CONFIRMING CLAIMS AND INVESTIGATING IDENTITIES:
FRIDA KAHLO AND AMERICAN FEMINISM IN THE LATE 1970s.

by
SUE MELNYCHUK

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Department of **Fine Arts**
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date **Oct 12, 1992**
Abstract

In the summer of 1991 full fledge "Fridamania" hit New York. Backlit billboards exhibited self portraits of the 20th century Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo (1904 - 1954) and it seemed that Kahlo had once again been re-discovered by the United States public. This scenario of re-discovery is one that Kahlo has been constantly subjected to. And it is for that reason that she is an excellent candidate through which to examine processes of reception implicit to art history. Her candidacy is particularly appropriate when one considers the dramatic transformation of her status from that of heroine for American feminist art historians writing in the 1970s, to the existent explosion of near cult status in 1990.

It is not Kahlo herself who is the subject of this thesis, rather it is her reception by the American public. To consider such a "public" is an overly broad task; therefore I will focus on Kahlo's reception by American feminist historians in the late 1970s. This focus highlights my interest in feminist art history, and provides an opportunity to consider the claims of that seemingly distant and radical era.

Kahlo's significance for feminists will be explored through an interrogation of the interpretive strategies used by feminist historians writing on Kahlo. The purpose is both, to recognize the historical challenges feminist art historians encountered, and to elucidate the underlying issues that ideologically bound American feminism together. In consideration of these ideological connections this thesis contends that many of the
challenges feminist historians faced were in fact discursive pressures which functioned to limit and contain their feminist practise.

Each chapter within the thesis examines a specific feminist interpretive strategy that characterized how issues of biography, the canon, and nationalism structured feminist writing in the instance of Frida Kahlo. The main thrust of this investigation is not so much the conclusions of feminists, but rather how their strategies describe a struggle for interpretive power in the cultural economy of the United States in the late 1970s.

The method I am using seeks to grapple with both the historical contingencies of the period, and limitations enforced by art historical discourse. This will be done by examining sites of contradiction and patterns of absence inherent to the historical narratives feminists have built around Frida Kahlo's personae and practise. It is at these sites of conflict and absence that insights are gained into the historical discursive pressures encountered by feminists. The political and historical choices feminists made are quite clear, what is not, are the needs, agendas and pressures behind those choices.

My contention is that strategies of American feminist historians were informed not only by a feminist-politic, but by an American cultural-politic which acted as both screen and frame for their investigations. Moreover, that politic served to establish and maintain viewing positions from which a feminist art historical identity could be formed. Ultimately this paper
suggests that the feminist reception of Kahlo, served the needs of an American viewing position, both through its ability to confirm the claims, and enforce the identity, of its own position.
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On reflection of this thesis, I am inclined to think of it as a product of a much larger community than myself as author, would suggest. And although I take responsibility for what I have written, I also recognize that the results reflect the different contacts that I have had with many people and their immeasurably exciting ideas. Given this, I must acknowledge the value of stimulating and challenging conversations with peers and professors, some who have influenced me in much more significant and startling ways than they might assume. On that level, my advisors Drs. San Juan and Guilbaut presented challenges and asked questions of my work which was fundamental to its development. I want also to acknowledge the support of friendships both inside and outside the Fine Arts Department. Specifically, Sandra Gillespie and Lora Rempel provided emotional support and intellectual sustenance which was critical in allowing me to view my personal struggles surrounding this thesis as worthwhile. And Charles Greenberg helped to keep my view far seeing and my eyes clear.
Since the spring of 1990 it appears that the United States public has been engaged in a love affair with the 20th century Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo (1909 - 1954). This is not Kahlo's first appearance on the stage of public approval; there was a much earlier, and less widespread re-discovery of her by feminist historians and critics in the late 1970s. Kahlo's relationship to feminism although profound has now been taken for granted. In May 1991, Newsweek reported that Kahlo's Self Portrait With Loose Hair had sold at Christie's for the highest auctioned price paid till then for a Latin American work. It was also noted that the previous owner was 83 year old feminist Louise Noun and that the sale would help endow a women's archives at the University of Iowa.¹ This account suggests that there remain many contemporary connections between images of Frida Kahlo and the politics of feminism. Such an affiliation is a provocative one, and thus I have sought to trace the political relationship between Frida Kahlo and feminism, while critically examining Kahlo's unusually precise and perfect fit into the matrix of feminist aesthetic debates.²

2. See Oriana Bradeley, "Her Dress Hangs Here, Defrocking the Kahlo Cult", Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, p. 10-17, for an initial discussion of this. The author's conclusion is that "this appropriateness of Kahlo's aesthetic to contemporary debates has tended to remove her work from its historical context, to stress the collective and the crosscultural.", p. 14.
Though many may recall early contemporary feminism as having its greatest impact in the early 1970s; its radical activism did not begin to rupture art historical paradigms until the mid to late 1970s. One of the ways that rupture was effected was through the development of alternative interpretive strategies: creating different ways of seeing art. Feminist art historians sought to develop an interpretive frame colored by feminist politics, and defined by strategies that were initial and investigative, forging and re-forming the discipline as they worked.

This thesis plans to recognize the value and power of that politic, while critically examining the theoretical and political choices made. The purpose is not to critique feminism itself, but rather to interrogate American feminist's interpretative strategies specifically as they relate to Frida Kahlo. Such an interrogation is important because those strategies are part of the process of reception that organizes how we understand practises of making art. The notion of reception in art historical literature is perhaps the most productive and challenging methodology available to art historians today. This thesis acknowledges that challenge by seeking to explore how feminists received Kahlo, and secondly, by recognizing the historical importance of challenges created by feminists in the 1970s.
Philosophical Departures

The most obvious concerns for feminist art historians writing on Frida Kahlo in the United States have been to investigate and re-define particular conventions for viewing Kahlo's work. These conventions followed a philosophical trajectory set up by specific feminist concerns that developed out of the women's movement of the early 1970s. One of their overriding philosophical aims was to develop a truly effective feminist artistic practice and one which worked toward productive social change. Consequently, many understood the issues of representation as a political question.3

Feminist art historians challenged notions of history, genius and the universality of art, and this challenge had a companion politic which was manifested in highly activist forms. Feminist historian and critic Arlene Raven recalls, that women protested their exclusions from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the Whitney Museum, set up shared workspaces and art collectives, and organized feminist publications.4 Most importantly, they felt that only as a

3. Feminist Art Criticism, eds. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Lager, and Joanna French, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 87. For a detailed history of the conflicts and commitments of the early feminist art historical movement, see also Thalia Gouma - Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History", The Art Bulletin, Vol. LXIX, no. 3, pp. 325 - 357, Arlene Raven ed., Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), and Sandre Langer, "Emerging Feminist Art History", Art Criticism, Vol. 1, no.2, Winter 1980, pp. 66 - 83. What also has to be acknowledged is that there have always been voices which have challenged the constructs and collusions of art history. Most effectively these voices are heard from the left, were Marxist in method and masculine in timbre: Frederick Antal, Max Raphael, Arnold Hauser, Meyer Schapiro, to name a few.
4. Arlene Raven, Crossing Over p.5
movement could they achieve what women had been denied. Their "culture of tears and years of oppression" would now result in a positive culture which was women-centered: created for women and by women.\(^5\)

Feminist historians saw the most pressing and fundamental work as the retrieval of the lost and absent woman from history. This meant unearthing, documenting and interpreting the art produced by women artists.\(^6\) Frida Kahlo was included in this revival. After a decided lack of interest in her in the 1950s and 1960s, she was re-introduced to the United States, through the work of feminist art historians.\(^7\) Kahlo's relevance for feminists was the immediacy with which they understood her images to depict a "female point of view." For feminists, Kahlo was proof that women had participated in the creation of symbols for themselves, and furthermore, that those symbols would lead to knowledge and histories of subjects that had previously been unacknowledged by history. Kahlo was a historic identity which

\(^{5}\) Ibid., p. 5 - 6.
\(^{6}\) Similar to women's literary criticism which developed at the same time, if only slightly earlier, the concern here was inspired by the desire to find out what makes women's texts different from men's, with the purpose of attempting to establish a feminine tradition. For a discussion of this see Toril Moi, "Sexual/Textual Politics", The Politics of Theory, ed. Francis Baker, et al., (Colchester: University of Essex), 1983, p.2.
\(^{7}\) One of the earliest accounts of Kahlo from a feminist perspective was Orenstein's article for the radical magazine: Gloria Orenstein, "Frida Kahlo: Painting for Miracles", The Feminist Art Journal, Fall, 1973, pp. 7 - 9. It wasn't until almost ten years later when the most significant re-introduction of Kahlo was done by Hayden Herrera, A Biography of Frida Kahlo, (New York: Harper and Row), 1983. A 500-page biography deemed by the contemporary press to be "fascinating, dramatic, and definitive". In many ways this approach signified an attempt to negotiate around notions of genius; Herrera was critical of Kahlo's exclusion from the pantheon but not necessarily of the process itself.
confirmed the claims feminists wanted to make about representation. 8

The most popular and prolific writers on Kahlo were, and in some cases still are: Nancy Breslow (American art critic), Gloria Orenstein (American art historian), Hayden Herrera (American art critic and free lance curator), and finally, Lucy Lippard (New York art critic). Each has interpreted Kahlo's work differently, but as a group they articulated general trends which will serve as the basis for my methodological critique. Writers are typically more fragmented in their approaches, but this group is drawn together by the politics of a period that required consolidation, unification and solidarity: the underlying tenets of early seventies American feminism. The consistency with which feminists approached Kahlo suggests that there were underlying principles that bound American feminist writing together ideologically, serving as the steel pillars that supported their frame of interpretive strategies. 9

8. Stuart Hall discusses this phenomena in terms of the struggle of black consciousness-raising, where the sign of "black" is plucked out of its articulation and re-articulated in a new way. He comments, "In that very struggle is a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, and the emergence into visibility of a new subject." See, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicity" in Culture, Globalization and the World-System. Anthony D. King ed. Binghamton, (New York: State University of New York), p. 54.

9. Joan Borsa, "Frida Kahlo: Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject", Third Text, no.12, Autumn 1990, pp.21 - 40. More recently, Joan Borsa, a Canadian art historian, has discounted these earlier feminist approaches. She believes their work reinforces the myth of the artist as tortured genius and presents women as victims by making artistic production equal to that of therapy (p.26). To avoid this pitfall Borsa has attempted to look more closely at how Kahlo has constructed her own identity, how she has resisted spaces that were deemed female, and how her work speaks of a culturally separate and different space (pp.27 - 28). One could say that Borsa's focus reads as Kahlo's account of herself, whereas this paper is more interested in interpreting North American
Each chapter of this thesis examines a specific feminist interpretive strategy that characterized how issues of biography, the canon and geography structured feminist writing in the instance of Frida Kahlo. Chapter 1 describes an approach that subjects the historical persona of Kahlo to the all-encompassing metaphor of biography, thus transforming Kahlo's visual language into a political language for feminists. Chapter 2 examines how feminists attempted to negotiate between the demands of their discipline of art history and those of their own political agenda. It outlines the way feminists interpreted Kahlo's self-image as being socialized by patriarchy, which led to the collusion of groups as diverse as surrealists and feminists. Finally, chapter 3 examines feminism's attempt to challenge the aesthetic criteria of modernism through a consideration of Kahlo's use of folkart. An analysis of this particular perception of Kahlo reveals an insistence on American cultural hegemony by feminists. This insistence is related within the discussion to feminists' understanding of their own national identity in relationship to a Mexican national identity. Thus, the last chapter attempts to scrutinize the politics of geography as they intersect with those of feminism. Each discussion will highlight specific problems with these interpretive strategies to reveal the discourses which informed, structured and ultimately framed feminist writing.  

accounts of Kahlo and uncovering the ideological agendas that those accounts have served.

10. Refer to Carolyn G. Heilbrun's work which seeks to articulate the difficulties and limitation that women face in terms of writing on women: "Women are writing and still writing under the constraints of acceptable
To gain access to such discursive structures my method of analysis elaborates and uncovers "patterns of absence" within the attending literature. In historical terms, this refers to a temporal and art historical layering process that results from Kahlo's original moments of interaction, production, resistance, provocation, insinuation and dialogue. The art historical process transforms these moments into art historical narratives. Kahlo's "authentic and original" moments are not retrievable, but as Gayatri Spivak, theoretician and literary critic comments, those texts or moments, can be used as tokens within a different cultural economy, where the focus is on dissent, subject and struggle for interpretive power.11 I aim to uncover feminists' particular struggles for interpretive power within the cultural economy of the United States in the late 1970s. I will do this by comparing sites where the art historical narratives clash and jar with one another. The results of that conflict are spaces left open for more critical readings.12 These open spaces are the "patterns of absence" of which I speak. This methodology does not make a linear argument possible; instead problems and conventions are manifest by their absence and the discussion, as if under agreement of what can be left out." Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life, (New York: WW Norton and Company), 1988, p.30. Another helpful theoretical source was Nancy Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1988.

11. As quoted in: Jean Franco, Plotting Women, Gender and Representations in Mexico, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1989, p.xii

12. Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutique du soupcon" assumes that a text is not only what it pretends to be, and therefore looks for underlying contradictions and conflicts as well as absences and silences, see Toril Moi's "Sexual /Textual Politics" p. 3 for a discussion of this. Philosophically my text is closely aligned with these assumptions.
presence of contradictory fragments within the literature. Such patterns signal openings that allow alternative readings to take place.

Since my critique is based on a frame defined by feminist writing, then I must also acknowledge other art historical structural supports of those writings. Specifically, the writings of feminists with which I am concerned need to be juxtaposed against the cultural relations of the period. Thus, I will take time now to outline the place of Mexican art in the United States at this particular time -- the mid 1970s.
Historical Departures

The growing Latin American influences on mainstream American culture must be understood as one of the discourses that permeate the Kahlo cult. American art historian Shifra Goldman made the argument in 1988 that vulnerability of Latin American art to North American imperialism has existed since before the early 1970s. She saw the situation as one of "cultural dependence", made evident by the corporate connections of institutions such as the Center for Inter-American Relations (funded by the Rockefeller foundation) which specifically aimed to recover American respect in Latin America during the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs and the 1962 missile crisis.

13. Interestingly, the First World Conference for International Women's Year sponsored by the United Nations was held in Mexico City in 1975. Numerous exhibitions featured female Mexican artists, including Frida Kahlo. See Shirfa Goldman, "Six Women Artists of Mexico", Women's Art Journal, Vol. 3, no. 2, Fall 1982/Winter 83, p. 1. Also see TIME, vol. 132, no. 2, July 1988 which marked the crest of these trends by presenting a cover issue on: "Hispanic Culture Breaks Out Of the Barrio" and subtitled "A Latin Wave Hits the Mainstream". Along with examining the cultural chic of this latino wave the magazine also notes how the past ten years have seen an explosive increase in US immigration from Latin American countries, and likewise an increase of $134 billion dollars in spending power wielded by Spanish-speaking Americans. Hence "entering the mainstream", means both voting and spending power: Time reported that candidates in the southwest, New York, and Miami are forced by sheer demographic numbers to consider the Latino vote.


This politically motivated history of cultural exchanges culminated in the *Mexico today* symposium held throughout the United States during 1978. The symposium consisted of exhibitions, seminars, films, performing arts, and courses on contemporary Mexico.\(^\text{16}\) Not surprisingly, this was also a year vital to economic issues, since the symposium coincided with negotiations between the US and Mexico on the export of petroleum and natural gas. These negotiations were tied to Mexico's economic boom of 1978-1981, induced by the announcement of oil and gas reserves which were to have reached 250 billion barrels.\(^\text{17}\) In his opening remarks to the *Mexico Today* symposium, past ambassador to Mexico, John Java, stressed the importance of linking culture with the economics of petroleum:

> In terms of its culture, GNP and population, Mexico already is one of the world's more important countries. Now with the discovery of raw oil, our

marked the ghettoization of Latin American art, since the Union program became the single point of entry into the country, effectively removing Latin American art from mainstream culture. See *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States 1920 - 70*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), p.194.


17. *Mexico A Country in Crisis*, ed. Jerry R. Ladman, (El Paso: The University of Texas), 1986 provides a good discussion of the economic situation in the introduction and Chapter 1 "Roots of the Crisis" pp. xi - 12. The details of the international negotiations are beyond the scope of this paper, but, it suffices to say that in return for infrastructure support the US had expected that Pemex would respond with special prices which would undercut OPEC's current market price.
southern neighbor is certain to become an even more significant economic force in world affairs. 18

Mexico's economic boom was hoped by then President Echeverria to help diversify the economy, decrease dependency on the United States, and place Mexico firmly in the position as a leader of the Third World. 19 In a cultural effort towards these goals, Mexico arranged for a touring exhibition concurrent with Mexico Today entitled Treasures of Mexico. The show was conceived of and brought to the U.S. by the Armand Hammer Foundation, along with the cooperation of Santiago Roel, Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the Mexican government. The foundation's namesake, Armand Hammer was CEO of the Occidental Petroleum Oil Corporation, international philanthropist, art collector, and not accidentally, owner of the only two private galleries that this public exhibition was shown at (Knoedler and Hammer Galleries in New York).

Ironically, the Mexico Today symposium, which was predicated on the idea of Mexico climbing the ladder of

19. Although the symposium and exhibition covered a broad spectrum of Mexican culture, what was not reflected were the difficulties between Mexico and the US surrounding oil and gas negotiations and the resulting tensions that were so symptomatic of the late seventies. In June 1979 President Carter was accused of erecting a "petroleum curtain" and Mexico was blamed for empty Oldsmobile tanks, because of PEMEX's failure to increase oil to meet the demands of the American government. Cultural interventions that attempted to ease these frictions did not always succeed. One of the less successful was Armand Hammer's exhibition in Mexico City of his Renaissance art collection valued at 65 million. Despite the invitation from President Lopez, this extravaganza of private art was condemned by Mexican journalists, who interpreted the show as an "art curtain" to camouflage business dealings in oil. See Edward H. Worthen, "The Hammer Affair and Recent U.S. - Mexican Relations", World Affairs, Vol. 142, no. 1, Summer, 1979, pp. 33 - 44.
international power relations, ultimately presented a view of Mexico that was based on its past. The Treasures of Mexico show stressed pre-Columbian art throughout the exhibition; its presentation of modern artists consisted of those who "comprised the esthetic or contemplative wings of Mexican painting, whose concerns dealt more with formal problems and "universalism" as opposed to the narrow nationalism of Mexico."20 Criticisms of the show ultimately stemmed from its emphasis on "universal" and "timeless" values, introduced and reinforced by Octavio Paz in the catalogue's Introduction.21 Paz stressed the notion of the "continuity" of Mexican culture, a concept that when used in a historical context is translated into a notion of "timelessness". The principle of timelessness operates by repressing the specifics of cultural difference and upholding supposedly universal values inherent to cultural products. Clearly, the Treasures of Mexico exhibit stressed

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20. Shifra Goldman, "Rewriting the History..." p. 103 This promotion of Mexican art quickly fed appetites for new art markets. In 1977, when Sotheby's initiated their trial sale of Latin American art, artists such as Rivera, Tamayo, Zuniga and Francisco Toledo surpassed their estimates. And by the spring of 1979, after the symposium, prices boomed and Kahlo's work entered the market, saleroom estimates of her work had risen from $40,000 to over $1 million. In 1990 a work by Kahlo broke all records at Sotheby's New York for a Latin American artist. Noting the profits to be made, Christie's entered the Latin American market in 1982, see above reference p.109. For statistical information on Kahlo's art sales see Oriana Bradeley, p.10.

21. Even during its production and exhibition, there was much criticism of the show for its poor detail, lack of scholarly debate, decontextualization of objects, and omission of original meanings and functions. See Barbara Braun, "Coming to Terms with the Treasures of Mexico", Art Forum, Vol. XVII, no. 4, December 1978, pp. 56-58, for a discussion of these problems.
universal values over the social and political difficulties and differences Mexican art may have sustained.22

The show's treatment of Kahlo's painting *The Two Fridas* (Figure 1, 1938), illustrates this repression of social and political differences. The catalogue discussed the image formally, ignoring the political dichotomy of social identities created between colonial and Indian women. *The Two Fridas* are described as

...seated side by side, against a sky animated with clouds, posed in a bisymmetry reinforced by their contours and expressions, as well as by their ritually joined hands and the overlapping hems of their garments.23

By focusing on aspects of form and description this analysis ignored the political and social implications that feminists were claiming for Kahlo's work.

This omission gives us an insight as to why feminists sought to challenge certain art historical practices. The deliberate dismissal of politics from art, motivated them to recognize the politics of art-making practices and the significance of gender to those practices. But while a feminist re-framing of Kahlo was in this case a rebuttal against corporate, state and oil interests, that rebuttal was also sustained and supported by some aspects of the symposium and exhibition. For instance, it may be worthwhile to consider that feminists were at that historical moment attracted to theoretical aspects of the notion of

23. Ibid., p.174
"timelessness" or "continuity" as it applied to the notion of women existing throughout history. Feminist viewers looking to discover a past for themselves in the history of art were inspired by the evidence provided by Kahlo. She appeared as an artist previously absent from art history which art historians could now excavate from the past. Therefore proving women's continuous art historical presence, despite their spotted representations in the histories of art.

The theoretical problematics of this position aside, this does suggest historical contingencies where the symposium on first glance, may have appeared to position feminist writers deliberately outside and antagonistic to the politics of standard art history and of shows such as the Treasures of Mexico. But further analysis also suggests that a feminist interest in Latin American art was provoked and maintained by the symposium. And that theoretical precepts of traditional art historians were shared with their more radical feminist counterparts.

The comparison of the approaches taken by traditional art historians and those of feminist historians underlines the need to locate feminist writing within parameters of acceptable scholarship and permissive discursive forms. American feminists worked within parameters set and fortified by rules which they did not create, but rules they did accept. These fortifications and rules are themselves the structural supports of art historical strategies surrounding Frida Kahlo. The following chapters expose both these fortifications and the
webs of interpretive strategies that positioned feminists in art history.
CHAPTER I
STRATEGIES OF SEEING: INSTITUTING FEMINISM

In April 1983, Lucy Lippard, an American critic of contemporary art, wrote "Kahlo sowed the seeds of a new vocabulary for the expression of female experience." 24 Undoubtedly Kahlo's imagery of childbirth, My Birth, (1932, Figure #2), miscarriage, Henry Ford Hospital, (1932, Figure #3) and the violence of domestic life, A Few Small Nips, (1935, Figure #4), all recorded aspects of a world view centered on the female experience. 25 The significance of representing these gender-based experiences was of extreme importance to the women's movement because it paralleled the attempt to transform women's personal lives into powerful political tools. Women engaged in a strategy of grassroots consciousness-raising to develop women's awareness of personal experiences, hence the slogan "the personal is political." 26 This

24. Lucy Lippard, "A Ribbon Around the Bomb", New York Times Book Review, April 24th, 1983, p. 10. See also, Joyce Kazloff, "Frida Kahlo", Women's Studies, Vol 6, no. 1, 1978, p.48, "Long before the women's movement (Kahlo) was exploring taboo aspects of female experience." On the female experience see Gloria Orenstein, "Painting for Miracles", Orenstein writes: 'she addressed herself viscerally to all women, and was the first women artist to give aesthetic form to the drama of her biological existence.' p.9.

25. In using the term world view I am referring to the notion of a special construction of reality. Certainly Diego Rivera's much used quote only further enhanced the position that feminist writers were to take, "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings." Diego Rivera, "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art", Bulletin of the Mexican Cultural Seminary, No. 2, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City, October 1943, pp. 89 - 101.

26. Kahlo so clearly fits into this paradigm that one graduate student saw fit to title her thesis: Frida Kahlo: The Personal and Political, Mary Motian-Meadows, California State University, Fullerton, 1982. Her main argument is that although women exist and record a world conceptualized and
empowered women with a critical understanding of how their personal experiences were touched by the patriarchal structures of their society. This consciousness-raising validated women's experiences, which in turn legitimized feminist subject matter within art, literature and the media.

As a result, female subjects appeared in an extraordinary variety of artistic media equally matched in its force by the radicalism of the critique being levelled at the art world in general. Introducing the female in art meant recognizing women as viewers and meeting their visual needs. Consequently, this meant introducing women's representations of the female body into art. And along with women's bodies came the significance of their tools and crafts, which had been previously relegated outside the categories of fine art. While challenging the limits of content and materials women also

dominated by men it is filtered through Kahlo's feminine consciousness. For a rather rigid Marxist critique of the movement's epiphany "the personal is political" see: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Personal Is not Political Enough", Marxist Perspectives, no. 8, Winter 1979/80, pp. 94 - 115. 27. Historical conditions which resulted in these protests must be understood within the larger social sphere that radically sought to challenge the institutions of authority. "The loss of faith in the central institutions (...) was manifest not only in activism but also on a new reliance on the individual." Randy Rosen, "Moving into the Mainstream", Making Their Mark, Women Artists Move into the Mainstream 1970 - 1985, ed. Nancy Grubb, (New York: Abberville Press), 1989, p.11.

28. There are numerous artists whose work focused on the female body and its signifying power. One of the most gratuitous of whom was Gina Pane, a French body-artist who cut her face with razors to challenge notions of feminine beauty and its pain. Hanah Wilke used vulva shaped-chewing gum on her bare torso in S.O.S. Stainification Object Series, stating, "I am my art. My art becomes me." See Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making", in Feminist Art Criticism, pp. 89 - 91 for a discussion of both the forcefulness and limitations of these strategies.

conquered new public territory by setting up institutions that legitimized their own practise. In organizations like Womanhouse, they worked collaboratively to defy 20th-century notions of the art-making process. One of the most famous feminist works which was inspired by all of the above concerns was Judy Chicago's painted porcelain and needlework piece called The Dinner Party (1974 - 79). The 48 foot triangular table was set with 39 porcelain place settings, each representing a historic or legendary woman. Not surprisingly, Frida Kahlo warranted a seat at this table. The catalogue described the artist's "images (as) vividly infused with the warmth of native Mexican art - combining joy and pain, tragedy and humor, into a complex vision of one woman's universe."  

These challenges raised a plethora of debates on the aesthetics of feminist art. The most significant was that while stressing the bond between women, the valorization of female subject matter also supported an art that glorified a "feminine essence". Such a glorification presumed a universal language

for all women. On its most problematic level this implied that certain biological essences or characteristics were inherent to all women, thus ignoring social, racial and environmental differences. However, feminist concerns to recognize women's common experiences were clearly appropriate, since women were discovering real political power in their unity and solidarity.

Deconstructing how this potent notion of universality was played out in Kahlo's particular circumstance is revealing. How did feminists use Kahlo's imagery to assert a language of universality? Clearly, Kahlo's images have been understood as

32. This issue of the female experience in art also gave rise to aesthetic questions and debates over the possibility of feminine traits and a female sensibility in art. Lucy Lippard's initial argument was that women's art used forms that were, among other things, concave and centered with compartmental forms. She later altered her ideas substantially. See Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art in the Seventies", Feminist Collage, pp. 66 - 73, Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, p. 89, and Lise Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism", in Feminist Art Criticism, pp. 41 - 43 for a summary discussion of these critical debates. And for a polemic on the necessity of these discussions: Pat Mainardi, "Feminine Sensibility: An Analysis", Feminist Art Journal, Vol. 1, no. 2, April 1972, p. 4+. And finally but not exclusively, the second issue of Women and Art, no. 2, summer/fall 1972, devoted pages 17 - 22 to an open forum on the question: "What is Feminist Art and/or Is There a Feminist Sensibility?".

33. For involved discussions of these debates, beyond that which is stated above, see: Feminist Art Criticism, p. 89+ and Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, pp. 348 - 351.

34. Extraordinary moments of politicization were marked with mass meetings such as that which was held at the Loeb Student Center at New York University, May 1970, bringing together 1500 people who were protesting the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State killings. This mass politicization fed the specific interest groups such as WAR (Women Artists in Revolution), who had splintered off from more general groups such as AWC (Workers Art Coalition). WAR was organized to address inequalities in the cultural realm, and thus picketed museum and sent letters condemning the low representation of women at the MOMA and the Whitney. Among the historical accounts of women's activism already suggested, Lucy Lippard's collection of essays is quite informative and useful in providing the enunciations of the era: Lippard, From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art, (New York: E.P. Dutton), 1976.
representing biological situations that women similarly face, but this thesis argues that these images have simultaneously been re-represented in a code formulated specifically to meet the needs and desires of a North American feminist audience.

This code itself is a product of a very specific cultural understanding of representation. In this case the basis of that understanding were Kahlo's "authentic historical moments" or her specific life experiences. The code itself is the interpretive frame which has been built around these so called "authentic historical moments". To uncover the ideological constructs of this code, my point of entry or critique of American feminists has been to address specific structural sites of absence within their writing. I have located where their historical narratives often clash, and thus leave spaces or "patterns of absence", which are open to critical readings. These points of absence and conflict are paths to understanding how feminist's have transformed Kahlo's visual language into a political language. The result of this transformation has been the reconstruction of Kahlo in universal terms, "universal" here refers to a universal image of "oppressed woman" as opposed to its more standard reading of "white middle class male".

Feminist historians created this "universal form" by emphasizing Kahlo's individual story and biography, thus de-contextualizing her from other social and economic factors. This approach resulted in a chronological narrative formed around the art historical symbol of Kahlo. This approach is not unique, in fact it is almost ubiquitous among conventional art
historians. But what was significant here for feminist historians was that the reliance on biography had to transcend social, economic, and racial obstacles to become a universal story for women. Feminist historians did this by assuming a liberal politic which stressed opportunity and the political power of the individual. Their historical argument was then limited to expounding on the concept of the "artist/author" whose work and life are united through her existence, which is then superimposed on a narrative genre.

Hayden Herrera who has written extensively on Kahlo, provides ample opportunity to examine how liberalism can methodologically structure writing in this way. In the words of Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, Herrera’s approach merges “the authorized corpus and its producer into a single entity, creating essentially a totalized narrative.”35 In other words Herrera’s accounts of Kahlo conflate the painter and the woman, literally blurring the line between the images and the artist.

Such a blurring of boundaries can be seen in Herrera’s 1982 House and Garden article where she describes Kahlo’s home as the artist’s frame and setting. While this notion has potential, it also sets up the construct that the artist herself is as visually important, or equal to, her work. And therefore Kahlo’s physical and personal pain is read by Herrera as recorded and inflicted onto the canvas, which Herrera understands as a reflection of the artist. While Herrera ironically notes how

Kahlo's house remained a big part of the artist's "...self-invention as a flamboyant, mythic and utterly Mexican creature..."; she does not acknowledge how her own methodological style continued to reproduce the myth. For the historian, Kahlo's art facilitates the telling of her life story, therefore Herrera need only provide evidence of her interpretations through visual descriptions of the artist's work.

Herrera is willing to stretch this strategy to its metaphorical end when she likens Kahlo's self portraits to a form of psychological surgery where the tragic victim/artist produces a heroic sufferer through her art. In the article aptly titled "The Palette, The Pain and the Painter", Herrera mines the specific symbolism of Kahlo's self portraits for their significance in her health, personal history and love life. In The Broken Column, (1944, Figure #5) Herrera reads the shattered ionic column which Kahlo has used as a metonym for her fractured spine, as a graphic depiction of the painful link for Kahlo between sex and pain. Such an analysis as well as being overly intrusive, locks the image into an art historical paradigm which only permits the image to reflect the life of the artist.

To use biography successfully as an organizing principle within art history, "only a few aspects of an artist's innumerable traces will count as relevant, and only a certain number of

38. Ibid. p. 65.
images will count as elements of the authorized corpus". Consequently, some of Kahlo's paintings are rarely shown or reproduced because they jar with the narrative paradigm of biography. Works such as Self Portrait on a Circle (Not dated, figure #6) indicate where Kahlo has deviated from her recognizable figurative style. The image suggests the disintegration of the female form in a landscape as barren and alienating as her other self portraits are lush, fecund and filled with narrative detail. The figure's dissolution is made more violent and uncontrolled by the missing body parts, particularly the omission of Kahlo's trademark head and face. This rarely reproduced image could be said to condemn the female form rather than celebrate it. It therefore does not easily carry the banner of a reclaimed feminist experience. 

Contrasting this dominant American tradition with the more critical stance of British writers and film makers such as Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, gives us a valuable perspective. In the 1982 exhibition conceived by Mulvey

39. M. Ball and Norman Bryson, p. 181
40. Another example of how Kahlo's singular identity is completely tied up with her product is apparent if we consider the vast numbers of portraits done for payment. An aspect of Kahlo's painting that is frequently ignored is the necessity of it in terms of her need to earn a living. However, Herrera is not the worst offender and she does recognize the issue of patronage in her book, see Herrera, A Biography of Frida Kahlo, Chapter 19, part 5. See Art Digest, "Producer-patron in Mexico", Vol. XLVII, no. 7, Nov. 1948, pp. 37 - 38, for a gossipy discussion of one of Kahlo's and Rivera's most prominent patrons, Mr. and Mrs. Gelman. Mr. Gelman was a movie producer who was of Hollywood-type fame in Latin America.
41. See also Terry Smith "From the Margins: Modernity and the Case of Frida Kahlo", Block, no. 8, 1983, pp. 11 - 23. who examines Kahlo's images using psychoanalytic theory to talk about potentials for Kahlo's subject formation and resulting expression within the modernist cannon of the 1930's and 40's. Also interesting is Orianna Braddeley, (see note #2) who critically examines the gendering of Kahlo as a cult figure.
and Wollen and organized by Mark Francis called *Frida Kahlo and Tina Mondotti* these critics attempted to make viewers' understanding of gender issues more complex by weaving in questions of marginality.42 This approach did more than describe Kahlo's personal circumstances; it opened up opportunities to consider women artists and their relationships to power within artistic, political and domestic paradigms. As a result, historians are then forced to consider the schema of power within their historical formulations. As Wollen and Mulvey suggest, the "oblique and unexpected" history of art will then be "re-valued and re-made" as historians push to unpack this schema.43

A comparison of American and British critics must acknowledge the significant differences in their theoretical backgrounds, history and politics.44 The significance of this to our discussion of Frida Kahlo makes a return to my analysis of the "code" of universalism necessary. In American writing, critics display a marked insistence on the code, whereas Mulvey and Wollen seek to challenge this issue of assumed universality, by reconceptualizing the personal to include broader social forces. Such a reconceptualization requires a

43. Ibid., p. 27. "If the art of Frida Kahlo and Tina Mondotti has appeared to be detached from the mainstream this by no means entail any loss of value. In many ways, their work may be more relevant than the central traditions of modernism, at a time when, in the light of feminism, the history of art is being revalued and remade."
44. See Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, p.350-2 for a discussion of these differences delineated on theoretical, methodological, and psychological stances.
more analytical approach to personal experiences. Lisa Tickner, a British art historian, points out very clearly that:

"...women artists can embrace the domestic and personal, accepting their sphere and using it as a source of imagery and experience, simultaneously paying tribute to the historical relegation of women. But this position can, and should, lead very quickly to analysis of the female condition rather than celebration of it." 45

It is here that American art history gets stuck, because the personal which is understood to be political never seems to evolve out of the personal. Their methods and interests in Kahlo remain a celebration of her female condition. We must question why it was more necessary for Americans to continue to celebrate the private interior and not, analyze that world instead.

Toril Moi's evaluation of American literary criticism suggests that the study of women's work was inspired by both explicit and implicit desires to find out what makes women's texts different from men's. 46 Accounts of feminists' initial efforts to change the art world concur with this account. Engagement in a feminist consciousness rather than a critique of that consciousness was necessary to ensure the very existence of feminist criticism. Such a practice was "woman centered", both by choice and by necessity. 47

45. Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History and Sexual Difference, Genders, no. 3, Fall 1988.
46. Toril Moi, p.4. Moi suggests that this approach assumes that the text functions like a transparent medium through which the experience can be seized, thus ignoring theoretical questions about readership.
47. Raven, p.6.
American critic Lawrence Alloway comments on how early feminist art shows weren't given serious critique, which therefore required women to work more closely with one another.\textsuperscript{48} Such a situation promoted questions about what it was that made women’s art different from men’s, because except for a few exceptions, women’s art was being produced and seen in very different terms from men’s.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, the desire to define a feminine artistic tradition confronted a system which had previously marked the feminine as invisible. In efforts to refashion a self-image, clarify identity and fortify strength, it was necessary for art historians to embrace a notion of woman as fixed, excavatable and therefore not removable.\textsuperscript{50} This position promoted the celebration of women, and consequently deflected analysis of the constructions involved in that celebration.

\textsuperscript{48} Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art and the Failure of Art Criticism", \textit{Art Criticism}, Vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 1980, pp 55 - 65, and Alloway, "Women's Art in the 70's", p. 64., and Alloway, "Where were you on the week on the 23rd?" \textit{Village Voice}, March 2, 1982. See Elaine Showalter, "The Feminist Critical Revolution", intro to \textit{New Feminist Criticism}, (New York: Pantheon Books), 1985, p. 8 where she quotes sociologist Olive Banks regarding the deep rift separating men and women during this time, which not only kept the groups apart but also quite hostile towards each other.

\textsuperscript{49} Alloway, "Women's Art in the 70's" p. 64. Exhibitions such as the "Women Chose Women", organized by Women in the Arts which took place at the New York Cultural Center in the winter of 1973 was clearly an attempt to work out these aesthetic questions which were challenging artists and historians. For a discussion of this particular show and the questions it raised see: Gloria Orenstein, "Review: Art History", \textit{Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society}, Vol. 1, no. 21, 1975, pp. 505 - 525.

\textsuperscript{50} This formulation is on part based on Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews' account of the American art historical tradition. The idea of woman as a fixed subject can be understood in relation to feminists who see the category of women as socially constructed and always in flux with the demands of ideology.
But there are more than the politics of sexual difference at play here. The early American feminist movement saw Kahlo as a woman from a different culture, and understood Mexican culture as one which was more oppressive than their own, having a much more significant element of overt machismo. Despite these cultural obstacles, Kahlo's art depicts a woman who had the ability to speak out, resist, and record her personal experiences. For feminists, whose desire to re-write art history was paramount, Kahlo amounted to the discovery of a "natural" feminist, who serendipitously confirmed feminist politics at that particular moment. That confirmation was only maintained through an interpretation of Kahlo based on her biography and reliant on her individual needs, desires, and wishes, thus drawing the link to a liberal politic.

What American historians were celebrating was a politic of life, a politic that acknowledged and reinforced liberalism as a commanding tenet. Reinterpreting Kahlo as performing this liberal politic was a source of inspiration and relief for women. She represented a potential saviour who confirmed self and society.

CHAPTER II
UNDRESSING THE POLITICS OF FEMINISM
AND SURREALISM

If we agree that North American feminist's liberal politic is what operated as a potential saviour of the individual female experience under threat of patriarchy, then their next logical step was to interrogate those experiences. Such an interrogation resulted in the understanding that women's bodies had physically and philosophically suffered the repercussions of female socialization. For feminist authors, this suffering worked as a metaphor for the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures. In attempts to address these issues in the visual arts, feminists sought to focus critical attention on the currency of how women artists represented the female body. Kahlo's images of herself spoke directly to this concern and particularly to the body's relationship to patriarchy. Consequently, feminists read Kahlo's images as representing the socialized body. Gloria Orenstein for example, described Kahlo as "having raised the consciousness of women's pain, ... of abortion.... of infidelity....", while at the same time recognizing a resisting subject, a body that fought back at patriarchal culture.52

Given the optimism of the women's movement in the early 70's, feminists theorized that the pain of female socialization had a transformative and therapeutic quality.\(^5\) Therefore, such a pain could motivate women to change the circumstances of their lives. Both Orenstein and Nancy Breslow wrote of Kahlo's ability to transform her situations. Orenstein declared: "Frida, who was going to become a medical doctor, became instead a kind of Artist-Curandera -- one who paints in order to perform miracles, paints in order to cure."\(^5\) Art and its expression was therapeutic for the female socialized body, and thus a release from an oppressed life.

In *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, (1940, Figure # 7) Kahlo was interpreted by feminists as representing the escape of her socialized sex-role by rejecting society's expectations of femininity and by donning men's clothing. Kahlo shows herself as having cut her hair short, leaving shreds of her previous beauty lying carelessly about the floor, exchanging her feminine dress for a man's large oversized suit.\(^5\) Feminist author Susan Gubar explained that "crossdressing becomes a

\[\text{References:}\]

\(^5\) For a brief discussion of this transforming power see: Randy Rosen, "Moving into the Mainstream", p 15 17.
\(^5\) Included in the painting is a brief verse of a popular song of the time: "Look if I loved you, it was for your hair; now that you are bald, I no longer love you." Translation from Micheal Newman's "The Ribbon Around the Bomb", *Art in America*, April 1983, p. 168.
way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequities of culturally defined categories of masculinity and femininity.\textsuperscript{56}

Kahlo's clear portrayal of a resisting subject was made more piquant through the sexually ambiguous presentation of herself. Just as the above painting suggests the donning of masculine interests, images such as \textit{Two Nudes in a Forest} (1939 Figure #8) implied the violation of codes of approved sexuality by the portrayal of two nude women whose engagement spoke only to each other, and signaled an artist whose desires were active and acted upon. Consequently, many of Kahlo's visual strategies that interested feminist viewers also found an audience with surrealists during the late 1930s and 40s. Both groups, in separate historical moments, appreciated the rules and roles Kahlo had transgressed with her self-representations. For that reason among others, many feminist writers were interested in Kahlo's role in surrealism, and in particular Andre Breton's account of her work.\textsuperscript{57}

American feminism of the 1970s and French surrealism of the late thirties, have little in common, yet they intersect within the frame of Kahlo's production. Undoubtedly, within feminists'

\textsuperscript{56} Susan Gubar, "Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-dressing for Female Modernists", \textit{The Pushcart Prize VII, Best of the Small Presses 1982 - 83}, Bill Henderson, ed. p.494. Jean Franco in \textit{Plotting Women}, p.107+ discusses Kahlo's strategies around dressing. She sees Kahlo's display of her wounded body as the socialized body, one which has been opened by instruments, technologized, wounded, and its organs displayed to the outside world. Franco says, "The inner Frida is controlled by modern society far more than the clothed Frida, who often marks her deviation from a norm by defiantly returning the gaze of the viewer.*

\textsuperscript{57} Breton came to Mexico in the spring of 1938 and stayed at the Rivera's home in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. Later that year, in November, Breton wrote an essay for Kahlo's show at the Julien Levy Gallery, New York, which was published in French.
acknowledgement of surrealist interpretations of Kahlo's work there are, not unexpected contradictions and difficulties to be surmounted. This chapter addresses some of those contradictions by unpinning the ideological intersection between surrealism and feminism. This examination of how the two discourses intersect will help clarify how feminism positioned itself initially within the discourse of art history in general, and surrealism in particular. The assumption here being that feminist art history is necessarily described and delineated by the discipline itself.\(^5\)\(^8\) To clarify this feminist position this chapter will discuss the surrealist interest in Kahlo and her place in that interest, and then compare how in 1970 feminists re-interpreted Kahlo's role in surrealism, with a number of new interests at stake.

Ironically Kahlo functions as one of the emblems for both the surrealist and feminist revolution. In surrealism, woman is muse, femme-enfant, embodiment of amour fou, object of desire, and ultimately man's (sic) mediator with the unconscious.\(^5\)\(^9\) Feminists, on the other hand interpreted Kahlo's play with the costuming and re-defining of her body as

\(^5\)\(^8\). The significance of this approach is perhaps more clearly stated by Stuart Hall with his work on identity; "The tale tells the teller, the myth tells the myth-maker. The enunciation is always from some subject who is positioned by and in discourse." The concern here is to bring to light the position feminism found itself in, and to define the space of that position within the discourse of art history. For a discussion of this see "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicity" in Culture, Globalization and the World-System, Anthony D. King ed. (Binghamton, New York: State University of New York), p. 44.

rejection of society, sexuality, conformity, roles and rules. But significantly, both surrealists and feminists focused on her efforts to articulate how social controls manifested themselves on the body, and how those controls could be challenged or defied. For feminists, Kahlo's redefining and costuming of herself spoke to the physical and historical contingencies that she faced as a woman. For Breton, her images were witness to "a spontaneous outpouring of our own questioning spirit" but her spirit and art, unlike Breton's, was "in order to be as seductive as possible willing to play alternatively at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious."\textsuperscript{60}

The currency of Kahlo and her images amongst surrealists spoke to specific viewing interests, which focused on her paintings, her person, and the place of their production. Each of these interests played a specific role in how Kahlo fascinated Breton. Paintings such as: What the Water Gave Me (1938 Figure #9) combined strangely juxtaposed objects such as a skyscraper emerging from a volcano in a manipulation of surrealist motifs. Particular elements of the image, like the strangulation of a naked body, and the isolated island Arcadia supporting two female lovers, employed the shocking yet standard mix of sexuality and violence that would have attracted surrealists. Unbeknownst to Kahlo, for Breton this image, with its "web of happenings" and "particular conjunction

\textsuperscript{60}. Andre Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera" from \textit{Surrealism and Painting}, as reprinted in \textit{Frida Kahlo and Tina Mondotti}, p. 36.
of objects," alluded to a meaning which surpassed the visual to the realm of visionary power.61

It was not only the imagery which bewitched Breton. Much more significant was the fact that Kahlo was painting in a country where Breton found a "magical point of intersection between political and artistic lines beyond which he hoped they would unite in a single revolutionary consciousness."62 Mexico was simultaneously magical and revolutionary and Kahlo was the found-object of that surreal site. Not surprisingly, this appropriation of both the woman and her art did not guarantee Kahlo a significant role within surrealism. Rather she remained the surrealist-object, both personally and politically.63

Kahlo's play with the images does reveal a historical tension where her understanding of avant-garde practises is balanced by the historical contingencies of being a woman and being framed by the political agenda of surrealism. Kahlo was clearly aware of surrealism during her 1937 trip to Paris when she invited Breton, Paalen and Rahon to Mexico.

61. Ibid., p. 36.
62. Breton describes Mexico as such in his essay on Kahlo's work. Breton overcame his hatred of nationalism (as recorded in the surrealist magazine Cle; see Maurice Nadeau, History of Surrealism, (Great Britain: Pelican Books), 1973, p.228), in places such as Mexico because of its left-wing nationalism specific to 1938, which is particularly interested in promoting the indigenous voices that strive for identification.
63. Critic Lowery Stokes Sims has compared Kahlo's role within surrealism to the Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam, "Both gratified Breton's preoccupation with the merveilleux, that mysterious, magical quality of so called primitive art (...) and other art that formed the ideological base for surrealist thought." This comparison does ignore the fact that Lam was a much more willing and active participant in surrealism than Kahlo. Lowery Stokes Sims, "In Search of Wilfredo Lam", Arts Magazine, December 1988, p. 51.
"confident that Mexico would offer to them the spirit of fantasy, virility and paradox for which they were searching." While surrealism allowed Kahlo "in" and provided the platform from which she could launch a professional career in both New York and Paris, this opening also required that Kahlo dialogue with surrealists in the sophisticated language of avant-garde practises.

What is significant in a feminist re-interpretation of Kahlo's place in surrealism is how her position was modified by the social and political implications of her gender. The historical tensions which overload the biographical circuits of a work such as What The Water Gave Me, (fig. #9) also have implications arising from her identity as a woman. Breton's surrealist "discovery" of Kahlo was motivated both by politics and pleasure. This pleasure was a gendered one where Kahlo's success depended on her ability to fulfill the role of the surrealist femme-fatale, and to do so simultaneously while articulating a leftist anti-colonial position. Breton's pleasure was met by Kahlo's re-imaging of both her body and her paintings with the

65. Griselda Pollock discusses how aspects of surrealism such as: the "cult of the feminine" vs machismo sexuality, the notion of artist as medium, and the search for hidden mysterious meanings, all opened the way for women's participation in the movement. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, Old Mistresses, Women, Art, and Ideology, (London: Pandora Press), 1981, p. 139. Kahlo's first public exhibition was arranged at Julien Levy's surrealist gallery in New York, November 1st - 15th, 1938. Breton also arranged a show at the Renou and Colle Gallery called Mexique, March 10 - 25, 1939. In addition to Kahlo's work, ex-votos, folk art, pre-Columbian pieces and photos by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, were included as described by Nancy Breslow, "Frida Kahlo: A Cry of Joy and Pain" p. 37. Herrera records that Kahlo's work was favorably received by the critic L.P. Foucaud in La Fleche. See Herrera, A Biography p. 251.
decorative elements of nationalism, providing the correct mix of sensuality, exoticism and politics. For Breton, Kahlo’s politics were endowed with the “gifts of seduction,” rather than the authentic authorial privilege; as it was Diego Rivera, her husband, who was indulged when it came to autographing Breton and Trotsky’s “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” written in 1938 for the Partisan Review.66

These rigid boundaries of permissible revolutionary conduct relegated Kahlo to a particular cultural caste within the canon; where her beauty, nationality and politics functioned to define a privileged but limited role in art history. The privilege is based on the politics of Kahlo’s social position which enabled her the skills and understanding to initiate her visual transgressions. The pleasure that Breton found in Kahlo’s visual transgressions represented on and through her body, ignore the fact that for Kahlo, this was one of the only permissible places of authorship for a female artist. It is valuable to describe Kahlo’s place as a cultural caste, where gender acts as one of the fundamental organizing principles of culture. The limits imposed by her gender were such that her form of authorship became understood in the strictest terms of her body.

The surrealist and feminist re-interpretations of Kahlo, have the result of Kahlo functioning more as an emblem within a specific cultural caste than a live subject. In Breton’s re-

interpretations, and later through feminists' re-interpretations, both Kahlo's person and paintings become a sign connotating a series of complicated ideas. In the late 70's feminists were interested in challenging Kahlo's previously limited role, but not by questioning her placement in the art historical canon. Therefore approaches by various feminist historians have attempted to elaborate Kahlo's limited art historical role, while ignoring the problems inherent to that role. The concern here is not to expound upon the inherent differences between surrealism and feminism, but rather to clarify the necessary negotiations around their meeting place.

Gloria Orenstein's article, "Women of Surrealism" acknowledges the difficulties of this meeting place: "The role of women in Surrealism is equivocal, ambiguous, and fraught with contradictions." Orenstein's project is a valuable one, as she attempts to elucidate how surrealism presented obstacles for women artists who attempted to forge autonomous identities beyond surrealism's limiting definition. She spells this out with a critique of notions of the "Femme-Enfant", and the portrayal of "Femme Fatale" in sublime love, arguing that these were impossible roles for women. To overcome these difficulties and to avoid the political instabilities presented by surrealism, Orenstein retreats to a discussion of Goddess symbols and

67. Olivier Debroise's article "Heart Attacks" and his comments on Kahlo were extremely helpful in working these issues out; particularly this notion of emblematic quality Kahlo's sign has taken on. Olivier Debroise, "Heart Attacks", The Bleeding Heart, (Boston, The Institute of Contemporary Art: University of Washington Press), p. 39.
intuitive forms of art making. As a result, Frida Kahlo does not enter her discussion, despite the fact that she writes a considerable amount on artists working in Mexico. This absence is particularly evident in an earlier article, "Frida Kahlo: Painting for Miracles", where she acknowledges the importance of Breton in Kahlo's professional life, but does not broach surrealism in any meaningful manner.

In a significantly different approach to surrealism, Whitney Chadwick attempts to suggest that while being involved in movements dominated by men, women have maintained their own visual language. She sees female surrealists' art as much more personal and focused on autobiographical and narrative elements, thus understanding their paintings as a form of dialogue with an inner reality. Such a reality is not based on surrealist interpretations of the unconsciousness, but rather personal experiences which then narrate the canvas and its pictorial structure. Significantly, her interpretations are clearly connected with the agenda of the feminist movement. Her discussion of female artists' "inner reality" speaks directly of their lives as women in the surrealist movement, therefore employing the feminist strategy of drawing on personal experience as a political tool.

Although Chadwick's strategy rewrites the surrealist canon, she also dogmatically limits the meaning of women's

69. See her discussion of Leonora Fini, ibid., p.40-41.
72. Ibid., p. 128.
representation to that of their personal experience. Kahlo's work provides excellent examples for Chadwick's theories, but also requires the author to limit the images and experiences she selects for discussion. Chadwick mentions only briefly Kahlo's most surrealist image, *What the Water Gave Me*, (fig. #9) painted during a visit from Breton. The cause-and-effect process of biographical readings that Chadwick adopts stumbles over the blocked narrative and opaque symbolism of the painting. Kahlo's own "inner reality" of pain and suffering is seized upon by Chadwick who uses the representation of Kahlo's deformed foot to describe this pain. The result of this analysis is that the author is locked into a reading which places Kahlo in the bathtub daydreaming; a limiting situation for both the artist and the author.73

While Herrera's more voluminous work more clearly situates the surrealist context that Kahlo found herself in, she is also quite uncritical of the nature of that situation. For surrealists, a substantial aspect of Kahlo's exoticism was her engagement in politics, which for feminists, has remained one of the issues most significantly absent from their writings on Kahlo. This lack suggests a "cold war hangover" of sorts where Kahlo's historical flips between Trotskyism and Stalinism are made invisible rather than to be dealt with as a serious issue, even within the realm of biography.74 But there are also real-

life contradictions to this portrait, such as Kahlo's dexterity in negotiating between her loyalty to Stalinism in the late forties, and her collaboration with Trotsky only a decade before. This adherence to Stalinism repudiates her earlier support of Trotsky, who while exiled in Mexico delivered his rebuttal to the Moscow Trials in Kahlo's home. The problem of this erasure from art history was identified by Lucy Lippard, who urged Hayden Herrera to go beyond "the artist's obsession with her body and her husband (and instead make) connections with the body politic (of) Mexico itself." Lippard herself provocatively suggested that Kahlo's and Rivera's late Stalinism had to be reconsidered in relation to cultural and economic imperialism from the north.

Herrera's desire to plant Kahlo into an individualist modernist line of artists necessitates the absence of political questions which should be demanded of her chronology. This has resulted in a picture of Kahlo that overemphasizes her individual responses to social situations, and ignores the political limits inherent to that analysis.

One historian who problematizes Kahlo's surrealist situation is Nancy Breslow in her discussion of a rarely reproduced

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76. Lucy Lippard, "A Ribbon Around the Bomb" p. 10.
77. Ibid., p. 23. It is a fascinating notion and quite clearly relates to Goldman's notion that the absence of Kahlo from American art history has in part to do with cold war politics which balked at Mexico's radical history, see Goldman, "The Intense Realism of Frida Kahlo".
painting, *The Square is Theirs*, (1938 Figure #10). Kahlo parodies the form and content of a typically Giorgio de Chirico painting, by replicating his deep, lonely, mysterious European Piazzas, which contain a scattering of symbolic and personal icons. Kahlo shows us a pregnant pre-Columbian Nayarit idol, an explosive Judas figure, a gleeful clay skeleton and a distant straw horseman all of whom are only connected through the play of their shadows within the empty alienated piazza. Breslow comments that Kahlo is playing with the cultural similarities and differences between her work and surrealism, while at the same time working her own Mexican dialect into the composition. Breslow makes the important observation that "the poetry of paradox provoked by juxtaposing unrelated objects was just as effectively and knowingly used by the ancient Mexicans as it was by the founders of surrealism." But she does not address the question she so provocatively raised in her article as to why Kahlo would be interested in punning d'Chirico.

Kahlo's play with surrealism does not fit with the feminist politic that seeks to situate her within the lineage of avant-

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78. Nancy Breslow, "Frida Kahlo, 'The Square is Theirs' Spoofing Giorgio de Chirico", *Arts Magazine*, Jan. 1982, pp. 120 - 123. See also Herrera's *Biography of Frida Kahlo*, pp. 16-18 who calls this painting "The Four Inhabitants of Mexico" and interprets it as an account of Kahlo's childhood, and being surrounded by Mexican/Jungian figures.
80. A more critical reading by Olivier Debroise describes Kahlo as creating a polemic by evading the surrealist group: "By placing herself in opposition to the avant-garde as she did in 1938, by evading her possible insertion into the Surrealist circle - Frida Kahlo herself became a sort of "monster" a figure difficult to place within the continuous history of Mexican art." Olivier Debroise, "Heart Attacks", p.39.
garde artists. The literature lacks any form of analysis as to how and why Kahlo was picked up by surrealists. What we can surmise from this absence is that the demands of the artistic canon have overridden the necessity for a structural feminist critique in this instance. Kahlo’s association with the famous artists and movements of the 20th century were fundamental to the claims of her wrongly decreed secondary status, and therefore her problematic positioning within surrealism was ignored.81

The twists and turns of the art historical process are evident if one compares the histories of the 1940s with those of the 1970s. We began with a situation where Breton’s interest in Kahlo is multifaceted and richly complex. Her work, self, and national place culminated on a canvas into which Breton read the "body politic" of Mexico, believing that this was the identity that Kahlo had written onto herself and her body.

For Kahlo, Breton’s reading was professionally significant, but at the same time unmatched by her significance to surrealists as a group. Surrealism furnished a temporary place of dialogue by providing for Kahlo a community with an interpretive frame with which to deal with her work. We may view surrealism as Kahlo’s entrance into the canonical stream, but the movement and its politics also acted as a force which

81. For an interesting example see Time, R.Z. Sheppard, “The Wound and the Brush”, March 28 1983, p.70. A review of Hayden Herrera’s biography of Kahlo which clearly shows that the mainstream press was picking up on the need to insert Kahlo into some sort of art historical lineage: “Walt Kandinsky wept with emotion,....an admiring Picasso gave her earrings....Breton claimed her as a surrealist....Edward G.Robinson said nothing but bought Kahlo’s work.”
circumscribed her role, through the politics of gender and nationality. While interested parties of Europe welcomed her work through a surrealist interpretive frame, mainstream America interpreted her efforts with not a little amount of paternalism. This tone is evident in the language used by *Time Magazine* to describe Kahlo's 1938 show at the Julian Levy Gallery. Adjectives such as "Little Frida" are paired with that of "Old Surrealist Andre Breton", and their radicalism is referenced through the recollection of the "furious manifesto" produced out of Mexico the summer previous.82

For feminists writing in the seventies, placing Kahlo in the surrealist canon was fundamental to upholding their claims of Kahlo's self-representation.83 The form of representation which interested them was not the body politic of Mexico, but the chronology of Kahlo and surrealism which justified their claims for women's self-representation within modernist traditions. And those claims to self-representation were based on an interpretation of Kahlo's ability to image herself and her body. Through this re-fashioning of the body, Kahlo became an emblem of modernist self representation. Therefore it was necessary to accept the limitations that surrealism set on Kahlo, without challenge, in order to revise art history according to their own political desires.

83. As well as the strategies of Chadwick, Herrera and Breslow, it is useful to consider the text of Eleanor Tufts who writes that by including women in art historical paradigms women and men will be able to present a "total history of art". Eleanor Tufts, "Beyond Gardener, Gombrich and Janson: Towards a Total History of Art", *Arts Magazine*, Vol IV, April 1981, pp. 150 - 154.
The final twist in this crafting of history is that aspects of surrealism such as the politics of nationalism and revolution which allowed an art historical space for Kahlo, are the same conditions that make surrealism itself an awkward fit into the teleology of modernism. Consequently, feminists deliberately chose not to acknowledge the aspects of Breton's interest in Kahlo which were politically radical. For Breton at this political moment, Kahlo and the others, functioned as visionaries who as artists became "the natural ally of revolution."  

For feminists to have acknowledged this, would have reduced the possibility of surrealism ever fitting into the modernist canon. Such a radical politic completely undermined the aesthetic criteria that demands that the main tenets of modernism be universal, purely formalist and devoid of content.  

Here again, feminists have found themselves walking a tightrope between the needs to institute female content in art history, and the methodological challenges that content presents.

Feminist writers in the 1970s had to make an ideological leap of faith over the politics of surrealism in order to maintain claims of modernist self-expression for Kahlo. Because American politics of liberalism and modernism resulted in feminists' efforts to ensure the fair participation of women in

84. This phrase speaks to the sentiments of both Trotsky and Breton in 1938, as recorded in their "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art.", in Partisan Review, Fall 1983, as per Alan Wald, p. 145.

85. Lisa Tickner, p.93 - 97 Tickner comments that feminism will always be disabled by the principle terms of modernism because of its formalism and ahistoricism, reverence for the avant-garde and artist-hero, concept of art as individual expression or reflection, its sense of itself as universal and disinterested, and pursuit of universal values.
mainstream culture, writers such as Chadwick and Herrera, while writing Kahlo into the surrealist canon, ignored the awkward and contradictory role she played within the movement, and the political difficulties surrealism presented for them. So while the politics of feminism dominated over the redress of canonical stature, the politics of social change were absent, and the politics of nationalism were left unaddressed.
CHAPTER III
THE GEOGRAPHY OF FEMINISM:
INVESTIGATING NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Although feminists failed to address the politics of nationalism that were inherent to surrealism, they did acknowledge and embrace them by interpreting Kahlo's interest in folk art as a nationalistic and anti-American statement. While the visual symbols of folk art had a distinct connotation in the thirties and forties; in the seventies that concern was transformed to reflect the specific interest feminists had in recovering the lost art made by women.

Feminist art historians held the assumption that women have always participated in many forms of subcultural resistance, thus asserting a feminist counter-tradition in the arts. To follow up on this assertion they strove to uncover a hidden history of female art by critiquing distinctions within art making practices. The results saw women's traditions of quilting, embroidery and craft as expressions of female artistic intent of the past, and as challenges to modern art making practices presently dominated by patriarchy. Not surprisingly, feminists were interested in exploring how Kahlo used specific media

86. "By redefining art to include crafts and skills heretofore neglected, it obviates the ideological distinction between "high" and "low" cultural forms. In so doing, it emphasizes that this distinction is a tool of patriarchy that has served to downplay or negate creative avenues for women," Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, p 91.
87. The classic example of this strategy at work is Judy Chicago's collective project, The Dinner Party, 1974 - 1979. For a discussion of her and other artists of this genre see: Judith E. Stein and Ann-Sargent Wooster, "Making Their Mark: Art With An Agenda", in Moving into the Mainstream, pp.122 - 127.
that corresponded to Mexican domestic folk and craft traditions.

Kahlo's play with domestic artistic tradition was also interpreted as a sign of her vehement nationalism. This was not always an effective strategy for dealing with Kahlo's complicated nationalism. Barbara Rose's article for *Vogue* is indicative of this ineffective treatment where Rose flippantly refers to Kahlo as the "Chicana". Such a remark paternalistically belies the anti-american aspect to Kahlo's Mexican nationalism and ignored the political undercurrents within the Chicano movement in the United States.88

This brief example alludes to cultural assumptions of the 1970s which lead to "patterns of absences" within art history. My contention is that these absences made mute aspects of nationalism that were historically relevant in the 30s and 40s when Kahlo was painting. Therefore, it is fruitful to consider the cultural constructions specific to the late 1970s, and play those out against the historical struggles of the 1930s and 40s. Those struggles concerned the forging of national identities and were visually located in the nexus of folk art, and contextualized by the activities and interests of figures as diverse as Frida Kahlo and Nelson Rockefeller.

Kahlo's interest in cultural politics was acknowledged by many feminist historians who commented on her use of the emblems of nationalism as a political tool to critique and condemn American society. Herrera comments in an article called "Portrait of Frida Kahlo As A Tehuana", on how "the folkloric impulse in Mexican culture of this period can be taken as a generally leftist, anticolonialist political statement." Self Portrait on the Borderline (1932, Figure #11) and My Dress Hangs There (1933, Figure #12) are images which feminists believed represented Kahlo's staunch nationalism. Historians have assumed that Kahlo's use of indigenous Mexican and Aztec imagery is an uncomplicated manipulation of the icons of nationalism. This assumption insisted on a belief that symbols of Mexican nationalism were used in the 30s to signify a charted and unchallenged "readable past"; thus functioning the same way in the 1930s as they did in the 1970s, as a protest against American dominance. In 1977 American dominance was overwhelming and signified by economic relations which resulted in the US buying 90% of all Mexico’s foreign exports. This dependence was exacerbated by the fact that much of

89. Herrera, "Portrait of Frida Kahlo as a Tehuana", Heresies, Winter, 1978, p. 58. She also proposes other potential reason’s for Kahlo’s picking up of Mexican culture which range from pleasing Diego to compensating for her body’s deficiencies and her own sense of fragmentation, see pp. 57 - 58.

90. Unlike earlier feminist accounts, Jean Franco’s discussion of Kahlo’s nationalism is fascinating. She sees her in terms of a "messianistic nationalism", clarifying that at some point Kahlo accepted the myth of the birth of the hero, while at the same time forged an identity in a space that was outside history and the nation. Jean Franco, Plotting Women, p 105.

Mexico's foreign debt was with private US banks or with international lending agencies such as the World Bank, Interamerican Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, all of which the United States is a significant member.\textsuperscript{92}

This 1970s view of 1930s nationalism was based on American assumptions promoted by shows such as the \textit{Treasures of Mexico}, predicated by socio-economic conditions, and prevalent in feminism's interpretations of Kahlo. This assumption asserted that it was only Mexico which needed to establish an identity in the 1930s, therefore ignoring the fact that the US itself was struggling with questions of national identity throughout the Depression. Unlike the 1970s, in the 1930s, struggles and debates over identity were occurring on both sides of the border. However, the residual existence of these struggles have been made mute by the unchallenged interpretations of Kahlo's supposed nationalism.

The dialectic of nationalism that Kahlo represents therefore must take into account the circumstances of the Depression in the U.S. Experiencing a period of profound self-doubt and inadequacy, the Nation turned inward to search for the "roots of a usable past" during this time of crisis.\textsuperscript{93} Motivated by the demands of the Depression, historians of the time sought to discover a past that was as bright and shiny as the future for which they hoped. Americans attempted to

\textsuperscript{92} Williams, ibid, p.210
authenticate their past by establishing institutions such as: the national archives, state guides, and by re-valuing folk songs and handcrafts of previous eras. In conjunction with this revision of history, debates focused on the nature of national culture. Well-known texts such as Constance Rourke's 1937 *Roots of American Culture* sought to "prove American culture was to be valued simply because it was American."^^

In attempts to solidify their identity, Americans wrote about differences between themselves and Mexico, and claimed that these differences were significant. A theoretical analysis of this need to enunciate and establish differences is clear in the writings of Stuart Hall. He notes that forms of identity are always constructed through ambivalences which are established through "splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other."^6

Waldo Frank, writing in the liberal *New Republic* (1931) records that the grand tour for the young and intelligent was no longer Europe, but Mexico. Frank's article was not simply meant to encourage tourism, but rather explicitly stated that understanding the Mexican maze was important for America's sake, "the maze being, of course, in us."^7

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94. "The search for an American style of painting which dominated art criticism during the 20's and 30's, was a symptom of inferiority felt by the US art world." *The Latin American Spirit*, p.184.
95. Stuart Kidd, p. 403.
98. Ibid., p. 183.
the United States to work out what Mexico was in order to understand itself. ⁹⁹

For liberal American writers like Waldo Frank and Stuart Chase, traveling to Mexico meant a search for the New World, and a return to native origins in rebellion from Philistine America and its machine esthetic. ¹⁰⁰ Most writers considered folk art to constitute the "real" Mexico, primarily because such artifacts represented a machineless agrarian society. ¹⁰¹ For Americans then, folk art signified a "type of authentic" through which their national differences with Mexico could be articulated. Conversely, if America was busily establishing itself as different both intellectually and commercially from Mexico, Kahlo and Rivera also manipulated this rhetoric of difference within their own practice and within their own social class.

The rhetoric of difference functions visually, not as images of a true Mexico, but rather as a series of symbols that relay a

⁹⁹. Stuart Chase, "Men Without Machines", Series with five parts, in The New Republic, June 17, 1931, p. 114 - 117, and the following parts appeared on June 24, July 01, July 8, and July 15. This interest was quite valuable for Mexico because it reinforced Mexican nationalism, increased the market for Mexican goods, stimulated tourism, and improved international relations.

¹⁰⁰. The development of a New World philosophy occurred throughout the 1920s, with the increase of romanticism, travelers and historians to Mexico. Well-known American names were involved in this exploration such as: Walter Pach, Lewis Mumford, Anita Brenner, and US Ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow. In fact this interest was so pervasive that it was deemed worthwhile to resuscitate the Modern Mexico magazine, designed primarily for the American businessman (sic) with the purpose of improving commercial and cultural relations between the two countries. See Henry Schmidt. "The American Intellectual Discovery of Mexico in the 1920s", The South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. 77, 1978, pp. 335 - 351.

¹⁰¹. During the 30s a contemporary Mexican writer Jose Juan Tablada wrote that the attitude of American's in the 20s-and 30s approved of the so called "universal values" of Mexico because they were viewed as stable in the midst of political and economic contingencies. Ibid. p. 351.
semiotic message structured through juxtaposition. In Self Portrait on the Border, (fig. #11) Kahlo sets ancient Aztec temples of Mexico side by side modernist Ford Smokestacks, and paints America's mechanical and robotic members as a foil for the primitive and organic qualities of agrarian society. Thus, Mexican pre-Columbian culture became the mythological structure of nationalism. This description of Mexican icons may appear to ignore the complex fashioning of Mexican indigenous culture, but what this description is meant to suggest is that Kahlo herself has simplified these symbols to that of icons. Likewise, in My Dress Hangs There, (fig. #12) the indigenous symbol of Kahlo's Tehuana dress is a chaste and immaculate icon amongst the decay and corruption of American institutions. The Justice Hall's front entrance is graced by a financial graph, the church has a dollar sign superimposed on its cross, and sultry May West appears as a tattered starlet. All these are signs signalling the cancer of capitalism. The metaphors of both paintings employ the myth of Mexico's "authenticity" to challenge and criticize American society. Significantly, each nation needs the other for its identity to be complete. Therefore, Kahlo can only paint this metaphor while she herself stands on the border, with access to the symbols of both national cultures, with American

103. Helland agrees: "Kahlo's particular form of Mexicanidad, a romantic nationalism that focused upon traditional art and artifacts uniting all indigenistas regardless of their political stances..."Helland, ibid. p.8.
cigarette and Mexican flag in hand. Her view from the border indicates how the "other" of the north stimulated the definition of Mexican identity, but was also a constant source of corruption challenging Mexican identity.104 Kahlo's view from the border reiterates that both Mexico and the US were together entangled in a struggle to form their identities.105

Kahlo's use of folk objects in her art referenced the continuities of a national culture - as in My Dress Hangs Here, (fig. #12) but also had a performative function in daily life. National culture was enunciated and performed daily through the decorative and costumed life associated with bohemia, which Kahlo has become so famous for and are evidenced by the many photos of Kahlo surrounded by folk art. See figure #13, an example of this.106

But access to the authentic was not only for bohemia; while folk art referred to post-revolutionary modern Mexico, it also signified class difference. Many photographs show Kahlo proudly in front of her folk art collection, a display practise that was typical of upper-middle class families in Mexico City.107

104. For a discussion of these ideas on the process of identity construction see Roger Bartra, p.13.
105. I have found the theory and writing of Homi Bhabha very helpful in formulating this argument. He writes "...the demand for a holistic, representative vision of society could only be represented in a discourse that was at the same time obsessively fixed upon, and uncertain of the boundaries of a society and the margins of a text." Homi Bhabha "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi Bhabha, (London: Routledge, 1990). p. 296.
106. This lifestyle was made public through reproductions in the popular press, Vogue 1938, Vanity Fair 1946, Time 1938.
Commonly a room in the house was decorated in folk style tradition and called the Mexican Room.

The supposed democratic traditions of folk art, ironically indicated a fairly elite audience. Kahlo and Rivera shared a history of collecting practices intimately connected with that of former American vice president Nelson Rockefeller. The relationship between Rivera, Kahlo and Rockefeller is hardly limited to folk art collection, and began as early as July 1931, when Rivera was offered a solo exhibition at the new MOMA, which had recently been founded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and friends (Nelson's mother). Abby Rockefeller was also responsible to beginning the Museum of Modern Art's Latin American collection, and in 1942 Nelson through his pet Inter-American fund provided the monies to purchase 195 more works for the collection.\(^ {108}\) His sojourns to Mexico in the 1930s and 40s resulted in a folk art collection of 3000 pieces.

Rockefeller's interest in Latin America was linked with his commitment to an Interamerican alliance which hoped to result in social and economic benefits for all of the Americas.\(^ {109}\) Outwardly Rockefeller reflected the liberal attitudes of a Waldo Frank or Stuart Chase, but he also remained an industrialist, whose philanthropic endeavors defined a position of power. Therefore, like Kahlo and Rivera

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\(^ {108}\) See *The Latin American Spirit*, pp 187 - 194 for information on this.
\(^ {109}\) The whole notion of an Interamerican Alliance had its pre-war basis on the American assumption that the security of the United States was intimately ties up with the political and economic future of Latin America. See David Haglund, *Latin America and the Transformation of US Strategic Thought, 1936 - 1940*, (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1984), pp. 3 - 6
he enjoyed a privileged access to Mexican folk art, but unlike them he remained an American voyeur - seeing but not participating.

Rockefeller's distanced access to a particular type of authenticity provided by folk art was a position many Americans enjoyed. Part of that pleasure is that the Americans' distance worked to construct an identity for themselves that was distinct from the passions of a Kahlo or Rivera. Within the realm of folk art, Rockefeller challenged the assumed purity and authenticity of these objects because of his ability and desire to purchase them. The demands of his folk art collection were matched by the demands of his identity. When he discovered an artisan, he found it necessary to purchase their best pieces and own the most complete collection. During Rockefeller's final visit to Mexican ceramist Teodora Blanco's house in 1978 he bought every ceramic doll she had.¹¹⁰ He understood her work through its place in his collection where the ideology of merit and individualism served as an organizing principle for the collection itself. This treatment of Teodora Blanco was not unusual. In fact this was the standard approach of most Rockefeller-funded agencies. Those who staffed Rockefeller foundations had intentions which were specifically that of the democratic ethos: "talent and merit would be rewarded wherever they were identified."¹¹¹

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¹¹⁰ Marion Oettinger, Jr. p 18, "I was so excited by her wonderful work that I bought virtually her entire collection."
¹¹¹ See Edward H. Berman, p.26 - 27
If the concepts of merit and individualism dictated how Blanco fit into Rockefeller's collection, then that demand also challenges notions of Mexican cultural authenticity. For example, Rockefeller subverted the religious iconography of a milagro by purchasing an entire collection of milagros at once, instead of individually for specific religious contemplation. Milagros are silver charms in the shape of a diseased body part that are purchased by individuals to be hung on a red or black cloth near the saint responsible for that concern. While this purchase revealed that notions of the "authenticity" of Mexican culture were shifting, it also indicated the redefinition of the value of "authenticity" within the economy of the collection. The significance of the milagros for Rockefeller now related more to issues of display and possession, than to religious performance. This redistribution of authenticity challenges the economy of meanings in which Kahlo’s milagro figures in a work like *Henry Ford Hospital* (fig. #3) circulated. To an American, Kahlo's poetic play on the milagro form became a charm to be consumed.

This complex tug and pull of cultural enunciations means that folk art did not function simply as reified symbols and icons, but as much more flexible signs which facilitated the process of constituted identities. Kahlo was not simply a staunch nationalist, as feminists in the 1970s assumed. For Kahlo, folk art served to critique and condemn national difference in her art.

while at the same time, in her living room it affirmed and supported a lifestyle and class difference. Conversely, American identities were also implicated in this structuring of difference; for Rockefeller, folk art clearly solidified his own identity in Latin America, appeased the difficulties that identity presented, and allowed him to wonder at the wonderful differences Mexico presented to him. And in the late 1970s feminists understood that same folk art as speaking to an amateur artistic tradition that women had engaged in throughout history.

Just as certain identities are claimed and exchanged through art, so did those exchange patterns occur through the historical narratives that feminists were uncovering regarding Kahlo. That narrative was based on assumptions of the 1970s that facilitated the erasure of the dialectic of nationalism from history. The identity that feminists secured for themselves in their reading of Kahlo as a political nationalist, was one which silenced their own historical struggle for a national history and identity, and incorrectly assumed a historical hegemony.
CONCLUDING REMARKS:
CONFIRMING CLAIMS AND RECLAIMING FEMINISM

This paper began by describing feminists' deliberate rupture of the discipline of art history. The rupture itself was a political act, by a group of heterogeneous women, who sought to break down chauvinistic barriers and break into the ivory tower of art history.

The historians who I have treated as a unified group were clearly not so. Lucy Lippard's use of Marxist theory does not sit easily beside Herrera's liberal practice, nor does Orenstein's interest in goddess imagery mesh comfortably with Chadwick's view of the surrealist inner reality. It is only by way of the paintings and personal products of Frida Kahlo that these writers and their interests intersect. My initial interest was sparked by the fact that this diverse group of feminists appeared to be responding similarly to pressures that had produced commonalities in their writing. These commonalities suggested something other than a lack of originality. Rather, they referenced the discursive pressures that American feminist historians generally faced.

To clarify these discursive pressures, I employed a strategy of seeking out patterns of absence within these historians' writings and accounts. The purpose of this strategy was threefold: to overcome the desire to condemn what seemed like "bad feminist art history," to avoid the possibility of a rescue
of this art history, and finally to gain access to the hidden
problems and agendas of this historical period.

The result is that the patterns of absence discovered
within these writings were made necessary by a political history
of absence. While feminists fought to confront women's
absence from history, rupturing the discipline while doing so,
they also needed to consolidate any gains that were made.
The breaking down and opening up of art history for feminist
historians simultaneously required a consolidation and
fortification of their own positions.

Within the thesis I have presented diverse ways in which
this reconsolidation of feminists in the face of art history has
worked. Each chapter has examined how notions of
biography, the canon, and nationality worked to fortify feminist
positions. I would further argue that the consolidation of a
feminist position was in fact a strategy which defined and
refined a viewing positions for feminists. This viewing position
can be understood as a feminist identity within art history which
was fashioned by means of a revolutionary rupture, and as
quickly contained by the discursive needs of that viewing
position.

Such an analysis works in this instance in part because of
Kahlo's images. It has to be acknowledged that under the
rubric of rupture and consolidation, Kahlo's self-imaging
provides paintings which facilitate this process. Not only did
their content support the most overt needs of a feminist viewer,
but the sign of Kahlo herself also signalled the more covert possibilities of rupture.

Both the possibility and impossibility of rupture and consolidation are traced onto the image of the artist. Specifically a late work, *The Mask of Madness*, (1945, Figure #14) comes to mind. The gaudily colored red and purple caricature mask of a women, is held by the sitter’s hand in front of her face. The artist paints herself as immobile as always, while the masks cries real tears of sorrow. The push to establish ones identity is there with the ply of the paintbrush, and fortified by the well known marks of Kahlo’s identity; the heavy black braid upon her head, and a glimpse of the passion of her gaze. Yet when the viewer attempts to grasp hold of that identity, or strains to capture her view, we stumble over the ever-present mask, a mask that cries real tears.

In the instance of this thesis, the mask has facilitated a process of grasping at identities so dissimilar that the stumble has now become a leap. The leap is into the 1970s, from the 1940s, where we now seek to understand how the choices feminists made fortified their understanding of themselves, their relationship to their work, and finally, their relationship to society.

On that level, this project has elucidated how a liberal politic manifested through the structure of biography, confirmed for feminists the significance of the individual, and the belief that the individual has the power to speak out, record, and resist oppression. This was the paradigm in which
Kahlo's images were understood. Such a paradigm was made possible through the use of biography, which transformed Kahlo's images into a "universal code" designed for North American white feminist women. This code set the terms for a feminist viewing position by addressing so-called "universal" content.

Confirmation of women's selves, through the highlighting of their experiences within Kahlo's images, then produced the need to affirm oneself as an active participant, and as a functioning person integral to surrounding systems. So while chapter 1 shows how feminists sought to break down established barriers, chapter 2 speaks to a simultaneous process of re-consolidation within the discipline of art history. Therefore working Kahlo into the canonical system acknowledged the power of art historical systems and the need to participate in those systems. It also, coincidentally, set up the structures for a further understanding of Kahlo's work; allowing it to become part of a larger picture, and at the same time allowing feminists to become part of that art historical picture.

Finally, the ultimate consolidation occurred through the contextualization of self through verification and re-enforcement of national identity through the medium of history. In this case, American feminists were not consciously claiming an identity, but repressing aspects of their own identity and history through their rediscovery and reinterpretation of Kahlo's play with national identity. What feminists did not say of
themselves and their history was significant, because it speaks to the "assumed" invisibility of the hegemonic American center. By 1977 the United States truly was a colonizer of Mexico and therefore felt no need to describe or understand itself. And presently in the early nineties, the latest cultural re-discovery of Mexico continues to prove that the "icons" of Mexico face a dubious time being represented by North Americans.¹¹³

Claims made by feminists in the late seventies, are not read in the authoritative chronologies of time, partly because feminist ruptures have had an unseemly fit into the story of art history.¹¹⁴ Perhaps more significantly, the story of these claims and confirmations also do not sit well with our method of telling of history. My explanation has been burdened by the facts of simultaneity, contradiction and absence -- all conditions that make history quite different from how we typically understand it. And that is perhaps where the significance of this thesis lies -- in the opportunity to rework history through the re-telling of feminist challenges.

¹¹³ Mark Stevens, "South of the Border", Vanity Fair, October, 1990, p. 156 - 160. Stevens discusses the issue of Madonna the pop-music star playing Frida Kahlo on the silver screen in a much more optimistic fashion than I would be inclined to: "Madonna as a Mexican will probably be about as convincing as Madonna as a Catholic. Yet one can always hope that the Material Girl will grow up - and that the United States will begin to treat Mexico as something more than hot stuff." Page 156. On this topic see also Hayden Herrera, "Why Frida Kahlo speaks to the 90s", New York Times Book Review, Oct 28, 1990, p. 1 + 41.

¹¹⁴ The concern that the power of the feminist challenges and critiques produced in the late seventies and early eighties are being made invisible yet again, is more than simply a concern of mine; see Marcia Tucker, "Women Artists Today: Revolution or Regression?", in Moving into the Mainstream, ed. Nancy Grubbs where she notes in 1980 the backlash against feminists was beginning to be felt. p.199.
Figure 1. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas* 1938, oil on canvas, 67"x67"
Figure 2. Frida Kahlo, My Birth 1932, oil on sheet metal, 12 3/4" x 15 1/2"
Figure 3. Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, oil on sheet metal, 12 1/4" x 15 1/2"
Figure 4. Frida Kahlo, *A Few Small Nips*, 1935, oil on sheet metal, 15" x 19"
Figure 5. Frida Kahlo, The Broken Column, 1944, oil on masonite, 15 3/4" x 12 1/4"
Figure 6. Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait on Circle*, no date, oil on masonite, 32 cm x 31 cm
Figure 7. Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, oil on canvas, 15 3/4" X 11"
Figure 8. Frida Kahlo, *Two Nudes in a Forest*, 1939, oil on sheet metal, 9" x 12"
Figure 9. Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me*, 1938, oil on canvas, 38" x 30"
Figure 10. Frida Kahlo, *The Square is Theirs*, 1938, oil on canvas, 12 1/4" x 18 3/4"
Figure 11. Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait on the Borderline*, 1932, oil on sheet metal, 12 1/2" x 13 3/4"
Figure 12. Frida Kahlo, *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933, oil and collage on masonite, 18" x 19 3/4"
Figure 13. Photograph of Frida Kahlo posing in front of her folk art collection
Figure 14. Frida Kahlo, *The Mask of Madness*, 1945, oil on cloth, 40cm x 30.5cm
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