

On Feminist Archives

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It begins with a casual encounter. At the exit of a movie theater, for example. Perhaps, it begins in a more intentional way. With a letter. An email. With a question posed at the end of a talk, an exhibition, a class.

The important thing is that this encounter is, it cannot but be, the first of many. These encounters, if they are happy (happy in Spinoza's sense), may result in a new friendship; facilitate, provoke, long conversations; create intimacy. Confidence. Complicity.

It is possible that this friendship may produce, or at least imagine, archives, anarchives or counter-archives, the name doesn't really matter... I'm just thinking about ways of collecting, preserving, making visible and disseminating solidarity efforts, the work of the resistance, feminist memories and the memories of feminisms.

Feminist movements and feminist theories have drawn attention to acts of historical erasure and the consequent invisibility of the experiences and stories of historically marginalized groups or subjects. To repair this invisibility and ignorance, and, in the best of cases, to dismantle the heroic or romantic stories that continue to be reproduced in different spaces and contexts, feminist researchers, historians, critics and curators have turned to the archive. The results of these labors are varied, but they almost always coincide in their subject matter: "women." There are countless biographies, fictionalized histories, films, and series centered on remarkable or exceptional women whose lives and contributions (to science, art, politics, fashion, haute cuisine, revolution, etc.) have been ignored. In the field of art, there have also been major exhibitions that attempt to "rescue" the work of "women artists." Yet, we should be wary of this rescuing gesture; wary of the themes, tropes and concepts it may reproduce or reinforce when it is done uncritically.

Let me quote Ariella Azoulay here. About Jacques Derrida's famous formulation, "archive fever", she [offers](#):

Archive fever is not reducible to the claim to study documents. Archive fever is the claim to revolutionize the archive, to a different understanding of the documents it holds, of its supposed purpose, of the right to see them and act accordingly, the claim to the forms and ways of categorizing them, presenting and using them. It challenges the norm that has become the definition of an archival document as designed by sovereign power—documents the writing of which the powers that be dictate, and later also order their hiding.

While Azoulay does not formulate these archival gestures or operations as feminist acts, her definition of archive fever is feminist, anti-imperialist, decolonial, and anti-racist.

What is a feminist archive? Which forms does a feminist archive take? What does a feminist archive do? How does it do it? It is not my intention to answer these questions here. Rather, I want to invite you to try to answer them yourselves, as you walk and browse around this exhibition. I believe possible answers for these questions are manifested here, in this matriarchive.

Quoting, referencing others, is a form of doing feminist memory. So, I would like to bring here the words of a *compañera*, a fellow educator and researcher whom I greatly admire, and who happens to define herself as “an almost archivist and almost cartographer”, Paulina Varas. Paulina says in the first pages of her book dedicated to the work of artist and archivist, Luz Donoso:¹

I want to anticipate that this book is not about the construction of a stand-in story so it can be inscribed in a scene or in an art history where the artist has not been named; this research is closer to an exercise that wants to account for and take account of adjacent stories... an exercise of caring for that radicalism and desire for rupture that runs through Luz Donoso’s work, but that also continues to be alive every time we pay attention to the neutralization of the impulses that create other forms of life. It is then about snuggling these forms of irruption in the most tender and delicate way possible.

I think this is the only time I've ever seen the words snuggle, irruption and tenderness in the same sentence. But yes, feminist archives are full of tender irruptions.

As Paulina shares, it was thanks to the memories of other women that she came to know the work of Luz Donoso and her archival practices: first of all, the memory of artist Lotty Rosenfeld, who had several photographic records of Luz Donoso, and then, that of Luz’s own daughter, Jenny Holgrem, who was the guardian of her mother’s archive. As I thought about what to write for today’s opening, I realized something similar: it is thank to the memory of Yohanna that I got to know Josefina Mena and her work, it is thanks to the memories of Josefina that Yohanna realized there were many stories to tell, many objects, documents, photos and letters to show; it is thank to their friendship and collaboration that we can learn today about these different collective projects and solidarity efforts.

“Save despite everything”, is, according to Paulina Varas, the situated, feminist, persistent and rebellious response of “women” to the oblivion of History with a capital H, to the erasures of/in the Archive with capital A. And she continues: “These other documents and objects, which are preserved by these other women to define possible worlds, archives full of patience and delicacy, inspire my memories and help to situate me in the present because we too must protect these memories today, giving them a new critical meaning.”

¹ Paulina Varas. *Luz Donoso. El arte y la acción en el presente*. Santiago: Ocho Libros, 2018. The translations from Spanish are mine.

This new critical meaning that Paulina speaks of has to do with the forms in which we—we, researchers, archivists, activists, artists—help to activate documents and archives.

Given the hypervisibility of images and the normalization of feminist, queer archives and archival experiences in large museums or institutions, the activation of these experiences in spaces or places that allow for other forms of knowledge and memory making—places like this one, for example, a White Box that is not “a white box”—becomes necessary. Here, at this exhibition, we can touch some of the photos, browse the journals and magazines in which Josefina collaborated, read the letters that friends and acquaintances wrote in response to the matriarchive. Feminisms’ expanding archives do not exist in a stable manner; their appearance always occurs in a situated way, in the combined consideration of ephemeral objects and delicate documents that were not made to remain in the Archive.

Thinking about the work and the friendship that imagined, elaborated, and knitted this matriarchive to which Josefina and Yohanna invite us to witness today, I came back, I remembered, the words and evocations of Paulina. I also evoked the work of Luz Donoso because, in a way, she continued, in the eighties, this is, during the dictatorship, the archiving work that Josefina had begun in the years of the Popular Unity. As you may know, or as you will learn after exploring the matriarchive, Josefina left Chile before the civic-military coup of September 11, 1973. Here, we can see some of the flyers and posters Josefina designed with photos Kohen Wessing did in Chile, before and after the coup.

When I met Yohanna last year, in the midst of the pandemic, the first thing I learned about her, and by way of her, was this project, the matriarchive, this work that she has been developing with Josefina for years. I remember that her description of the matriarchive made me evoke the gestures, affects and acts I had previously found in Paulina’s account of her work with Luz Donoso’s archive: complicity, commitment, tenderness, memory; writing, imagination; listening and accompaniment. I was struck by the coincidence between the ways of doing archival work of the researchers and curators—Yohanna and Paulina—and also by the ways of doing feminist memory work embodied by the archivists and artists themselves.

Feminist complicity is made manifest here in the concern for the archive’s form; this form wants to be consistent with Josefina Mena’s thinking and doing, with her way of archiving—at the same time situated, translocal, expanded—all of which was effect of her migrations and displacements. The matriarchive attempts to account for these ways in which feminist memory operates, through its very deployment.

Feminists engage in activism in the streets and on social networks; part of this activism involves documenting, collecting, and disseminating—these are all integral tasks of feminist memory work. The recovery of demands, slogans, repertoires of actions, and collaborative work formulated by previous groups, collectives and movements is also part of this work. This way of making feminist memory, one that reveals the continuity between the past and the present and that insists on the unresolved nature of the demands and the issues, does not repeat in the same

way, but recovers by expanding, by making identity categories ever more complex (example in case: the category “women”) and by articulating different struggles.