

LATENTE

by Karla Desentis

The first part of this project, entitled Latente, is a six-minute video collage in landscape format, depicting twenty close-up frames of women's hands writing without ink onto a white piece of paper, leaving behind invisible marks. Each frame portrays an individual story as unique hand movements, drawings, tools, and sounds appearing one by one, joining a field of charcoal over paper marks. Along with the video-visuals appearing consecutively, the sound produced by the pencils, pens and other drawing instruments, creates a crescendo of a sonic texture's chorus.

The intention of having diverse video frames as well as the selected materials and actions was to invite the audience to reflect on all forms of feminine violence and its huge impact. According to the United Nations Populations Fund, UNFPA, one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world is violence against women and girls. It does not have social, economic, or national boundaries. As evidence of this, the World Health Organization presented the first systematic review in 2013, on the estimated global and regional prevalence of two forms of violence against women (by an intimate partner and by someone other than a partner), indicating that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence.

The data provided by this study is very valuable and helps to understand the magnitude and extent of the problem, however, it only allows us to see the impact of a certain type of violence and only in terms of its volume, but not to understand the qualitative aspects of it as the level or forms of violence. Thus, physical assault has been overemphasized while psychological violence like sexism and misogyny are mostly ignored among research.

Although WHO's definition of violence includes **psychological harm**¹, their reports of feminine violence are only focused on physical and/or sexual violence, since for the WHO,

¹ According to the WHO violence is "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, **psychological harm**, maldevelopment or deprivation commission" (Etienne G. Krug, 2002)

other forms of violence cannot be calculated because systematic data on non-fatal outcomes are not available yet in most countries of the world.

“In all parts of the world, deaths represent the “tip of the iceberg” as far as violence is concerned. Physical and sexual assaults occur daily, though precise national and international estimates of each are lacking. Not all assaults result in injuries severe enough to require medical attention and – even among those that do result in serious injuries – surveillance systems for reporting and compiling these injuries are in many countries either lacking”. “The human cost in grief and pain, of course, cannot be calculated. In fact, much of it is **almost invisible**. While satellite technology has made certain types of violence – terrorism, wars, riots and civil unrest – visible to television audiences on a daily basis, **much more violence occurs out of sight** in homes, workplaces and even in the medical and social institutions set up to care for people. Many of the victims are too young, weak or ill to protect themselves. **Others are forced by social conventions or pressures to keep silent about their experiences.** (Etienne G. Krug, 2002)

The fact that some forms of gender-based violence are difficult to calculate undermines the health, dignity, and autonomy of its victims since it remains shrouded in a **culture of silence**. This is undoubtedly a big problem that, from my point of view, must be exposed and challenged.

“... violence against women is pervasive globally. The findings send a powerful message that violence against women **is not a small problem that only occurs in some pockets of society, but rather is a global public health problem of epidemic proportions, requiring urgent action.**”(WHO, 2013). Now, with Covid-19, we understand more than ever what is to have a problem of epidemic proportions, but, do we understand that regarding feminine violence?

Hence, I believe it is important to address this issue and use art as a tool to do it. Through my work, I am interested in exploring the universality of objectification of women (which leads to other forms of aggression and violence), and the lack of visibility and understanding

of this problem on a global scale. I think that objectification² of women is part of a cultural problem, thus, it affects all women. And, since it has its roots attached to cultural and social behaviors it has been normalized and in consequence, it has become invisible.

That is why with this video-art piece I attempt to show the invisible violence that women live in all around the globe. Thus, I thought that for this project to be successful it required the participation of many women. First, I wanted to do an art installation, having several papers from different people, but since COVID-19, I decided to adapt the project to a video and to use technology to invite women to collaborate, which opened the possibility of inviting people from around the world. Through a digital invitation that included a video (English and Spanish versions) and a.pdf document, I invited people from different countries to collaborate since for me, it is very important to address that this problem is not exclusive to one region or another. After sending the invitation and instructions to my contacts, I received 22 videos. Two of them weren't used because I received them late. The final footage includes videos of people from Brazil, Canada, China, Finland, France, and Mexico. The languages used are English, Spanish, and French.

Instructions:

- 1.- Reflect on how this issue has affected you.
- 2.- Decide if you think this problem should be visible, and if you want to participate in this project.
- 3.- Take a white paper, a pencil, and a pen or a mechanical pencil without the point.
- 4.- Set your cellphone camera in a landscape/horizontal format pointing down to record the paper and your hands.
- 5.- OPTIONAL. Write (without color) your thoughts or anecdote or even a line that shows your feelings about this. This could be emotionally hard! And it is completely fine if you don't want to do it or if it is difficult and you need to stop. I am interested in see your hands while writing. If they are contracted, stressed, nervous, sweating, if they look mad or normal. I am also interested in your rhythm for writing, pauses are ok. Take into consideration the strength applied to the paper. Everything is allowed!
- 6.- Show the paper to the camera. The paper will have marks but people won't be able to read or even see anything. With this, I intend to show the audience that violence is there and happens to many, even if some women don't want to talk about it because it is difficult.
- 7.- OPTIONAL. If you want, you can add charcoal or pencil to the paper to show your words. The darker, the more we will see. You decide what to reveal!
- 8.- Show the paper to the camera.
- 9.- Please send me the video. I will use it for an edited version including many videos of the same thing. I want to show all kinds of hands, all kinds of writing, languages, etc. Please take in mind that I will use this video to show in my art class, but after I might use it for an art gallery, festival, etc. So... take in mind that this will be shown. You don't need to show your face, or add a name. **Thanks for participating**

The instructions and formal approach of the piece were decided based on the concept. Each aspect has a conceptual reason. For instance, the choice of shooting hands in close up was made to show the act of writing as an intellectual activity that reflects women's thoughts, expressions, experiences, ideas, convictions, beliefs, or whatever they decided to put on

² Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object. Martha Nussbaum (1995) has identified seven features that are involved in the idea of treating a person as an object: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, denial of subjectivity.

that paper. But not precisely through their words but through the genuine gestures and tiny expressions that hands can reflect while moving, looking for an embodied language that could show much more than conventional language. With this section of their body, I also was trying to avoid the use of images from other parts of women's bodies that have been extremely sexualized, even in feminist artworks. On the contrary, I liked that hands have not been endowed with that sexuality and that they carry a lot of information such as age, genotype (through the color of the skin, the shape of the nails, etc.), and maybe in some way, the viewer could perceive that they were women's hands, probably through gestures or other visual indicators as clothing, hair, nail polish and jewelry that people was wearing (without any direction from me).

Another formal choice was to have people writing without ink, paralleling the violence that we can not see, leaving through this action paper prints as the psychological marks left in one person after suffering any kind of violence. Additionally, I decided to have multiple video frames showing, more or less the same pattern of actions because I wanted to have many voices on the matter, empowering women to "speak up" themselves and to protest themselves. Their voices appear not only with their bodily actions but with the sounds they were unintentionally doing while writing and drawing, providing sonic textures that acoustically illustrate individual perspectives, as the timbre produced with each specific tool and sonic nuances created by variations of effort.

Finally, the suggestion made to all participants of adding charcoal over the paper marks was an important decision that was based in my belief that the human cost in pain caused by sexism and misogyny must be visible in order to understand the roots and dimensions of the feminine violence, and from there, maybe contribute to solving the problem. Thus, adding color to these marks is like raising your voice, it is a way to protest. Nevertheless, my voice is just one from many, and since I consider these voices should be real, I let that choice open to the participants to determine if they wanted to add or not charcoal, explaining to them that the darker the color added, the clearer of the text to reveal. So, it was people's decision if they wanted to protest themselves or not, and how much they wanted to actually say while protesting. For me, this was like a scientific experiment in which I had my hypothesis and then after running some test I was going to get some result. Thus, it was vital to respect people's decisions when editing the final video as a documentation of the result of this "social experiment". To be honest, I was expecting that maybe some of them decided to leave the paper in white since it could be extremely difficult to reveal those words.

However, as a happy surprise for me, all of them decided to add charcoal, in different intensities, some just in a few words while others added it to the full text. This result makes me notice how important is for some women to manifest against feminine violence.

After receiving all the videos, I realized that even when the totality of participants added charcoal, not all of them did it dark enough to read their words. As an ethical resolution of respecting people's voices and privacy, I didn't change the contrast, speed, or duration of their videos while editing the final result. Also, I didn't ask them to change anything to make their words more readable. However, I reflected that the most important aspect of this piece is to show the invisible violence they have suffered and their decision to protest by adding color, as well as the force of all their voices joined to express a message through invisible words, body language and sound, but not necessarily through the details of each story. As in every street protest, the strength is the union of individual claims into one powerful demand, and what we see is the volume of it, but not the details of each person's experience. That is why there is the phrase "Do you really need to see the details?" As I knew the audience would be feeling curious about reading the words and I considered it is not important to know "the morbid details" to recognize the problem. On the contrary, what is important is to establish that we don't need to know all the awful experiences to face the true dimension of feminine violence, and to acknowledge that many women don't want to talk about that, especially, not with details because it could be painful, or they could feel ashamed.

For a further iteration, I would like to have a wider participation focusing on the epidemic proportions of this problem. I would like to do an installation combining the projection of videos, like this one, having the same kind of sound, plus many papers from audience participation, encouraging women to actively participate and see their bodies in the space.

For illustrating this, I am presenting a video preview of an architectural installation comprised of papers, which built an immersive environment designed through drawing (hand-coloured black-and-white) done by women's participation on their view of the many forms of female violence and its global impact.

While walking through the installation, spatial constraints will force bodies to physically interact with the piece, where the interior walls and ceiling play with the normalized

orthogonality of vertical and horizontal, as the hegemonic perceptual norms of space, forming a disruptive environment with twisted rooms and tiny corridors. The layout will provoke the audience to shift their physicality and sensations/perceptions, imitating the disorienting properties of the symbolic space.

In addition to the papers, the sounds of the drawings depicted from the video “Latente” will be played in some areas of the room. In this sense, the piece will challenge the passive spectator by asking them to engage their senses (visual-sound-kinetic experience) and become active.

Participation will be essential, not only while walking through but to keep constructing the space. Although at the start of the project, the installation will have an initial form, the female audience/visitors will be encouraged to participate by drawing a paper and attach it to a wall or ceiling. Over the course of a week, the installation will be transformed by the repetition of papers displayed that will act as the overwhelming crescendo of the audio, representing the multiplicity of women's voices empowering themselves to make visible the normalized, and thus invisibilized, female violence.

References

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Published 2010; Revision 2019). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved February 2020, from Feminist Perspectives on Objectification: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-objectification/#PosPosObj>

World Health Organization. (2002). *WORLD REPORT ON VIOLENCE AND HEALTH - a global public health problem*. Geneva: Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Rafael Lozano.

World Health Organization, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the South African Medical Research Council. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women*. World Health Organization.