

Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans

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Communities of concern, Dora García at M HKA Antwerp



Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

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It is rare that an exhibition of contemporary visual art is so vigorously conceived as a reading exercise.[1] In Dora García's *She Has Many Names* (M HKA Antwerp), curated by Joanna Zielińska, books are everywhere. Not only are writers such as James Joyce, Julio Cortázar, or Albert Camus subjects of García's work, but writing and reading as such appear throughout the exhibition space. Quotations are written on the walls, integrated in installations, and transformed into visual displays. Literary concepts and figures, also those found in lesser-known authors, are often at the core of García's projects. Even live performances, the focus of this exhibition, relate to literature – be it by staging a monologue on a novel or by reading aloud poems in the exhibition space. Fittingly, the title of the show, *She Has Many Names*, is also a quotation from a book – this time from Gloria Anzaldúa, a feminist author who wrote of her struggle against multiple oppressions as a Chicana[2] and a queer woman. The many names Anzaldúa talks about have to do with the complex identities she adopted,[3] but in the exhibition, this idea is expanded to refer to several things at the same time – from the many names of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the main character of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, to multiple entangled liberation and emancipation struggles, especially women's struggles, throughout time and space.

The exhibition spans a variety of works, from in-situ installations arranged on the walls and floors of the museum, through performances, to film. The various pieces are spread through the capacious halls of the museum, leaving plenty of room for performances, but more importantly, creating space for the visitors to take in the immensely rich meshwork of images and ideas. Each visit to the exhibition might be different as some performances

are staged at set times, while others are 'durational' – which means that they run for longer stretches of time. The accompanying film screening program, presented in the museum's cinema room, encompasses a selection of García's filmic work.[4] Two more recent films are shown in large format and, contrary to the isolated conditions of a black box, are allowed to intermingle with other works. This knitting together of different media occurs on the level of sensory perception – the sound is audible and large screens are visible across the spaces – but also in terms of conceptual convergences which flare up between the diverse pieces.

The artist moves effortlessly between performance and installation – media which are aimed at exhibition spaces – and film, which is intended for screen audiences.[5] The various threads she picks up from the art-historical and activist movements, as well as literature reappear variously in these different media. The density of the interconnections between various pieces is the biggest strength of the exhibition, which at the same time risks to be its greatest weakness. The breadth of García's conceptual and figurative associations, combined with her bold juxtapositions of historical and geographical moments, requires the viewer to excavate and reassemble the disparate parts, taking time for them to emerge by patiently returning to already-seen pieces or re-reading already-known books.

Yet this effort on the side of the viewer – and reader – of García's exhibition is worthwhile. It allows one to discover a way of thinking which is simultaneously material and abstract, and which facilitates an interweaving of fictional and factual elements as part of the same reality. One way of tracing that thinking path could be by following distinct, even if marginal, details across different works. Take for instance the figure of a circle, the theme of a nuclear family, or the gesture of unfolding a piece of paper. A circle is a common visual trope recurring throughout the exhibition. In different pieces, various round shapes are marked on the floor and drawn on the walls. Also, the arenas of some of the performances are delineated by circles. In *The Labyrinth of Female Freedom* (2020), the performer sits or lies down in the area marked by a circle with books by feminist authors spread around her and reads selected poems, intermittently altering the intensity of her voice. In the collection of books growing with each new iteration of the performance, the most recent addition is a volume by Ruth Lasters, an Antwerp-based author who was recently censored by the municipal authorities for a poem which appeared too critical of the Flemish education system because it pointed towards the fact that the splitting of secondary education in job-market oriented and higher-education oriented areas only exacerbates social divisions and discrimination.



Fig. 1: Dora García, *The Labyrinth of Female Freedom*, 2020. (c) M HKA.

The circle appears again in the performance *Two Planets Have Been Colliding for Thousands of Years* (2017) which is aptly shown in a large, round-shaped room. It consists of two performers, each roaming in the space delineated by one of the two non-concentric circles painted on the floor. They move gently while facing each other and gazing uninterruptedly into each other's eyes. Their absorption in each other's movement is an apparently endless and unresolved process, which seems to take place regardless of whether a public is present. It is indeed as if the performers were two planets orbiting around each other, undecided which one is the centre of gravity. The performance hints at one of the core ideas of this exhibition and of Dora García's work in general – that of being in common with others. The figure of a circle is here not only a material sign, but stands also for an idea of a community, which, as Zygmunt Bauman reminded us (quoting Göran Rosenberg), can be imagined as a 'warm circle'.^[6] In a warm circle one feels safe and loved, shielded from strife and competition. As Bauman aptly concludes, today such a community, conceived as a warm circle, represents everything that is utterly missing and inaccessible. Instead of being given, a community must be reimagined and painstakingly constructed.



Fig. 2: Dora García, *Two Planets Have Been Colliding for Thousands of Years*, 2017. (c) M HKA.

The questions of how people relate to each other, what principles guide social structures, and what role art can play in this context, have occupied García for a long time. In *She Has Many Names*, this preoccupation finds an articulation in the idea of love. Love is here not so much a sentimental or romantic attachment, but a political force which can bind a community back together. *Amor Rojo* (Red Love, 2023) is also the title of one of the films shown in the exhibition. It centres on the Soviet diplomat and feminist writer Alexandra Kollontai's period in Mexico. The archival search for Kollontai's legacy accidentally coincided with the wave of feminist protests in Mexico which erupted following repeated and increasingly outrageous acts of violence against women. The film alternates between the concentrated and slow images of hand-written letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and posters from the 1920s and 1930s and contemporary footage from the streets of Mexico City filled with thousands of enraged and disillusioned women. García weaves together the two narratives and the two historical moments, looking back at the feminist movements in the Soviet Union and Mexico as well as their contemporary heirs. Surprisingly, the slogans chanted by women today sound uncannily similar to those of the earlier feminists. The histories of feminist emancipation movements seem to be moving in circles, too.

Kollontai has been the subject of a larger collaborative project, for which García created a filmic triptych with *Amor Rojo* as its last part.[7] She showed Kollontai is a somewhat forgotten figure of the Soviet revolution who was already marginalised during her lifetime due to the radicality of her views and her position as the first woman diplomat. Her stay in Mexico, where she served as the Soviet ambassador between 1926 and 1927, was a relatively short episode in her career, which was moreover riddled with personal and political obstacles. Yet her ideas on the emancipation of women, equality, childcare, and family impacted the local feminist movement and still sound fresh and radical. One of her postulates was to abolish the traditional nuclear family, which she saw as the nexus of inequalities affecting women in all aspects of their private and professional lives. Her radical proposition, in the film read in Spanish by a feminist activist, returns in the installation by García *The Bug Timeline* (2021), consisting of a series of black boards. The work is an outgrowth of the workshops and performances built around Vladimir Mayakovski's play entitled *The Bug*, which is about a man who was frozen for 50 years to wake up in the late 1980s. This inspired García to reflect on the passing of time and especially on the linear versus circular development of events. On the timeline drawn horizontally through the black boards, García marked various historical and personal events as well as expected future milestones. In 2070, ten years after the predicted abolition of capitalism, she playfully foretells the end of marriage and the nuclear family – the definite fulfilment of Kollontai's postulate. While it may be still difficult to imagine this would become a reality, the postulate is, García seems to suggest, one of the basic conditions which should be on the agenda of feminist movements today. It is the nuclear family, and the state which models itself on its example, that is the primary source of inequality and violence.[8] The many slogans and banners held by the protesting Mexican women in 2021 and 2022 show that they are well aware of this relationship between the domestic and the political.



Fig. 3: Dora García, *Amor Rojo*, 2023. (c) Auguste Orts.

The crossover of the theme of the nuclear family from filmic and documentary work to performance and installation is just one small example of the captivating interconnections that can be found across García's works. Another such migrating element, this time a minor and gestural one, is the act of unfolding a piece of paper. In *Amor Rojo*, the camera views a close-up of gloved hands slowly and carefully unfolding a red poster belonging to the archive of Kollontai. The paper is so fragile and torn that loose pieces have to be put back together in order for the text to be readable. Several other documents appearing in the frame are similarly handled with utmost concentration and care. The slow and focused camera images draw the viewer's attention to the meticulous movement of the archivist's hands unfolding and folding back newspaper clippings and letters. This procedure is mirrored in the durational performance *Révolution* (2022), in which a performer gently unfolds a large paper banner with the inscription 'Révolution, tiens ta promesse!' ('Revolution, fulfil your promise!'). García found this slogan in a photograph from 1934 showing a protest sign worn by the Mexican activist Margarita Robles de Mendoza.[9] The second part of Mendoza's slogan reads: 'Emancipate women!' This old postulate is reinscribed by means of a performative gesture into the contemporary context. It is treated – similarly to the historical documents of the past feminist struggles – as a valuable document which should be carefully kept for future generations. This gesture brings with it the dismal realisation that despite the tone of an impatient reproach in Mendoza's call for the revolution to keep its promise, it is still something that has to be fought for today.

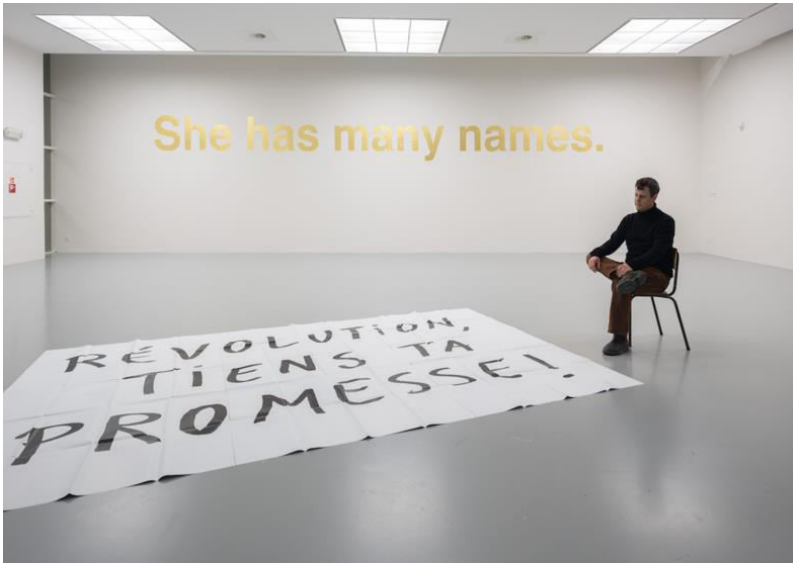


Fig. 4: Dora García, *Révolution*, 2022. (c) M HKA.

The seeming endlessness of the feminist struggle can be glanced from the sometimes-futile endeavours of Kollontai. The earlier film by García and second part of the Kollontai trilogy, *Love with Obstacles* (2020), (shown in the accompanying film screening program and featured in the almost simultaneous exhibition *L’Insecte* in the gallery Michel Rein in Paris) introduced Kollontai’s efforts to legalise abortion in the Soviet Union at the time when she served as People’s Commissar for Social Welfare and the first woman in the Bolshevik Government. Shortly after the October Revolution, Soviet legislation adopted progressive abortion laws, but then quickly reversed these laws following a conservative turn in the party leadership. Similarly, today’s right wing tendencies in some countries in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere have led to the reintroduction of an almost total abortion ban. Repeating the same emancipation slogans today as almost 100 years ago is therefore a question of necessity and not so much a choice.

Instead of avoiding it, García adopts repetition as a method – something that can be seen in another film shown in the Antwerp exhibition, *Segunda Vez* (Second Time Round, 2017). The title echoes a short story by Julio Cortazar and features a re-enactment of two performances by the Argentinian intellectual and artist Oscar Masotta. The repetition of the performances allows García to reflect on their political dimension, stemming as they did from the fraught period of state terrorism in Argentina marked by countless victims of torture and murder, the so-called disappeared (‘desaparecidos’). Her artistic strategy

connects seemingly abstract and conceptual happenings to the political and historical realities, and other way round.

Covering all these complex crossovers and interactions between different figures, gestures, and narratives in the work of García would require inventing a new way of writing – one that is nonlinear, allows for repetitions and circularities, and at the same time shows clearly how distant events, ideas, and personalities can reverberate with each other. Instead of leading to clear-cut conclusions, the argumentation in that new writing would have to take a leap into a different idea or yet another material object, visual motive, or literary figure – and start again. One of García's unsurpassable examples of such an alternative way of writing is James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which is the subject of another film, shown in the accompanying screening program, titled *The Joycean Society* (2013). It shows a group of enthusiasts who engage in a practically endless reading and deciphering of Joyce's circular book. After concluding one round of the collective reading, they spontaneously start again, convinced as they are that the process of interpretation is never completed.

While Joyce stretched the language and the format of the novel to its limits, García expands that exercise in pliability towards the disparate media she uses, retaking and transforming themes she already addressed in one medium into a new constellation of questions and ideas in an entirely different medium. Undoubtedly, each of these iterations – be it a film, a live performance, a trace of a live event in the form of an installation and a documentation – adds something specific to the theme that the artist is developing. In that sense, the media indeed are the message; but they are also, always, already mixed media and, as W.J.T. Mitchell eloquently argued,^[10] cannot be entirely disconnected from each other. A performance such as *Révolution* creates its own physical intensity and concentrated presence. The gesture of unfolding the banner, which resonates with the documentary footage from the Kollontai archive, allows García to establish kinships – whether visual, conceptual, or historical – where they are least expected. Each of the artistic media thus has its specific contribution, while they also require each other in order for the alignments and connections to become apparent.

In *She Has Many Names*, distant historical moments, such as those of the Soviet experiment, Argentinian state terror, or Mexican feminist struggles, resonate with fictional narratives, artistic experiments, and mythical figures. While learning from these histories makes the prospects for the future look bleak, the attitude which prevails in the exhibition is that of confident perseverance. In *Amor Rojo*, García shows a group of women in Mexico gathering to discuss philosophy, Kollontai's writings, and the current political climate. It

remains unclear whether the gathering happened on the participants' own accord or whether García arranged it and directed the topics of discussion. Such orchestration of a seemingly spontaneous debate would be a typical tactic of García, visible clearly in, for example, her film *Segunda Vez*, too.

The atmosphere in the gathering is that of mutual support and common struggle. At some point, one of the participants, encouraged by the company of concerned listeners, gives a heart-breaking account of the traumatic experience she had as a trans woman. The image which could be brought in connection to this testimony is the round sculpture of the dismembered body of Coyolxāuhqui, an Aztec goddess which inspired one of García's drawings – another circle present in the exhibition. Coyolxāuhqui equally inspired Gloria Anzaldúa, who coined the term 'Coyolxāuhqui imperative'.^[11] It signifies an attitude of endurance, especially in light of difficult experiences, and indicates a way out of dejection through a process of confronting and working through the pain and disappointment. The past failures and adversities must be carefully unpacked – just like the worn tissue of an old poster or newspaper article must be attentively and almost lovingly unfolded, cautious not to tear the fragile paper. This is what the group of Mexican women offered for each other and what García seems to suggest as a pathway for the emancipation struggles. Creating what Bauman called 'communities of concern',^[12] which have the courage to probe the darkest moments from the past, gives hope that a process of healing is possible.

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Notes

- [1] Many thanks to Hannah Van Hove for her attentive reading of an earlier version of this text and to the exhibition section editors Miriam De Rosa and Annet Dekker for their insightful comments.
- [2] Chicano/a is an American with Mexican descent.
- [3] Anzaldúa 1987, p. 43.
- [4] The film screening program is available in the exhibition brochure: https://s3.amazonaws.com/mhka_ensembles_production/pdf/DG_Brochure_EN.pdf.
- [5] García's artistic approach resonates with the lively theoretical debates on the interrelations between media, intermedia networks, remediation, and expanded cinema, developed by, among others: Bellour 2012, Krauss 1979, Rees, Curtis & White & Ball 2011, Uroskie 2014, Youngblood 1970.
- [6] Bauman 2001, pp. 10-11.
- [7] Apart from numerous exhibitions and events, the project resulted in the publication of books gathering historical and contemporary feminist writings: García 2020; Lind et al. 2020.
- [8] García writes about the family and the state as the two patriarchal structures responsible for the violence against women in García 2021, p. 48.
- [9] The photograph is reproduced in García, 2021, p. 13.
- [10] Mitchell 2005, pp. 257-266.
- [11] Anzaldúa 2015, pp. 19-20.
- [12] Bauman 2001, p. 150.