity in its various forms (flexibility, instability, non-determination of functions, (self-)exploitation of experiences and emotions, the extreme mobility, the shortage or absence of wage ...) define almost all works within the field of cultural production and communication (even the most profitable ones or those that are better placed in the cultural hierarchy –exhibitions curators, museums directors, big media stars ... -), except when we go into the field of a paralyzed or extremely legislatively slowed down corps of government employees (permanent workers on RTVE or institutional museums, for example).

But what happens when image production does not take place within the logic of the business or if it does not have a primordial purpose of divulgation

and / or entertainment but it is produced as a "personal need" or as "a form of criticism towards the surrounding structures of reality"? In other words, when you say at home: Mom, I want to be an artist! ... and not exactly a folkloric one, no ...

### **Survival manual or how precarity is experienced in the glamorous world of art**

The first thing anybody think when you tell that you are an artist is that you do not need to work for living and, therefore, that your family is wealthy or that someone is responsible for providing your needs.

When you get into the art world (and, in general, into any profession related to the production or transmission of what is defined as "culture") coming from a group that, a few decades ago, was just the working class or simply alien to or in disagreement with this field, you immediately perceive your "strangeness" in the midst of their "endogamy" or, if you prefer, your "discordance" in the midst of their "consensus": your gestures and your words must be reincarnated, your concept of what producing knowledge means must be self-controlled, and the fear generated by the uncertainty and the emotional cost of your daring adventure must be delicately camouflaged.<sup>3</sup>

And the first deficiency of artists, in a significant number of cases, is their unconsciousness as workers, an idea reinforced by the construction of the deep-rooted romantic demiurge, classless and saturnine, too individualistic to look around him, perpetuated and emphasized by the media imagery up to the present days.

The traditional "art institution" denies the working status of an artist and her/his responsibility and ability to influence on the everyday life, so that they hide the political connections of representation: art, the "great art", is presented as eternal and unalterable, un-historical, dis-topical and transcendent, and therefore, alien to the material conditions in which it is produced.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, there is a very interesting text by Walkerdine, Valerie: "Sujeto a cambio sin previo aviso: la psicología, la posmodernidad y lo popular" ("Subject to Change Without Previous Notice: Psychology, Postmodernity and the Popular") in Curran, J., Morley, D. & Walkerdine, V. (eds): *Estudios Culturales y Comunicación*. Paidós. Barcelona, 1998, where the author relates her own experience and the emotional strain of her "journey" from London suburbs to a prestigious British university in which she became a psychology professor.

While one might think that after decades of materialist analysis, after an apparent diversity of artists' types and after the more than proven links of images as ideological tools, the concept of the elaboration of representation outside the communicative business framework would suffer a definitive transformation, this transformation has not happened radically. Art is still thought as an uncontaminated area of "absolute autonomy"<sup>4</sup>, populated by individuals without sex or class, who transcend their living conditions to formalize their emotions, with a very secondary interest in the economic output ("all for the love of art ") or openly cynical ("all for the money").

After proving the influence of the economic models in the artistic production and the "re-politicization" and rethinking of the social role of artists during the 60s and 70s, in the 80s an important reactivation of hierarchies and conservative stereotypes takes place and, at least in the Spanish state, it won't be until the mid-90s when a new generation of artists will renew the analysis of the relationship between the economic and historical conditions of the image production, in particular, a generation of women that takes up again some feminist approaches to discover that our position in the art world remains completely subaltern.

To the conditions of precarity in the cultural industry mentioned above (in which I am not going to insist on), artists must add the pressure of an idealized vocational work, in which we apply the maximum degree of self-exploitation and that leads us to adopt work as a way of life and our own body as an additional territory of our "project": no effort is enough, nothing is enough for the sake of our career (postponing or renouncing to motherhood, lack of time and / or our own space, not attending our family, friends or partner, thus accumulating great frustration which is born from the clash between our education, orientated to care, and our work....).

We turn into our own company and we assume the limits of our researches without exploring too much up to what extent they are due to a self-imposed censorship.

If, moreover, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, you do not come from a circle that "understands" and / or "shares" your decisions, you have to

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<sup>4</sup> For a further exploration of the idea of "relative autonomy" of the images in front of the traditional "absolute autonomy", as well as other concepts repeated throughout this essay as "symbolic capital" or "art institution", it will be very useful to read some books of the French sociologist Bourdieu, Pierre, especially "Las reglas del arte." Anagrama. Barcelona, 1995 y "Razón práctica". Anagrama. Barcelona, 1999.

cope with your own insecurity, against the opinions and fears that you provoke in your relatives, and against the lack of economic protection, having to endure endless working days that produce immediate outputs in order to allow yourself to "afford the luxury" of making art.

One of the historical responsibilities of individuals, to visually articulate their world and its contradictions and to generate different images to suggest other possible realities, becomes a painful and exhausting effort, sabotaged by a grotesque media paradigm of what an artist is or should be where you do not recognize yourself and which generates more than a few personal conflicts.

If, additionally, you are a woman, then you are aware of the paralysing burden of the dominant generic stereotypes transmitted by the historiography (the "suffering" Frida Kahlo, the "beautiful" Tamara de Lempika, the "magic" but "crazy" Eleonora Carrington ....) and the objectification of images within the art market, contradictions become sharper.

In general, cultural production, but especially the production of "artistic" images, hides a dark back room beyond the glamour of the openings and domesticated emotions, where talking about the often contradictory sources of income, is still considered "distasteful": absence or extreme lack of honoraries, total lack of contracts or irregular contract systems (even among artists and *marchands*, who are supposed to have a connection in a mid to long term period), class relations that condition the entry into certain circuits, implicit and explicit sexism (there is a large number of women in cultural production, but in most cases they incorporate patriarchal models of power exercise or they continue acting as "mother-carers" or "undervalued managers" without enough "talent or disposition" to become "great artists") and almost a complete absence of discussion regarding the material conditions of artistic production (irresponsibility or lack of position of representation producers in the economic and political system; (self-)exploitation and instrumentation of the artist's image, often turned into a fetish; in most of the cases, self-production of projects, even when working for institutions; absence (almost always) of payment during the production process in return for the (accepted) inflation of the final object, now already more or less unique and postauratic ...).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> To study in depth the art material conditions panorama in the context of the Spanish State, is interesting the text by Expósito, M. and Navarrete, Carmen (at the time when associations of visual artists appeared): "La libertad (y los derechos) (también en el arte) no es algo dado, sino una conquista, y colectiva" ( "Freedom (and rights) (also in art) is not something given, it is an achievement, and it is collective " ) published in the book by Perez, David (ed.): *Del arte impuro. Entre lo público y lo privado*. Generalitat Valenciana, Valencia, 1997.



These are some of the situations that draw a panorama where we, the artists, continue (often much to our regret) nurturing the false image of the self-sufficient "genius", assuming absolutely personal ideas of "success" and "failure", anchored in the parameters of mystification and prejudice of the demiurge, and endorsing the romantic idea that representation is not a type of strategic political action, and therefore temporarily and deeply linked to historical conditions, but a subjective contribution to the world seeking to access to recognition in the form of institutional universalizing historical narrative.<sup>6</sup>

However, the need to position themselves within the framework of production relationships is not shared by all artists: highlighting the precarity, submission and self-censorship in which the generators of representation work, denouncing the need to develop an imaginary apart from the constructions of Cartesian individualism, as well as talking about the huge accumulated fatigue as a consequence of full-time work, do not seem to be in the agenda, not even in the one of the frustrating artists' associations. All this will involve, for example, an in depth questioning of the very idea of what is an artist, start thinking about creativity as a capacity and a collective instrument and, finally, thinking about art as a political work with a well defined historical framework, which not only does not pretend eternity and transcendence, but which denounce them as repressive parameters.

Anyway, when the forms and regular assumptions of artistic production (imagination, dedication, coming into play of the autobiographical elements, the emotional aspects....) have been appropriated and capitalised by the post-industrial capitalism, does it really make sense to continue considering the audiovisual production outside of the mass media? It is appropriate to think yourself as an artist, especially if you're a woman?

I would like to respond conjuncturally (always conjuncturally) with a reflection on a recently written text, where I was trying to disrupt the irritating my(s)tification of the work of Ana Mendieta, and where I expressed my doubts regarding the need of a feminist history of art, rather pointing to

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of the reproduction of the most reactionary stereotypes of *creatives* living within the new "net-conditions" of immaterial work, there is a very interesting article by Kuni, Verena: "Some Thoughts On The New Economy of Networking . Cyberfeminist Perspectives on "Immaterial Labor", "Invisible Work" and Other Means to Make Carrier as Cultural Part Time Worker under Net\_Conditions"in " Future is Female. Old Boys Network, Hamburg, 1998. Also available on [http://www.kuni.org/v/obn/vk\\_cfr\\_01.pdf](http://www.kuni.org/v/obn/vk_cfr_01.pdf).

the various feminisms as instruments for political analysis of the images which every historian should use to a greater or lesser extent, to problematize the frameworks of the elaboration of historical narratives.

From this point of view, as a feminist and as a worker within the field of audiovisual production, I think we should remain there, to generate (although in a precarious way) other possible eyes (even if they are never shown on TV), by designing strategies, always mobile (we already know that assimilation is permanent), and highlighting the conditions and efforts these images have meant, but also being aware of their potential to generate new images (in short, their capacity for political agency) for us and also for the others.

And to construct these "other" images, we could perfectly learn from some previous experiences, and even taking up again or updating some of its strategies, articulating the forms of action in three interrelated territories, those conforming the cycle of consumption, production, distribution.<sup>7</sup>

If in the consume field we must make an effort (or a liberation) for reactivating the deconstructive mechanisms (both personal and collective) to escape the numbness caused by media neo-suture (and with this I do not mean returning to the radical displeasure of Laura Mulvey <sup>8</sup>, but rather searching for a less homogeneous and oedipically regulated and reductionist visual pleasure) in the field of production of images, it would be necessary to continue with what the Vietnamese writer and producer Trinh T. Minh-ha would call a "negotiation process with the limits of the visible", or rather, an assault of these limits, and (temporary) installation in the interstices, in the folds made by the "ob-scenae" (offstage): desynchronizing, de-idealizing, de-

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<sup>7</sup> In this context of reactivation of some visual and conceptual tools of feminist cinema, such as problematization of the representational frameworks, and conditions of production and reception of images within the current process of non-materialisation of goods, is presented the currently in development project "Real time, Images, words and political practices from the bodies to the precariousness: notes for a theory of discourse", framed within the exhibition proposal "Total Work", curated by Montse Romani, in which Ursula Biemann and I took part. The text is available online at [www.totalwork.geobodies.org](http://www.totalwork.geobodies.org).

<sup>8</sup> Here I am, of course, referring to the article by Mulvey, Laura published in the journal *Screen* in 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (translated into Spanish in *Episteme*, Valencia, 1988), later revised by the author herself in 1981 in a text entitled "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by "Duel in the Sun"." *Framework* 6, 15-16, 1981.

aestheticising, repeating in order to contradict the devouring novelty through the cadence of haiku, embodying the experiences, and ultimately, breaking the narratives through the evidence of subjectivity and discontinuity, are presented as some basic tools (and I think they are still operational) to oppose the gaze defined as necessarily objectifying and exploitative, a possibility of reciprocity and reflection, where memory(ies) may emerge as an interpellation, the generation of "culture(s)" appears, at least, as the result of a conflictive process, full of divergences and antagonisms, and its gaze is defined as the result of a series of forms and meanings historically influenced and, therefore, mutable.

With the arrival of digital cameras and the relative lower costs and easier handling of editing programmes, it seems that the horizon of production is much more accessible and manageable, that new stories and images "can" be built without filters. But we must try to avoid falling into the technological-abstract optimism and repeating some of the historical errors, as those explained by Deirdre Boyle in her critical text about guerrilla TV<sup>9</sup>, and, above all, avoid leaving unattended the most contentious part of the process: the distribution. We can generate self-representation and construct counter-information, but how to get those texts (visual or written) to become communicative flow? That is to say, how can we access the existing distribution channels?, or what seems most effective in a mid/long term period, how can we build alternative channels and devices?

I think the most significant conceptual difficulties that we face today in the framework of the construction of images are these: the evidence of the limits of visible on which I have been previously attempting to reflect (and the consequent complexity of "imagining" other representations outside the established visual order) and the development of new forms and distribution channels, which do not necessarily have to depend on the existing platforms and networks, with which we are doomed to negotiate the contextualization of our productions (at least for the moment ) if we do not want to fall into a self-indulgent and masturbatory artistic and/or communicative practice.

Though the internet has been a tool and a fundamental space for alternative development of information and narratives, the territory of images can hardly circulate on it in the current conditions, especially in the domestic field.

Moreover, we must ask ourselves if the type of reception we want is always individual and private, and if the formula of collective public-user has to go

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<sup>9</sup> Boyle, Deirdre: "Un epílogo para la Guerrilla TV" ("An epilogue to the Guerrilla TV"). *Acción Paralela*, No 5, Madrid, January 2000.

through the current display devices. Perhaps, the experiences of small production / distribution companies and the possibilities of exchanging and / or distributing the practices they used (for example, some groups that worked / work with women art, film and video such as Women Make Movies in New York or Cinenova, London) may open new fields for research.

As it was pointed out some time ago by Trabajo Zero, I think we shouldn't leave the occupied space to a possible gaze transformation, no matter how scarce this may be: producing our own knowledge and imagination is a necessity, as a way of transforming action of reality and as a way to highlight the ideological links, opacities and arbitrariness hidden by traditional representation.<sup>10</sup>

Barcelona, October 2003

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<sup>10</sup> See Trabajo Zero: "Metodologías participativas y acción política" ("Participatory methodologies and political action"). *Maldejo*, n ° 2, Madrid, April 2001.