Alice: Would you like to introduce yourself?

Mónica: I am Mónica Mayer and I'm a feminist artist from Mexico City.

Alice: What do you mean by feminist artist?

[00:00:11.15]

Mónica: I think there are different ways to understand this. I think as a woman artist, I get all the problems from patriarchy, whether I'm a feminist or not. I think there's artists who do work that has to do with gender, but they don't have a political implication in their work. And as a feminist artist, I do work that has to do with having analyzed these problems. For me very specifically, has to do with doing work that, apart from proposing something in terms of art, proposes something in terms of politics. And changing the situation for women, the power relationship between men and women. But also all the other power relationships because I think we are often- the oppressed or the oppressor, and the situation changes. One can be one in one moment, and the other, in another. And I like to situate myself in terms of my oppression as a woman, to be able to understand other oppressions, and to see how to disarticulate these kind of relationships that happen all the time and on very many different levels.

[00:01:16.15]

Alice: Could you give us examples of what you're talking about?

Mónica: In my own work?

Alice: Yes.

Mónica: For the past few years, I've been working on a project that has to do with archives.

Alice: Mhm.

Mónica: That has to do with going into archives, looking at the work, and then uh doing whatever I find uh necessary or the works that come out of that. I never know what my work is going to look like because I don't make a difference between my personal life and my art work. I don't make a difference between education and politics and art. For me, they're all things that are blended. So my work might end up looking like something that most people don't consider art work. And I don't really care.

But for example, one piece is- I've been working with the archive of Ana Victoria Jiménez, who's a Mexican activist, editor, photographer. With whom I participated with since the seventies in the feminist movement. Unfortunately she couldn't come to this event. But Ana Victoria documented the feminist movement and it's all this history that she was able to record. And that is very important to us because I think this is a kind of struggle that often gets erased or not considered "History" with a capital H.

So going back into her archive, I found images of my own participation in, for example, the struggle towards free and legal abortion. In Mexico, in the- which I thought was never going to happen because we come from a very Catholic country. That was in 1979 so it's almost forty years ago that I went to that demonstration. And based on that demonstration, I started collaborating with other women because a lot of my work, which I think has to do also with an idea of feminist art- that it's not just my own individual author work, but it usually comes out of collective work. I like to work collectively and to have many voices in my work. So I work with artists and activists to try to think what are the problems of motherhood today in Mexico City. In Mexico City, abortion is legal and is free. Which is a very important part, because if not, women who don't have resources are forced to put their health in danger.

[00:03:28.25]

We started talking about how it's different. The younger women, for example, kept on talking about how it was important for them to fight against their families who kept on insisting and, "When are you going to get married? When are you going to have children?" and "If you don't have children, you're not a full woman." And all these myths that exist. And other women were very aware of the economic situations of so many women in Mexico that have to leave their communities, have to leave their own children to come to the city to work as maids in houses or to work as nannies and not- take care of other women's children and have to abandon their own. So all these situations came up, or the, so many young women who get pregnant, because there's either no birth control or they don't have an education. They don't know how to prevent pregnancy, unwanted pregnancies.

So all these different ideas we had put under the concept of kidnapped or sequestered motherhoods. And all the motherhoods that are not joyful and are not voluntary. And all the different problems that are still around, around the issue of being- mothers, I think that is a central issue in feminism. Because it sort of marks the divide. People justify that women get paid less because we go off on mother, mother's leave etcetera etcetera, you know? And on the other hand, men also are kept separate from their children. It was very interesting to me, I'm going to go off a bit on another side.

[00:04:56.03]

A couple of years ago, I had a big exhibition at the MUAC, that Karen Cordero curated. And it was a feminist art exhibition. And a guy came up and wrote a letter complaining, saying, "I went to this feminist exhibition and I had to take my baby to the bathroom to change it, and in the men's bathrooms, there's no place where you can change a baby. And I had to go out and take out my wife from a feminist exhibition so that she could do it." You know? For me feminism is changing those roles that keep men- I don't see men as enemies- I don't see patriarchy as someone imposed on me. I think I'm part of patriarchy and I've swallowed a lot of it. And for me feminism is trying to soften those roles and trying to get out of me what I have swallowed of patriarchy.

[00:05:43.27]

So this goes all into my work coming back to that. So in this piece, and after working with different groups, and each group deciding what they wanted to work with. For example, there was one group that was called, "Escombros," when a building falls down, and what's left. Their group was called the rubble of motherhood. And they had all decided not to have children. But they still had to take care of their younger brothers or sisters or they had to take care of their parents when they got old. As women they found that, even if they didn't have children, they were still forced onto this kind of role. So they got a group and they talked about that. So then we all came together and we decided to do a demonstration.

That was like a, when you have a red carpet or when you have models walking on a catway I think you call it? So we made a catway in the street for a performance, demonstration. And it was made of the cloth we use for cleaning the floor, jerga? And so we had this walk and then we each walked with all the different proposals we had. A sequestered motherhood, a kidnapped motherhood, being a lesbian and having my children taken away, as being dying because the Church imposes women not having abortions- all these different ideas. And we did it in the street and everybody had their different voices. And we took a lot of photographs. And we did a demonstration that was a performance and a demonstration. A lot of my work has not been- has eventually got to be shown in museums. But I always say its natural habitat is either the street or the media or other places. I work in these places.

[00:07:22.29]

And another piece that came out of this work with Ana Victoria's archive is doing an archive. A little archive that is, folder, a little suitcase. That has a story of seventy-four feminist artists. So I think it's important to do our own history. Nobody else is going to do it for us! Nobody cares about feminist art. I care about feminist art! And I think it's important and I'm going to record it. So we recorded it and then this work I took to the feminist groups in Mexico, because the feminist groups often don't consider art important. And I took it to contemporary art museums because contemporary art doesn't consider it important.

And I've been to many universities, giving talks and showing this work, so- my work has to do with research and has to do with mixing it with teaching and mixing it with activism and doing these kinds of things. That's like the kind of work we do. And most people don't think it's art. And I don't care. I learned many years ago, I studied for two years at a place called the Women's Building in Los Angeles, which was an early feminist school, which was quite wonderful because it's like those times when you really feel that art work has to do with your community. Which I think it's the most fantastic feeling to be able to have that. For me it was interesting to start thinking of art not as something that I have to learn to be good at, but to art become what I need it to be. So I don't care if it doesn't look like art.

[00:08:50.16]

Alice: Right. Yes, yes! We don't often think of art in those terms. The way you're explaining it. But out of curiosity, I'd like your views on the Mexican woman artist that is reasonably well-known in art circles in Canada. Kahlo, Frida Kahlo- how has it impacted on Mexico? Or on women? Like here, we worship her. She's adored. You know? Almost like I get the impression she's adored without any, without any understanding of social lives of Mexican people.

Mónica: Yeah.

Alice: So that's my opinion as a Nishnaabekwe who knows a tiny weeny bit about stuff. But so I would just like to know how you would articulate how you see her and the role she's played in art and feminist art and what she has done for women in Mexico.

Mónica: I think it's complicated and complex and contradictory.

Alice: Yes. Well your work is! Well not contradictory. It's very um, what was the words you used- complicated and-

Mónica: I dunno-

Alice: -a lot of well, yes-

Mónica: It doesn't look like art.

Alice: Yeah.

Mónica: But Frida is interesting because, on the one hand, I like her work very much.

Alice: Yes!

Mónica: I love it. I like her character very much. I always say that she's more than a great painter, she's a great performance artist because she created a character that was, that is so strong that people want to be her character. There's an example-

Alice: In Mexico?

Mónica: In Mexico. And in other places.

Alice: Mhm. Okay.

Mónica: You have people dressing up as Frida Kahlo in Halloween.

Alice: Oh yeah?

Mónica: You have people making films, you have people making theatre productions. I started thinking of this many years ago when- I think he's an Argentinian photographer, Leo Matiz- he'd been in the forties to Mexico and started photographing her. And then he was kicked out of the country for political reasons. And she died eventually in the fifties. And he came back in the nineties to continue taking the photos of Frida. He dressed someone up as Frida. So it was interesting to me to think of this Frida as not there, the real Frida Kahlo, but she's, her character is. So I like to think of her as that.

I think her paintings are wonderful in terms of- she talked about many social issues. And you can see work about a relationship between women and you can see work that has to do with abortion and you can see work that has to do with a class struggle. She was very committed politically. But on the other hand, a whole corporation has now taken over her work. There's a barbie doll that is coming out. She's like the token woman for all women artists? We have Frida Kahlo and then we don't have to think of anyone else? The names of two other Mexican women artists. Nobody would know them.

Alice: That's right.

Mónica: Even in Mexico. You know?

Alice: Mhm.

Mónica: So on the one hand, it's good, and the other hand it's complicated. And it's interesting in terms of, she represents a generation that sort of established the idea of the Indigenous we have now.

[00:12:00.11]

Which is very idealized. And not necessarily very good to the Indigenous people.

Alice: Yeah. Exactly.

Mónica: So it's contradictory in many terms. I think her whole idea of what she was promoting was one thing and what ends up happening with a government as they take advantage of these things is another. But Frida was quite a character.

Alice: I know that systemically, Indigenous people are not valued, especially what could be labelled "nomadic." So if they can use- if the system could use anything to devalue, to help devalue Indigenous people, they will use it.

Mónica: But it's not devalue if it's idealized. I think the way our government has used it is idealized. I mean we have the whole narrative of "we're a Mestizo country." We're blended.

Alice: Oh yes.

Mónica: We all have blood that has, that has to do, European. Now we're starting to recognize the African-

Alice: Mhm-

Mónica: -roots and Indigenous, of a very very Indigenous, very many different communities. That have had different positions as well. But the situation of classism and racism is still very mixed and it's still something we have to deal with in many, in many ways. Another thing I wanted to say about Frida, that I think is part of the contradiction. Her whole image is centered about how much she suffered because of her, her relationship with her husband-

Alice: Right-

Mónica: Which I think is the least important part. And her suffering very much. When I was a young student, I used to see- what role models do I have? Frida Kahlo who suffered a whole lot. Celia Calderón, who committed suicide in the classroom in one of my schools. Nahui Olin who, when she became old, she became like a witch and she would bring cats to her house and they all lived with her. And whenever they died, she would skin them and make this big quilt she had. So those were the stories I said I don't-

Alice: A quilt? [Laughs]

Mónica: I don't want- like a blanket!

Alice: Yeah I know. I'm just kidding [laughs].

Mónica: But it was like a very personal thing for her. It was her had- it's not that she was killing the cats to make that-

Alice: No.

Mónica: And I said, "I don't want to be a woman artist." Either you commit suicide or you suffer, so I had to find myself another role model. Which is a sculpture who died a few years ago- Helen Escobedo. She had a good family life. She was a successful artist, she opened museums, and I said, "I want to grow up to be like that. I don't want to grow up to be like Frida Kahlo."

Alice: Very good point. Yes!

Mónica: [Laughs]

[00:14:41.14]

Alice: What relationships have you fostered or been fostered through your memory project? And in particular would you reflect on how intergenerationality plays out in your work?

Mónica: I have been very fortunate to have had older women artists like Helen Escobedo, like Catriona who was my photography teacher, uh all these wonderful women who, who have helped me.

Alice: Yes.

Mónica: And who have opened doors to me. And I have always felt this is, particularly as a feminist artist, this is something that is part of my work to do with researchers, with artists, with other people of younger generations. Because the knowledge is so dispersed or so non-existent that we have to make an effort. I work with younger artists all the time. My work is done in collaboration with them. So I think a lot of my work has to do with making these things between different generations to the past and to the present. That's one aspect.

I find for example, feminism in Mexico, is usually- like in other places where feminism is very politically correct, I think feminism in Mexico is very much like, how do you call it when a tiger goes SHRACK! [Imitates sound]. We're sort of very- everybody's fighting with everybody. All the time. You know, it's violent. We have conflicts, big conflicts between one group and the other. And in my experience of feminist art and women's art, I have found sorority.

Alice: Mm.

Mónica: I have found that there's a space within art that, in different generations we're able to get on very well probably because we're not struggling for power of any kind. I've been taught by then and I try to share my knowledge and learn from the younger people as well. Which I find very interesting. I love it. I see the work of younger artists and I get shocked, “Oh, they're working with menstrual blood!” Or whatever, you know. And then I say it's so wonderful that I get shocked. I love it, you know. That they're able to change how I think and how I see things.

[00:16:40.13]

Alice: So how do you deal with the populace which doesn't accept that kind of thing? Like, one time, I forget what the exhibit was, but there was a woman who illustrated in her paintings, a woman who had her legs spread and she was menstruating. And they wanted to have it in the mayor's office or at City Hall or whatever, and the mayor, a man, wouldn't allow it. And a lot of people did not like it. The converted loved it but the other people did not like it.

Mónica: Well this is something I've always been very aware of because I don't do work for the converted- uh you said- I'm very interested in having my work get out. And I've learned on the way. For example at one point, when I was in the United States, I was very shocked over there because I would get to the feminist houses and they would have their altars to the goddess. And they would include the Virgin of Guadalupe. And to me the Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol of oppression.

Alice: Yes.

Mónica: And for them it was a symbol of liberation. So I started doing work that had to do with the Virgin that I hadn't done before. And I had all these drawings that had the image of a virgin, not actually Guadalupe but Los Remedios, with the word "rape" around. Because I think it's a peculiar myth. You know, I think it's a peculiar myth. This woman, young woman who gets pregnant by- which we have in the Aztec tradition as well, you know, that- suddenly when patriarchy changes to- matriarchy changes to patriarchy, then women get pregnant who knows how?

[Laughter]

And these very strange things happen, you know? But I showed the work in Mexico- nothing happened in the United States- I showed it in Mexico. And immediately it was censored. And I asked to the people who censored it, you know, because I wanted to find out. I went to talk to them and it was in a school, and it was the mothers who had complained. And I said, "Look, what I'm trying to talk about is this thing about women being oppressed and not being able to enjoy our sexuality and either you're good or you're bad. These whole roles." And "Please tell me why you were offended?" And they said, "We very much agree with what you say, but you used the image." And I said, "Ah!" This is interesting because it's like doctors are used to seeing blood and they don't get shocked. As an artist, for me, they're symbols- they're elements to work with. I don't attribute them any magical meaning, you know? So I started in my following drawings, I used my, my revolso I put it on my head. Everybody knows I'm taking about the Virgin, but it's not the image. So I've never been censored anymore.

So on the one hand, I do talk to the people who might be offended. We talked in the feminist art group I had with Maris Bustamante which is called "Black Hen's Dust" which is a remedy against the evil eye. We used a lot of very popular words and images like that. And we were talking about rape and we thought this was going to be very difficult in Mexico, not to get a lot of bumping into heads all the time. So we used humour. So we would do the recipe to cause the evil eye to rapist. And we would do a performance that has to do with it. And then people were able to hear what we were saying, and not feel threatened, and be able to connect.

So I think I have tried it. I think the work has become extended. We did for example one piece, we did a whole project on motherhood and we went to a television program that was like the most popular television program. And the conductor, we put him a fake tummy. And we named him "mother" for a day. Because we sort of said, "Poor men, they're never going to be mothers.” We really wanted to be mothers and we really enjoyed it, and you're never going to have that chance. So we're very good, we're very generous. So we're going to make you mother for a day. So this was seen by 10 million people. And obviously the men started phoning, saying, "How horrible." And the women, "How wonderful." And the guy played very well with us. But we used this kind of humour and role playing so that, so that we could engage people and not- I'm usually very angry. And my angry is there- anger is there. But I can't dialogue from my anger because I know I won't be heard. So it's been a process of trying to say things differently.

[00:21:21.00]

Alice: What an amazing idea! I wish, I wish that maybe students at Trent could take that up, you know? Using, how to use humour to change. Bring change. That would be interesting instead of butting heads. The way we do it is so confrontational. Like in that image I was telling you about with the mayor. That is, you know, it did but heads. And what if we had sessions- what if somebody from Trent- and I think of Trent as supposed to be changing because they’re- a changer! Bringing change, you know? They have the resources to bring change. You know, I don't! How do you survive money-wise?

Mónica: Oh, all my life I worked as a translator. And I worked as a teacher. English classes. I go to companies at 7 o'clock in the morning, or 6 o'clock and teach from six to eight. And I would do it in the morning and Victor would do it in the afternoon. So then we each had time to be with our children.

Alice: Oh nice.

Mónica: We decided that early on that we wanted to give them the same amount of Mother than of Father. And we always had these other jobs around, too. In Mexico, it's very hard. Now, we have some grants and now I have a grant. A three year grant from the government. And uh I decided to apply for it when I was sixty because I said, "I'm running out of time."

Alice: Mhm. Yes.

Mónica: If I don't really sit down right now and start making things more concrete, I'm not gonna have the energy. So I have a grant right now from the government. And it allows me to not have to work in so many other things. I still have to work in them. Because if I don't, then I'm running out of the grant and it's ending in July. So then I'm gonna have to start working again, you know?

Alice: Right.

Mónica: But yeah. I, that's, that was very clear to me. I do come from a, privileged economically. I do have my house. Which has always been a big difference. I have had privilege in that way. If I hadn't had a house, I wouldn't have been able to be an artist.

Alice: Yeah.

Mónica: But that's why I also feel more committed. I think it was very much in my family. This whole thing of being responsible. Okay, you're one step up in the economic ladder? But that means you also have that much more responsibility.

Alice: Mhm.

Mónica: And for example, my parents had, we had a Telesecundaria- which is when television, high school through television started working. My Mother was not able to study so when this program opened, she decided to study from home but she brought thirty children in to study. And we had two whole groups of secondary kids coming in from, from all around. And she studied with them. So my examples on how to be committed to education and how to be committed to a community kind of life have come from my parents. Even from privilege.

Alice: Mhm.

Mónica: I think they always taught me not to take privilege as something that was a gift but as something that was a responsibility.

Alice: I feel that you've given us so much that we haven't even thought about.

Mónica: It's the same. I've learned a lot here.

Alice: Oh [laughs] thank you so much. That was wonderful.

[00:24:44.21]

[End of tape]