

Chicks Attack! Making feminist comics in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide insight, through the voices of the participants, on the current state of female comic artists in Argentina. We start with a brief historical overview: what was it like to be a minority in the Argentine comics industry? Historically, female comic creators have occupied a subordinate and even anonymous position in comparison to their male counterparts. However, since the 1980s, the Argentine comics industry has seen a change. This decade saw the appearance of several important women cartoonists in tune with the growing and expansive feminist movement of the 1970s. The tendency of female cartoonists moving to the forefront has grown exponentially over the years and in the last 25 years the number of female cartoonists in Argentina has increased significantly. The years 2015-2019 have seen a huge growth of such discussions and perspectives, coinciding with the birth of the massive *Ni Una Menos* ('Not One Less') feminist movement, which denounces femicides, and with the near-approval of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy law in 2018. This latter process sparked activist collectives such as *Línea Verde* ('Green Line') and *Femineetas* ('Femignettes') which took upon themselves to raise awareness of the necessity of the IVE (the acronym for Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy in Spanish), among other issues.

Keywords: Argentina, comics, feminism, authorship, engagement

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to reflect on the current state of female comic artists in Argentina. With this in mind, a brief historical review is necessary: what was it like being a female comic author in Argentina during what was known as the 'Golden Age' of the Argentine comics industry (1930-1960)?¹ Historically, female comic creators in Argentina have occupied a subordinate and even anonymous position in comparison to their male counterparts. This mirrors what Trina Robbins has discovered concerning female comics creators in the United States during the Golden Age of comics (Robbins, 2013; Robbins, 2017). Robbins is a major scholar in the branch of comic studies we are attempting to follow here. She started working as a cartoonist in the 1960s, she was active within the underground comix movement, and very critical of the misogynist and sexist attitudes within it. She became very active generating publications and spaces for women cartoonists in the 1970s and 1980s, publishing *Wimmen's Comix*, one of the first anthologies composed entirely of female cartoonists. At the same time, she became an important historian of the form, focusing on the history of women cartoonists in the United States, and releasing several books on the topic. As Robbins has found out, the American comics industry employed women cartoonists since its inception, but they were confined to comics which were 'comparatively light – cute animals and kids, pretty girls without a care in the world, rotund grandmas spouting homespun philosophy' (Robbins, 2013: 64). When Dale Messick started working on Brenda Starr, female reporter, men attacked her because they believed she 'was trespassing on male territory' (Robbins, 2013: 64) by drawing an action strip. This was further discouraged when the Second World War ended:

¹ For further information on how the comics industry originated and developed in Argentina see Vazquez, L. (2009). *El oficio de las viñetas. La industria de la historieta argentina*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

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(...) the kitchen movement took a different form. Although women continued to draw lighter strips throughout the 1950s, the men took back their action strips. (Robbins, 2013: 90)

The result of this process was a progressive disappearance of female authors while comic books became more and more focused on superheroes, erasing prominent female cartoonists from American comics history.

In Argentina, one of the first female authors we have noticed is Ada Lind (Laura Quinterno), the sister of Dante Quinterno (1909-2003), founder of the *Patoruzú* comics empire. Laura Quinterno co-created *El Gnomo Pimentón* ('Paprika the Dwarf') one of Quinterno's lasting properties. She was also the first female author to work on a newspaper comic strip with *Rayito and Clavelina*, which appeared in *El Mundo* newspaper.² *Rayito and Clavelina* was a 'cute kids' comic strip in which a brother and a sister had magical adventures in fantasy lands.

In terms of being recognised the landmark female creators who achieved a certain degree of prominence in Argentina during the first five decades of its industry would do so through their association with other, more famous, male cartoonists. Exemplary of this pattern was Cecilia Palacio, the daughter of Lino Palacio (1903-1984). Her father was one of the most recognised cartoonists, with a geometric and elegant style line, creator of a multiplicity of schematic characters (that is, characters with only one or two defining characteristics, which they then repeat incessantly in each strip, and from which stems the humor). Cecilia Palacio was a prominent golf player and had finished her studies at the School of Fine Arts. She began her career inking some strips and after several years, her father ceded her the use and ownership of three of his characters: Ramona (a Spanish maid who understands everything literally), Tarrino (a man with extraordinary luck) and Doña Tremebunda (an impetuous and strong-willed woman). She seemed content with this arrangement and continued her father's creations until 1992, when she retired.

There are a couple of other historical examples we would like to highlight here. One is Martha Barnes, the most important female cartoonist in Editorial Columba's staff.³ Barnes worked there for decades, since 1949. Columba (1928-2001) was one of the most significant publishing houses of Argentina, noted for its large output of material, and for being the home of Robin Wood, one of Argentina's greatest scriptwriters. She also worked for DC Comics and Eerie Publications, becoming one of the earliest cartoonists from Argentina to work for the U.S. comics industry. Despite this, her name and work do not take center stage in the history of Argentine comics.

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge the work of Blanca Cotta, a cartoonist who started working in the 1940s but rose to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s. Her work was tied to a singular line of work: illustrated recipes. She wrote simple but fun and hearty recipes for the modern woman,⁴ and accompanied them with her marvellous line work and cartoony characters. Cotta illustrated hundreds of recipes in a striking step-by-step style (which was also a panel-by-panel layout), which endeared her to children and mothers everywhere in Argentina. However, her work is often forgotten when talking about comics, not only because of her gender, but also because of the content of the culinary comics she did, which were traditionally considered the territory of women and girls, unfit to belong to the same class as the great action and adventure comics which were produced by men.

Since the 1980s, however, things have changed a bit in the Argentine comics industry. That decade saw the appearance of several important women cartoonists in tune with the growing and expansive feminist movement of the 1970s. We can mention artists such as Patricia Breccia, Maitena Burundarena, Cristina Breccia, Petisú (Alicia Guzmán) and María Alcobre. The process through which more female creators have entered the comics industry has grown exponentially over the years and in the last 25 years the number of female cartoonists in Argentina has increased significantly.⁵

² *El Mundo* was published between 1928 and 1967. It was one of the most popular tabloid-size morning newspapers in Argentina throughout its history. Editorial Haynes, its publishing house, also owned a radio and several magazines with a wide circulation.

³ Barnes was not the only one, but she certainly was the most prominent. Other female authors who worked for Editorial Columba include artists Laura Gulino, Idelba Lidia Dapuetto, Noemí Noel, Gisela Dester and Lucía Vergani and scriptwriter Francina Siquier. Their contributions to Argentine comics have been scarcely analysed, and a serious work of research concerning their body of work is long overdue.

⁴ Cotta belonged to a new generation of cooks who prized quickness and effectiveness over a traditional version of womanhood. They replaced the complicated and time-consuming recipes of Petrona Carrizo de Gandolfo – a famous cook who hosted radio and a TV shows between the 1930s and the 1980s, with recipes that took into account the fact that many mothers were now working mothers who had to juggle a career alongside kids and marriage.

⁵ A good way to represent this pictorially is the timeline the Chicks on Comics collective put together for their exhibition at Proa in 2017. If you see the first rings of the timeline, which cover the period 1900–1950, only a handful of names appear. But when we move closer to the present day, the allotted space for names is barely capable of containing the number of women cartoonists. This timeline has been expanded into a full-fledged investigation and exhibition soon to open in Buenos Aires by Mariela Acevedo, a researcher from Argentina, who is also a cartoonist and editor responsible for *Clitoris* Magazine, one of the most interesting queer/feminist publications of late in Argentina.

This growth has expressed itself in the publication of several works by women cartoonists, but also in different initiatives which aim to group the artists and gain strength from numbers. A good example of this phenomenon can be found in *Clitoris* magazine. Edited by Mariela Acevedo, *Clitoris* published four issues between 2011 and 2012 and later converted itself into a series of anthologies (there have been two of these so far) published by Hotel De Las Ideas. The magazine took a decisive political position regarding feminism and intersectionality: there are comics and articles by trans people as well as cis women in both magazines and anthologies.

The growth of female comic creators has had the additional positive consequence of allowing other gender minorities to start producing their own comics. Nowadays, the feminist comics scene in Argentina is positively intersectional. This is reflected, for example, in the mission statement and scope of the *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* ('Go Girls') festival. A manifesto printed on a zine edited by Agustina Casot, the organiser of the festival, reads:

We girls can write, we can draw, and we can do it however we please. That's why we aim to remove prejudices over the themes and styles of comics made by women, lesbians, transvestites and trans women. (Casot, 2018, 22)

This is also present in the way minority creators have reclaimed genres usually reserved for men, such as adventure, action, and superheroes, and diversified them, making them a vehicle for telling other types of stories which express their interests and experiences.

The years 2015–2019 have seen a huge growth of such discussions and perspectives, coinciding with the birth of the massive *Ni Una Menos* ('Not one less') feminist movement, which denounces femicides, which has been defined by Diana Russell and Jane Caputi, as an extreme in a continuum of abuse towards females and feminised bodies (Caputi and Russell, 1993: 424–426). In 2012 the Argentine legal system incorporated a modification which included the figure of gender violence and femicide, although not as a separate criminal offense, but as an aggravating circumstance concerning homicides.⁶ This modification, which was the result of the prolonged struggle of several organisations of civil society, introduced the concept into mainstream discussion and helped to raise awareness about the issue, something which sparked the *Ni Una Menos* movement.⁷ Nevertheless, the problem is far from solved: looking at the official statistics up to June 2019 there were 133 femicides in Argentina, at a rate of one every 24 hours.⁸

The other important event was the near approval of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy law in 2018. This latter process, which saw thousands of women in the streets during each day of debate in the Congress, sparked a couple of collectives which took upon themselves to raise awareness of the necessity of the IVE (the acronym for Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy in Spanish). One was *Línea Verde* ('Green Line'), a collective of illustrators and cartoonists who uploaded images to a common Instagram and Facebook accounts. Another was *Superheroes for Legal Abortion*, in which several cartoonists drew their favourite characters sporting the green handkerchief which is the movement's symbol.

Festivals focused on women and queer creators have also sprung up. The most noteworthy amongst them is *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* ('Go Girls!'), originally headed by Agustina Casot and Andrea Guzmán, in which all the expositors are female or queer, and which saw a huge success during its first iterations. The festival also spawned a catalogue called *Pibas* ('Girls'), published in 2019 by Hotel de las Ideas. This catalogue gathers 22 authors with wildly differing styles.

Finally, we can also mention *Feminietas* ('Femignettes'), an 'illustrated feminist newspaper' according to its creator, Rosario Coll, who was born in Rosario (Argentina) and is currently living in Barcelona. The newspaper gathers contributors from both sides of the Atlantic and is a hub of discussion and exchange between Spanish and Argentine feminism. Two issues have been already published, while a third is currently in preparation.

This timeline, captured sequentially, does not presume to be an exhaustive enumeration of all the initiatives, collectives, artists and publications which currently discuss feminine, feminist and queer representation in Argentine comics. It is meant merely as a brief overview. To better understand the current situation in this article, concerning female creators of comic books in Argentina, we approached a varied group of female comic book authors and asked them about several aspects of their work: their connection with feminism and queer sexualities, the importance of collaboration in comics creation, the techniques they use, the topics they discuss in their comics, their influences and the way these influences connect to a wider history of female comics artists in Argentina. We

⁶ "El femicidio ahora ya es ley", *Página/12*, 15/11/2012, recovered from: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-207885-2012-11-15.html>

⁷ The touchstone for this movement was a massive march on June 3rd 2015, which took place in 80 different cities around Argentina, including the capital, Buenos Aires. The objective was to denounce femicides and demand authorities to take actions to prevent the high murder rate that affected women in particular. The movement quickly became an international phenomenon and has inspired similar movements in most Latin American countries, Europe and Asia.

⁸ "Aumento de femicidios", *Página/12*, 31/05/2019, recovered from: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/197292-aumento-de-femicidios>

spoke with the Argentine members of the international comics collective Chicks on Comics (Clara Lagos, Caro Chinaski and Delius [María Delia Lozupone]), with Sukermercado [Paula Boffo], and with Paula Sosa Holt. Our interviews were held in different bars in the city of Buenos Aires and they were conducted in an informal manner. We decided to group the interviews according to several topics which appeared consistently across them: the beginnings of the interviewees' involvement with comics (or, in the case of Chicks on Comics, their inception as a group); the networks of sociability established by the artists; their relationship with the feminist movement and ideas; how they handle their craft and the creative decisions they take; and, finally, how their works are dialoguing with pre-existing genres of comics.

Mariela Acevedo, in a landmark article, reconstructed the two main lines of enquiry concerning women in comics, extrapolating them from a broader feminist cultural criticism approach:

(...) the first one is that which analyzes the images of women (in TV, in novels, in art history and, here, in comics). The second, also known as gynocriticism, looks, in the production of authors, the traces of female experience. (Acevedo, 2016: 177–207)

We will not analyse the textual images of women here. Rather, we aim to give voice to the artist protagonists and let them narrate their own experiences. In this respect, our approach is closer to gynocriticism, but rather than trying to interpret their experience ourselves, we believe their own narration of events and ideas to be more important.

THE INTERVIEWS

First of all, we have Chicks on Comics, a comics collective founded in 2008 with the aim of establishing a dialogue between comic book artists living in different parts of the world. The original idea was concocted by Powerpaola [Paola Gaviria] and Joris Bas Backer, and since its inception the group has opened its doors to several artists from a wide array of countries: Caro Chinaski, Clara Lagos, Sole Otero and Delius [Argentina]; Lilli Loge and Ulla Loge [Germany], Maartje Schalkx [Netherlands], Chiquinha [Fabiane Langona, from Brazil], Weng Pixin [Singapore] and Julia Homersham [UK]. Currently, the group is composed of Bas Backer [Netherlands], Powerpaola [Ecuador], Zane Zlemesa [Latvia] and the aforementioned Caro Chinaski, Clara Lagos, Delius, and Weng Pixin.

This diverse collective works in a variety of styles and engages in long-distance conversations between the artists, which are then posted to Tumblr (<http://chicksoncomics.tumblr.com/>). They have organised several exhibitions of their work. The most important one was held at Proa Foundation in La Boca (Buenos Aires) between January and February 2017. This was a landmark exhibition, since it was held at one of the most noteworthy contemporary art spaces in the city of Buenos Aires, it gave the collective a greater notoriety in mainstream media, in addition to the variety of materials and styles employed by the artists. They have also published several fanzines and magazines of their work. In 2018, the collective won the II Iberoamerican Cities Graphic Novel Award with their book *Las Ciudades Que Somos* ('The Cities We Are'). Secondly, Paula Sosa Holt comes from the world of illustration. She started making comics with her daily strip *Pip and Pep*, a one panel strip that humorously delves into the life of a couple somewhere between their twenties and their thirties. She followed this up with *Vainilla Kids*, a strip telling the adventures of a trio of slacker friends (one of whom is a cat), who like to drink beer, watch TV and smoke pot. She has also illustrated *Escuela Pública de Animales* ('Public School for Animals'), a children's book written by Malena Fainsod. Finally, Paula Boffo, also known by her *nom de plume* Sukermercado, is an impressive new voice on the Argentine comics scene. A member of the comic workshop given by comics artist Fernando Calvi in Buenos Aires, Sukermercado is also a student of animation and budding author. She has participated and edited the anthology *Telecomics*, which houses the productions of several students from Calvi's workshop. In 2017 she won one of the awards given by the Editorial Municipal de Rosario in their LGTBI contest with her comic *Fabulosa El Dorado* ('Fabulous El Dorado'), which tells the story of a young man who connects emotionally with a trans woman. Last year she published *La Sombra Del Altiplano* ('Shadow of the Plateau'), a revenge story starred by a *kolla* (a young native woman from Northwest Argentina) who rescues her sister from a prostitution ring. She also published *Si Mojás Me Enciendo* ('I get Turned on if You Wet Me') a romantic porno-queer comic.

We chose these artists because we believe each of them represented an important development concerning women and graphic narratives in Argentina. Chicks on Comics highlights the importance of collaborative action, something which has structured many of the initiatives undertaken by female creators struggling for visibility. Moreover, as the first all-female collective in Argentina, Chicks on Comics trail-blazed a path which many artists are now traversing. Finally, Chicks on Comics also highlights the importance of transnational collaboration, and

the decentring of discussions from the national sphere to analyse the same topics from a wide variety of perspectives.

Paula Sosa Holt, on the other hand, represents the hybridity of influences and media which is present nowadays in Argentine comics production: coming from the world of illustration and kids' books, Sosa Holt mixes these inspirations with a style that owes a lot to recent indie comics from the United States, Canada and Australia, to produce strips which appeal to long-standing readers of comics and to newer readers who discover them through social media. The social media presence of Sosa Holt is also a big part of her success: she currently has around forty-thousand followers on Instagram, something unprecedented for an Argentine comics creator. This points toward the way changes in technology have made it easier for diverse voices to emerge.

Finally, Sukermercado [Paula Boffo] is part of a wave of new queer voices in the Argentine comics scene, and as such her comics take part – more than any other treated here – in the discussions regarding gender identity, transgender rights, bisexuality and homosexuality. Furthermore, Boffo mixes these topics with pre-existing narrative genres (action movies, porn) which usually have been associated to male toxicity. Through this operation she decentres and recovers these genres for a different, diverse audience and injects her works in the long-standing debate about representation in media.

The following sections will be a series of interviews with the above-mentioned artists. We hope these interviews will show how the experience of being a minority comic creator in Argentina has changed with time; how feminist theory and politics impacted on their work; how they relate to the traditions of Argentine comics; and how they approach their work from an ideological standpoint but, also, from a craft standpoint.

BEGINNINGS

How did the Chicks on Comics project come about?

Maria Delia Lozupone [Delius]: “In 2008 [Power] Paola and Joris [Bas Backer] met in Paris because they had both won the same scholarship. Talking in a bar, they came up with the idea of founding a collective with the objective of raising awareness about the work of female cartoonists, because they thought it was something that was sorely needed. They divided the task of gathering artists; Paola did it with the Spanish-speaking side: Sole Otero, Clara Lagos and I. Joris contacted two German colleagues, Lilli and Ulla Loge, and Maartje Schalkx, a classmate of hers in the art school in the Netherlands, who at that point was living in England.”

Caro Chinaski: “Back then Sole, Paola, Clara and I shared a space in the blog *Historietas Reales*.”⁹

And what was the first thing you did?

Delius: “First we opened a blog, in September 2008. It was there that the conversations between Paola and Joris started and the dynamic settled in: we had to answer with a panel to the panel that came before. Two years later, in 2010, we put together the first show in LDF Gallery, in San Telmo [Buenos Aires]. It consisted of the first 100 panels with an English translation below.”

Why did you choose the format of a conversation in panels?

Clara Lagos: “What was attractive for us at the beginning was to see what people that hailed from very different places thought about a common topic. One of us threw a subject on the table and we started contributing that way, each one from her own corner of the planet. When we started inviting people, our criterion was that they should always come from a different part of the world.”

Delius: “When we were discussing abortion, Weng Pixin said that in Singapore abortion was legal.”

Clara Lagos: “Or in the Netherlands, where it's legal since 1986. At some other point in time we started discussing gentrification. For those of us who lived in Berlin it was a thing, and for those of us, in Buenos Aires, it didn't mean anything. There was a huge cultural difference... I must confess that at some point in time I didn't know what I was doing in Chicks on Comics because it was so hard for me to explain complex issues in just one panel.”

Caro Chinaski: “Anyway, that was also an excuse to produce material that could be publishable. Some of those dialogues ended up appearing as a fanzine.”

Delius: “That was a natural step, from digital to paper. We must also take into account that we did it in a blog, which requires very little investment. We used the social networks, and the production that first appeared there naturally passed onto paper. But that happened a while after we started.”

⁹ *Historietas Reales* [Real Comics] was one of the most important comics' creators' collectives of Argentina. Hosted in a blog roughly between the years 2005 and 2009, the aim was to upload a daily page of autobiographical comics, each day by a different author. The collective, which originally was composed only of Argentine authors, grew to include artists from Bolivia, Uruguay and Colombia and produced an astounding amount of material.



Figure 1. ‘Chicks on Comics’ from *Chicks on Comics* Tumblr site. Chicks on Comics (2015). © Ulla Logue, Caro Chinaski, Delius, Powerpaola.

Tell us about your beginnings as a cartoonist.

Paula Sosa Holt: “My relationship with comics started because of my love of drawing. When I was younger, I had the utopian idea that I wanted to illustrate books’ covers. It’s something I really like. In fact, I have done it recently with some poetry books. I like the idea that you can sum up the concepts inside a book in an image. Then I discovered children’s illustration. I studied in Sótano Blanco (“White Basement”) and I loved it, I never abandoned it.”

What was your first comics job?

Paula Sosa Holt: “While I was studying children’s illustration, at the same time, I don’t know why, I started to study comics with Mariano Díaz Prieto, in his workshop which is called *El Gato Verde* (“The Green Cat”). He proposed to me to do one strip a day, and I realised that I found it quite easy. I took everyday dialogues and illustrated them. I also joined Powerpaola’s workshop on autobiographical comics. When I showed her what I had done, she asked me why I didn’t upload it somewhere. I wasn’t so sure. Her advice was for me to start showing my work, so I did it from my Instagram account. But it meant exposing myself and that frightened me a little.”

Until then, what was your relationship to comics? Did you use to read them?

Paula Sosa Holt: “I am not a great reader of comics, I always found them too expensive... I read quite a bit in digital format, but I like books, I like to have a lot of books. I have a lot of children’s books.”

But children's books are expensive...

Paula Sosa Holt: “Back then not so much, because I had a friend who worked at Rivadavia Park¹⁰ who got me children’s books at half price. I bought like four books a week, even some I didn’t like so much, but I studied the techniques. I was interested in children’s literature by itself. When they ask me about comics influences, I don’t know what to say. I like to read them, but I don’t feel they have a direct influence on my work. I’m more influenced by cinema, especially the mumblecore genre, conceptually speaking. I like the dialogues they have, which are generally improvised, and their idea of the everyday.”

You started making comics at Fernando Calvi's workshop?

Sukermercado: “Actually, I made comics before that, when I was a teen. And when I was younger too, I did them for myself. When I was about 12, a friend would write the scripts and I’d draw on A4 sheets. But I didn’t dare to make my own fanzines; I thought that, in order to make comics, I had to write a super formal script. I used to go into the internet and look up tutorials on how to do it, I didn’t understand a thing! They spoke about the Marvel Method and stuff like that and I’d think ‘What is this!? I’ll never be able to make it!’”

I felt that I didn’t know how to write, because I had always drawn, so when I tried, I couldn’t make it or I didn’t like what came out. That’s when I contacted Fernando [Calvi], in order to start a scripting workshop, but there were no more places. So, I signed up for the full comics workshop and I started writing more and to work as a full-fledged author. Once the wheel was a bit more oiled, it started moving and it kept on going by itself. I just finished a comic and I’m already thinking about the next three I want to make.”

And what was your relationship with Argentine comics?

Sukermercado: “I started to know Argentine comics when I started attending Calvi’s workshop. Once in a while I’d buy *Fierro*¹¹, some things I liked and others I found heinous. I liked what Calvi, Lucas Varela, Gato Fernández and Ignacio Minaverri did; authors who have something to do with what I do. But it was through the workshop and through the talks we had there that I started shyly going to events and then the enormous tsunami of Argentine comics broke over me. Before that I just knew the more mainstream stuff, like Liniers [Ricardo Siri] or Kioskerman [Pablo Holmberg], whom I really liked because it was like Liniers but different [laughs]. In fact, I named myself Sukermercado in part because of the pseudonym Kioskerman, I wanted a nom de plume kind of like that. I was 15 when I made it up. My last name has nothing to do with Suko, in high school they called me Suki, playing with it I arrived at Sukermercado because of the band, Supermerk2¹². Between that and Kioskerman, I thought it was a cool name [laughs]. I feel it has a “sudaca” feel I like and I think of it as part of my identity. Even though my family comes from Italy, I’m here and I live here and these are my circumstances, so I feel impacted by South America. Although my roots come from elsewhere, I identify with this place.”

SOCIABILITY

When you started, did you notice any kind of response? When did you start to feel like a collective?

Delius: “I think the first exhibition was really important. There are some videos where you can see the public and there are people whom I didn’t know at the time and who went to the show anyway. There were a lot of blogs at that moment, it was before social networks, contacts were made by inviting people whose blogs you followed. We made a big open call around the topic of love and many people collaborated. It was included in the exhibition as a part made exclusively by invitees. There were around 40 pieces of work from different countries. In retrospective, we lead off the game and we realised that we were all reading each other. From the first moment that was present: to show our work and to see the work of others. Then came the exhibition at PROA [Foundation], which was a breakthrough and gave us a lot of visibility, but it also wore us down.”

Clara Lagos: “We made other shows before, like the 2011 one in Colombia, in Manizales. We were struck by the cultural differences there. Colombia is a really sexist country and that showed when girls came up to us to tell us ‘I’m going to draw too!’ For us it was something of a common thing, why wouldn’t they draw? That was really good, because they saw the exhibition and we got close with people who really needed it. We organised a fanzine

¹⁰ Parque Rivadavia is a popular park located in the district of Caballito, in the city of Buenos Aires. It’s there where the commerce of used books and magazines can be found.

¹¹ *Fierro* magazine is one of the most important anthology comics magazines from Argentina. Its first run lasted from 1984 to 1992 and is fondly remembered by local comics fans because of the quality of the material they choose to print and for being the first home of many important works by Alberto, Enrique and Patricia Breccia, Carlos Trillo, José Muñoz, Carlos Sampayo et al. The second run took place from 2006 to 2019 and showcased a younger generation of cartoonists alongside some classics.

¹² A notorious *cumbia villera* (‘cumbia from the slums’) band from the early 2000s.

workshop with Camila Torre Notari and we had girls who couldn't believe that they could do something like that. There were some male colleagues who wouldn't speak to me, for example.

And, on the other hand, in 2013 we went to Berlin thanks to a scholarship. And when we were there, I was the one asking if we could do this or that [laughs]. To make a fanzine you could go to a copy shop where you could find any kind of paper you wanted, in any type of colour you wanted. You could drink tea while working. You designed your stuff on a computer and sent it to print directly. It was paradise for a fanzine maker!"

It always grabbed my attention the way you work as an open collective. There are regular members, but others come and go, they change. How do you handle those porous borders?

Delius: "I don't know if they are so porous... [laughs]. The idea of an invited author was present from the beginning, but we always proposed a certain topic to them."

Caro Chinaski: "So, they don't do whatever they want [laughs]."

Delius: "There is a fixed staff, the people who keep the project going, the ones who are active. That group has had changes in personnel, it was something that evolved naturally, according to the circumstances each of us found ourselves in. When someone feels that she can't or doesn't want to continue, she can leave and then we decide if we incorporate someone else."

Caro Chinaski: "It depends on how much you can commit yourself. What happened to me was that at some point in time I couldn't handle anything, so I left because I wasn't offering the group what the group needed from me."

For me there's this image, of a small steep hill, and if someone stops because her leg is hurting, then there are two or three others that help her continue. It's like a living thing that moves in one direction, and when someone falls because she becomes less interested, or because of time or strength constraints, everyone else pushes her forward."

Delius: "There's something really loving in the group. The girls sent me a message urging me to participate in the book [*Las Ciudades Que Somos*, their latest graphic novel], they told me that I couldn't be absent. And perhaps that's what I needed, to be pushed a little. Partners exist not only to tell you 'we have to do this, we have to do this other thing,' but also to lovingly include you. Amongst the ones that live nearby and with whom there's fluid contact, there's also a friendship. And that is also a double-edged sword. A group is not necessarily the sum of our individualities, but it has a group identity. We're not a band where each one of us just plays an instrument, we all have our solos."

Clara Lagos: "We're a music festival! [laughs]"

Delius: "It's like a jam session."

How did you enter the comics and fanzine circuit?

Paula Sosa Holt: "When I was studying at Sótano Blanco I met two girls - Titihoon and Erika Coello – with whom we decided to put together a drawing group. We got together once a week to draw. That helped me to get close to fanzines, because when you're alone is harder to muster the courage to enter that scene. And that was good, suddenly we were twelve people getting together each Tuesday and making fanzines. We put together a show and that's how we became a bit more known. Afterwards the group dissolved, but each of us remained in the scene."

What is it about relationships that attracts you? I see it a lot in your work: friendships, couples...

Paula Sosa Holt: "I think relationships interest me because one works with what one is closer to, and when I'm interested in something, I pay a lot of attention. When I was doing *Pip and Pep*, the dialogues with my partner gave me a lot of material. Then I started to pay attention to dialogues with friends and so on. What I make is related to what I'm paying attention to at the time."

Would you say you are a pessimist or an optimist when it comes to human relationships?

Paula Sosa Holt: "[Thinks] I don't know how to answer that... what does it mean to be an optimist regarding a relationship?"

There are 'people persons', people who like to be surrounded by other people; and people who don't. Your strips make me feel like you are a really sociable person.

Paula Sosa Holt: "I like to engage one-on-one. I feel really uncomfortable in group situations, I feel like I can't relax. That's why I like couples' conversations, because I feel like I'm myself."



Figure 2. *La Depresión de Lisa*. Paula Sosa Holt (2016). © Paula Sosa Holt

*And there are the animals too, like in **Vainilla Kids** where the cat acts as a sort of go-between amongst the humans.*

Paula Sosa Holt: “I still don’t understand that. I don’t know what’s my thing with anthropomorphic animals. I have two cats and I love them... That’s why Mugre is human, but is a cat also, and behaves like a cat.”

You started making comics having no previous relationship with the tradition of Argentine comics.

Sukermercado: “Tradition is something I couldn’t care less about... It’s okay, but we’re in 2019 and there are other things going on. I have to live in this moment. Obviously it’s cool to know where we come from, as to have a better understanding of the present, but you have articles saying that everything died in 2001. Mister, let me invite you to the *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* festival, and then see all that women have been doing lately, like erotic and porn comics... We’ve done a lot of work! And that’s just mentioning women, we have men too. I think I was lucky to enter the field at this moment, in a pack with other women, with queer people, this field which was a bit inhospitable if you were a woman, if you were bisexual. There are people with different identities leaving a mark, a lot of very talented people, a lot of people who are just starting. Younger people, experimenting with new ideas, new questions. That’s attractive and it makes me feel more comfortable.”

Does that mean that when you started you weren’t comfortable?

Sukermercado: “When I started, I realised all of this was happening. When I started attending Calvi’s workshop the only other woman there, besides me, was Dani Arias. I sat next to her, we started talking and we became friends almost immediately. She was a part of the In Bocca al Lupo studio, and I went with them to my first *Crack Bang Boom*¹³ in 2016, I was kind of an adopted child. I didn’t understand a thing! They told me Juan Saéñz Valiente¹⁴ was there and I hadn’t read any of his stuff, I didn’t know him. Or I ran into Sole Otero and I didn’t know who she was either. So, I dived in and all this new material started coming up. I think this is related with the current social and political context, a moment in which feminism is super strong, where queer sexualities are bringing a lot of topics to the table, right in the middle of a political moment in which the right is on the rise.”

¹³ One of the biggest comics’ conventions in Argentina, held annually in the city of Rosario (Province of Santa Fe) since 2010.

¹⁴ Comics creator responsible for *La Sudestada*, one of the more lauded graphic novels of 2015.



Figure 3. 'Fabulosa El Dorado' from *Historietas LGBTI*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo

FEMINISM

Do you feel that the development of the feminist struggle has modified the topics you deal with as an artists' collective? Or did you align yourselves with those topics naturally?

Delius: "I think there's been a mixture of things: our work changed in a natural way. But not only what I do with Chicks on Comics, all my work. Before I make an affirmation, or a joke, or some drawing – and here we should ask ourselves if we're not losing a degree of spontaneity in some things – I think about what I want to say, what the content will be, making an effort so it doesn't affect my outlook so much. After all, if I want to speak about romantic love, although now it's considered old fashioned, I can say 'I believe in romantic love.' Just because we're feminists it doesn't mean that we're going to say that it doesn't exist anymore. We have a lot of freedom to talk and to carry out our conversations, but we can't be ignorant of certain things, we're not going to play dumb. If a law against abortion comes up, we will say something if we have something to say and if we want to do it. But perhaps we're not like other, more head-on collectives aiming for a clash. We have an artier side."

Clara Lagos: "Perhaps that was what Maartje, who left recently, didn't like so much: she needed a more outspoken, committed group. Perhaps I do it without realising it, because I don't set out to talk about these topics. But that's my way. Perhaps Maartje hoped we would speak more directly about abortion and other topics."

Caro Chinaski: "I think it all has to do with flexibility: if one of us wants to bring up those topics she can do it and we discuss it amongst ourselves because it has a place in what we do; the one that doesn't want to talk about them doesn't have to. Perhaps Maartje's need back then was for all of us to head in the same direction, and that was something that had never happened to us. We have always accompanied each other, but each of us goes down their own path; we listen to each other to know what the other person, who's not me, is thinking."

I wanted to ask you about your relationship to the history of comics. What effects did it have on you the making of the history spiral [during the Proa exhibition]? Did that reconfigure your relationship to comics and its history and allowed you to recover part of that submerged history?

Clara Lagos: "To see it written on the wall was shocking. The more we thought about it, more names started to appear."

Delius: "We looked it up in the internet and then we double checked the information. We had help from Judith Gociol.¹⁵ While we talked, we started to realise that many women had been through the same things we had. It's related to our identity as women cartoonists. That's why the act of writing those names on the wall was so significative, it meant we were leaving a mark. And to leave a space also, so names that were left out could be incorporated later. In relation to the future, the repercussions are unexpected, we opened a door and anyone who wants to come in can do it."

What's your political position as an author of comics?

Paula Sosa Holt: "I've now started making strips which I consider are feminist, but until recently I felt like, even though I'm feminist, I wasn't going to touch those subjects. It always seemed more important to have a story in which the topic could be touched upon although it wasn't at the centre of it all, to have something in the comic which was more than just the issue I was discussing. Making a feminist pamphlet in the shape of a comic doesn't interest me."

I was recently invited to participate in *Femínetas*, it's a publication directed by a woman from Rosario [Florencia Coll] who lives in Barcelona and, as part of her thesis in Communication Studies, she put together a feminist journal. It's distributed in Argentina and Barcelona. I published a *Vainilla Kids* strip in the first issue and for the next one I put together something made especially for the newspaper. That gave me the impulse to start making strips that touch upon topics such as jealousy and the deconstruction of jealousy. The idea is that each strip talks about an aspect of life we should deconstruct, and to make it accessible to everyone. For that approach to work, I find it's key to speak in first person, rather than to point with your finger in an accusatory manner."

I think what you say it's really interesting, because the problem is how to escape the obvious, which is also the easiest thing to make and say. Especially if you think that this will appear in social networks, which always risk looking for the easy like.

Paula Sosa Holt: "There's a formula, I think, that's widely used, and which consists in putting a sexist guy saying something and right next to him the author as a character correcting him. That is useful for reaching a larger audience, but I don't know if that's what I want... I want to say something I like. I can't do something I'm not comfortable with, I need it to be good for me."

¹⁵ Researcher on comics from Argentina and one of the people responsible for the Archive of Comics and Graphic Humor held at the National Library of Argentina.

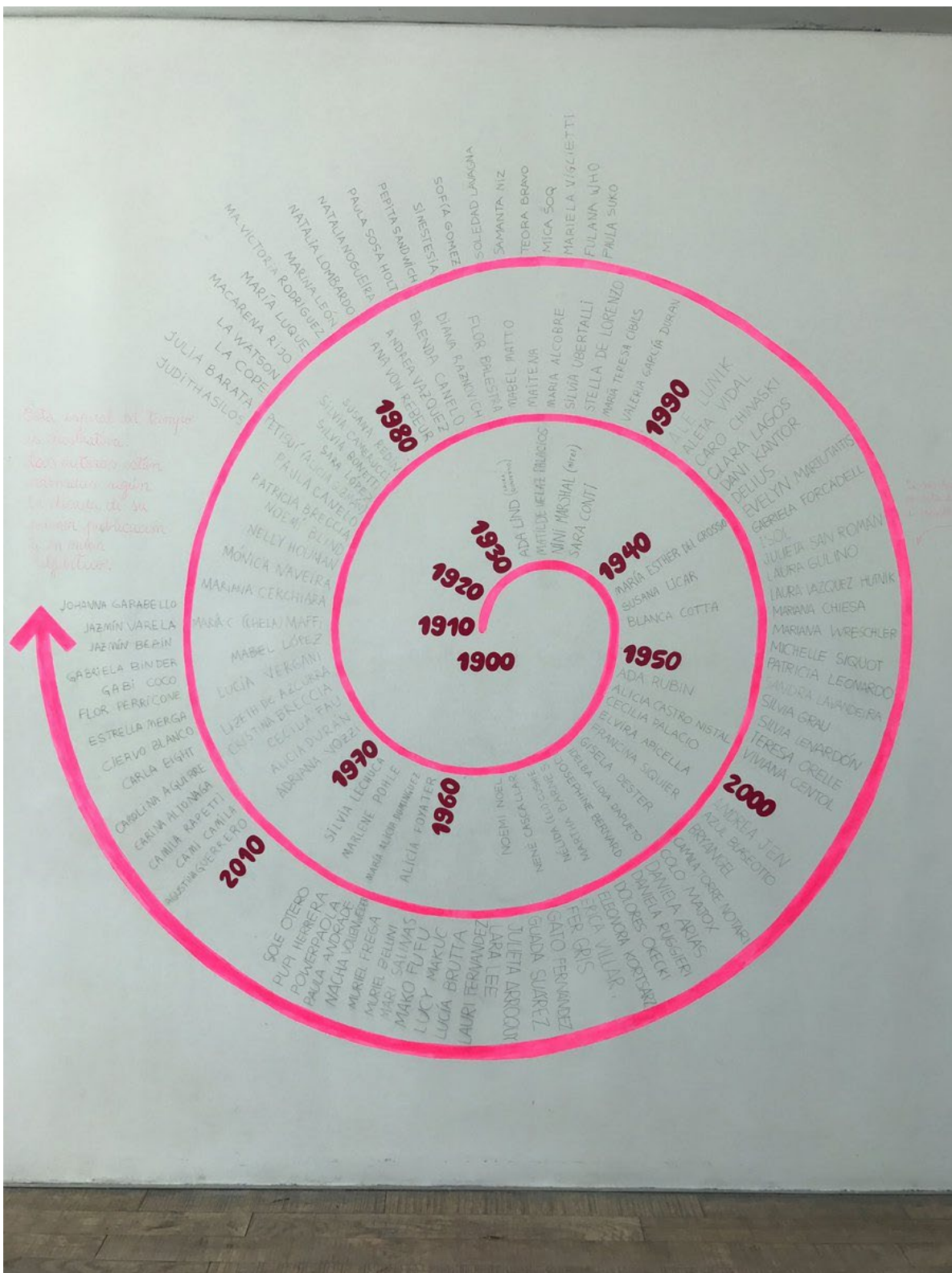


Figure 4. 'History Spiral' from *Chicks on Comics* exhibition at PROA, Buenos Aires. Chicks on Comics (2017). © Chicks on Comics.

I wanted to ask you about your porno works: the first one I saw was the one you exhibited at the Recoleta Cultural Centre [in the exhibition *Deseo y Problemas*] and I liked it a lot. It was a story I hadn't seen before, for sure not in comics, and neither in mainstream porn. When you make things like that, are you thinking about your own desire? Or in the desire of people you know? How do you choose which things to show?

Sukemercado: "What I did for *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo* was to take the same protagonist of that story you mention, because I love that character. In this story, I show a weaker side of her. There's a structure that is like a



Figure 5. *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo.

romantic story with an underlying porn structure: she can fuck everyone, but she finds a trans boy that she likes and she gets nervous, clumsy, she runs into him when she's in her pyjamas buying stuff at the supermarket. Things like that.

I did it taking inspiration from my own desire, because I felt that if I didn't do it like that it wouldn't be sincere. I believe that the personal is political, and I also believe that the personal is filled with shortcomings that, many times, go against what you believe. We shouldn't punish ourselves for being unable to instantaneously fulfil the model of deconstruction we are creating, because each of us has its own times and paths. In the porn story there were many points of view that were my own, but told from a sensitive side. There's a B plot about a girl who has a violent boyfriend, it doesn't have the prominence the other story has, but it's there because I want to talk about

that. What do we do when something like that happens to one of our friends? How do we tell him or her that that person is bad for him or her? I chose to do it from the sincerest place possible. Because I'm a woman and because of the way we are raised, there are things that I believed were the norm until a few years ago. For example, when a sexual partner wants to negotiate with you about the use of condoms. I thought that was normal and I was going to have to put up with it. But that shouldn't be normal. Or the fact that our own pleasure isn't taken into account in a sexual encounter with a man. That's the consequence of a porn sex education. The man comes and the scene is over. Why? If there are two people involved... or more [laughs] They teach you that things are like that and that's it. That's why we should all make a communitarian effort to demolish these ideas by sharing data and teaching each other. After that, if someone else reads something into it, that happens because the work is no longer mine. I own up to what I did, but I can't avoid if someone reads something in a way I did not intend. I prefer for that to happen than for the piece of work to not exist."

Since you are a part of it, and there are more women cartoonists than ever, how do you consider the relationship between the medium and language of comics and feminism?

Sukermercado: "I believe that we, as people who produce fictions and content, have a responsibility. All my life I noticed that there is a certain recurrence of certain leads and main characters. We've all seen those stories that can't pass the Bechdel Test. None pass the Bechdel test! It has to do with representation. There are voices that come from other places so you can't avoid it if they bring other narratives. They speak about other realities, there are privileges these voices don't have; therefore, there are things that are coming to light, that I don't know if they necessarily are thought from a theoretical feminist perspective, but rather have to do with being honest with what we are narrating, to speak from our point of view. Unavoidably, that can be constructed as a feminist perspective, I don't have any problem with it because I identify as feminist. What comics I have done were done because I needed to tell those things in order for those stories to exist, rather than thinking about them just as feminist comics.

I think that's something that's happening a lot with the current comics production: we need to tell certain stories because otherwise you can't find them. It's what Luciano Vecchio did with *Sereno*: he wanted an openly queer superhero, so he had to create it. I would have loved to read something similar to what I create now when I was 16, when I watched gore movies and I was obsessed with that ultraviolent style. When those films or comics were over, I had to say: 'it's great but it's super sexist.' So, it's about that, to explore genres and narratives from another place of enunciation and to question them, just like porn. If I do porn, since I am a bisexual woman, inevitably it will imply another discourse because I live and have lived different realities."

That's really cool, because, for example, porn fulfils a pedagogical role in the sense that it teaches you how sex works, mechanically speaking. But the idea of affection is completely outside of its discourse. The consequences of having sex with someone are never present.

Sukermercado: "I've just finished a workshop where we studied the history of porn. The genre is so wide as to be practically immeasurable. But right in the middle of it there's the mistreatment and objectification in mainstream porn that was introduced in the 1970s, when sexist and normative rules of desire were imposed. I documented myself for *Si Me Mojás...* I had to see pictures of pussies because it's not enough to know how my vagina looks like, or how the dicks I know look like. I have to know how a skin folds or how a tit falls; how to draw a fat body or how the tit of a trans woman looks like. I don't know, so I have to research, or to ask the trans people I know where to look, where I can find real bodies that aren't aestheticised or standardised towards a mainstream model."

CRAFT

*How did you decide what to do for **Las Ciudades Que Somos**?*

Delius: "Paola had been a jury in the first edition of that prize. My impression was that she saw an opportunity for us to participate in the second edition. We knew the bases, which are really open, really interesting. They don't ask for an enormous number of pages, the books can come from anywhere in the world, they don't demand that you have a Spanish bank account. So, Paola encouraged us to participate. We chose the cities and each one of us did her part."

Clara Lagos: "I thought about Buenos Aires, but we quickly came to realise that many of us were going to be talking about the same city."

Caro Chinaski: "I think the first decision was the format: landscape and printed in yellow and black."

Delius: "There's also the concept of the journey, the ticket... Each story has a cover which is the ticket for the journey."



Figure 6. Cover for *Las Ciudades Que Somos*. Powerpaola (2019). © Chicks on Comics.

Caro Chinaski: “The plane ticket, the train ticket, and also the ‘memory ticket’ that comes from our recollections. We are all passengers who go to a place.”

Clara Lagos: “That was what I was concerned about: how to connect all the stories, but in the end, everything worked out.”

Caro Chinaski: “When you read the book, each story is really different.”

Delius: “That worked against us during the selection process. Some people believed that that difference amongst the stories made the book lose unity, so it wasn’t a ‘graphic novel’.”

So, the stories are joined thematically but not argumentatively.

Delius: “Not argumentatively. They have the city as scenario, as a shared thing.”

Clara Lagos: “It’s the title that ends up conferring sense to it.”

Caro Chinaski: “When you read it, you can feel it has a communal spirit that wasn’t really planned.”

Delius: “The book says that cities can be very beautiful, that they have their own characteristics, that a thousand things can happen there, and that they can make you feel lots of things, but those emotions are mostly related to the people who live in those cities. When they gave us the award, they played an audio that had been recorded by Maliki [Marcela Trujillo, a Chilean cartoonist] in which she perfectly described each one of the stories. And it’s true, as she said, that there’s a female gaze, that you can perceive that. They are all stories about women that go through different situations, or that experience stress, or fear, or reminisce, or rejoice; all of those emotions in relation to the place.”

How did Pip and Pep come about?

Paula Sosa Holt: “I had uploaded like 40 strips of *Pip and Pep*, and Santiago Kahn¹⁶ wrote to me telling me that he would like to put out a book with all that. I had made scripts for more stories, he liked what I showed him, and he gave me the go ahead. Then there were some strips that were left out of the book, because they worked better on the internet. We organised the material and it was published.

¹⁶ Comics editor from Argentina, responsible for *Maten Al Mensajero* (“Shoot the Messenger”) one of the most active comics publishing houses in the country.



Figure 7. *Pip y Pep*. Paula Sosa Holt (2017). © Paula Sosa Holt.

I believe *Pip and Pep* was something I needed to do; I couldn't avoid it. That I had a lot of scripts and drawing is not something that worries me; I can resolve that quickly. Each day I uploaded a strip to the internet, that also gave me an adrenaline while making them. Now I have calmed down, because that immediacy is not so good, you become a junkie, getting high with *likes* [laughs]."

After Pip and Pep, you started Vainilla Kids. How was that?

Paula Sosa Holt: "I felt it was a progress. In *Pip and Pep*, I took the decision to resolve everything in just one panel, and one only. It's good to choose a structure and respect it. When I was invited by *Fan, el Programa*¹⁷ to make a strip, although they couldn't pay, I took it as challenge: every Thursday I had to have a strip ready. In a trip to Villa Gesell, I resolved the idea and the characters. I set out to tell stories in four panels, and every once in a while, to make a one panel comic, focusing on just one character in a more introspective way."

Do you always work with a script?

Paula Sosa Holt: "Yes. Actually, I write an idea rather than a script. I have an app that I carry around where I jot down ideas. Then I go over what I have, and I mould those ideas, I give them shape. Sometimes I write things and when I come back to them, I can't understand them."

¹⁷ A radio show hosted by Hernán Panessi which publishes one comic per day in their Face Book page.

VAINILLA Kids

POR PAULA SOSA HOLT



Figure 8. *Vainilla Kids*. Paula Sosa Holt (2018). © Paula Sosa Holt.

Do you include the dialogues in those notes? Or the dialogues come afterwards?

Paula Sosa Holt: “It depends, sometimes I write a dialogue, sometimes a picture, or just a phrase or a gag and then I have to see how I get to that gag. That’s what’s most fun for me. However, I’m a bit on bad terms nowadays with the idea of the gag; I want to escape from it a bit. In *Vainilla Kids* I used that resource a lot and since *Vainilla Kids* is now over I want to do something else. At this point in time my purpose is to write a strip a day, each one totally different from the previous one, I haven’t finished them yet but I have the scripts. Perhaps some ideas won’t go anywhere, but I will keep using the same graphic style. I feel it’s an exercise to get back to drawing, because with my other strips it comes a moment in which I draw the characters by heart.”

It’s interesting because it seems like you’re making your own creative process more complex.

Paula Sosa Holt: “At first, I wanted my new strip to be a six-panel strip [laughs]. But finally, I stayed in four. To have six panels per page I’d draw a graphic novel, which is what I want to do. First, I want to lay down the entire story as a script. It’s quite complicated, I’m used to following my impulses. If I have an idea, I have to do it. But I’ll get there... I want it to be about polyamory.”

Do you write the script first or do you just go ahead and draw the story?

Sukermercado: “Yes, I write it first. Initially, I had a hard time, but I like it now. It’s something that makes me feel... complete? And it makes me feel like I’m paying attention to the right things at the right time. That’s something Calvi told me: ‘when you write, you’re not thinking about what will be easy to draw.’ The exercise of writing is really good to free yourself and be able to create a plot; to work the characters, the dialogues, the structure, to have a beginning and ending so it’s not a just an undefined blob. That doesn’t mean I can pull it off, I still have a long way to go. But that’s the idea: to train myself in structure, because when I didn’t write it, some things went over me. To write a long story it’s necessary to understand what you have to do from the writing side.”

Do you see yourself doing something longer? A continuous series, with characters. Or a continuation of La Sombra del Altiplano...

Sukermercado: “At some point in time I will continue it. I have to decide how to do it, because I developed it as a one shot. It was the birth of a heroine (or anti-heroine) and I have to see how not to repeat the same story. I’m working on something longer, a graphic novel. It’s also something that happens when you start making comics: we all wanted to make something epic, 250 thousand pages, with characters you love... And afterwards you find out you have to advance step by step, starting with fanzines first. The story I submitted for the LGBTI anthology was important in that respect. When they accepted that story, I dared to do something longer and make it work. So, I did *La Sombra* and *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo* and now... I want more! [laughs] I want to develop characters, tons of characters. I want to tell a longer story. I have a lot to say and the space is never enough. The graphic novel format would allow me to do that.”

I wanted to ask you about your drawing style. In La Sombra everything’s black and white; but other works of yours are really fluorescent and colourful. How do you choose the materials?

Sukermercado: “I’m insufferable and I get bored really quick, so I switch techniques as a way to not repeat myself. Within the things I can handle I like to play with extremes; I need something fresh and something that enthralls me. I like to work with markers. Painting is hard for me. I tried to use watercolours or ink mixed with water, but the result was too pasty. I couldn’t generate a contrast. So, I left it behind. Afterwards, I digitalise my drawings with Photoshop and I play with the RGB and saturation. I take advantage of the possibilities of the screen. Sometimes I like things that explode in your face. I think it has a lot to do with cyberpunk, which I always liked, things like *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Alita*, Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, *Blade Runner*. But, also, with having grown up in downtown Buenos Aires. I always walked the city at night, with those aggressive lights that come up to your face. I belong to the *porteño* gen which makes me run a lot and juggle a thousand things at the same time. But it’s something that makes me be myself and that interests me aesthetically: the city as a nihilist and defeatist space, no future, the decadence and aestheticisation of trash.”

GENRE

I believe that in each of your works there are really personal points of view. Not precisely autobiographic, but there’s always an author that’s telling things. Have you thought about using characters which aren’t yourselves, so you can tell one story as a collective?

Delius: “I think your question has to do with fiction. In the book presentation for *Las Ciudades Que Somos* some people spoke about ‘biofiction’. I hadn’t heard the term before, it was mentioned by the editor of Sexto Piso [the publishing house that put out the book], Santiago Tobón: he called them ‘six biofiction stories’. In my case, it’s fiction since it’s quite a fantastical, futurist story that never happened to me. The main characters are a mother with her daughter; the daughter is almost like my daughter, Nina, and the mother is almost like myself. But there’s fiction. After the presentation, talking to people, we coincided that even though it’s autobiographical, there’s fiction. When you make a comic with it, it’s no longer reality.”

What were your fanzines about?

Paula Sosa Holt: “With Antolín [Andrés Olgíatti] we made one about *Rocky* (1976), the idea was to make one fanzine per movie, but in the end, we only made one [laughs]. We took lines from the movie we liked, and each of us made three drawings. It’s interesting because each of us did our own interpretation of the story. I also did another fanzine about Lisa Simpson, called *La Depresión de Lisa* (*Lisa’s Depression*), I took different scenes from different episodes as a reference, starting with one in the first season where she’s depressed, that’s actually what gave me the idea. It consists of four illustrations of Lisa, with references to movies or other things.”

In La Sombra Del Altiplano there are a lot of references to B-movies, gore, bad movies from the 80s, but with a feminist message. How did you work to appropriate those masculine genres and used them to tell a feminine story?

Sukermercado: “I’ve liked action stories since I was little. I like stories with heroes, fights, beatings. That’s why I liked *Sakura*, *Sailor Moon*, *Mulan*... those were stories that weren’t about the day to day of the characters, but rather they were heroines. Then I started liking violent action, gore stuff. For example, *Kill Bill*, that has revenge as a topic, that feeling that sticks in your throat and you have to let it out.

There was a time during which I went a lot to the [horror movie festival] *Rojo Sangre*; I downloaded Japanese movies with buckets of blood. I also consumed a lot of manga and anime with those themes. When I made *La Sombra* I wasn’t thinking about all of those things. Juana [the main character] is a character that occurred to me while I was watching an interview that Santiago del Moro¹⁸ did with a woman from [the northern province of] Salta. He asked her ‘Since you’re an immigrant, how do you feel in Argentina?’ And the woman from Salta

¹⁸ Argentinean late-night television host.



Figure 9. *La Sombra Del Altiplano*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo.

answered: ‘No, I’m Argentinean. You think all Argentineans are like you, blonde and white, but you forget that we *kolla* are also Argentineans’ Del Moro was frozen. I saw that and I drew a *kolla* child with machetes. Then someone wanted to make that an animated short. It didn’t come to pass because I would have had to animate it all by myself and it was a big NO. I had also seen a play, *La Fiera*, directed by Martín Tenconi Blanco. It’s a one man show about a girl who’s possessed by the spirit of the *yaguareté*¹⁹ and goes to rescue her sister, or friend – I don’t remember now– from a brothel. It has rap, it has a mixture of modern and folkloric elements, because you have the tradition of the were-*yaguareté*, the beast that goes out at night and kills people. And I was also watching *Devilman Crybaby* while I thought about the action scenes.”

¹⁹ *Yaguareté* (*Panthera onca*) is a type of jaguar native to the Americas, and it can be found in Northeast Argentina.

It's true that you use that violent gore as a catharsis, which is something that people usually like; the fact that the character's an avenger who can act as a vehicle for our own desire of revenge, of our resentment and darkest side. But you also issue a warning: when you surrender to the red, there's no turning back. And the main character, which is like an avatar of revenge against the patriarchy, surrenders her humanity. We are living in a moment in which the discourse of zero tolerance and tough laws on crime is ascendant, capitalised on by the right. And, at the same time, that right generates violence. And that takes me to something I always wonder about: what place does violence have in political change?

Sukermercado: “We’re in a delicate point in time regarding all those things. I don’t have a fixed position either. *La Sombra* was a catharsis for a lot of hate, for a lot of accumulated anger against an oppressive system. But we must also understand that if we surrender to that, building from hate is condemning yourself. So, to balance things up I made a romantic porno, a cute porno [laughs].”

CONCLUSION

The surge in new female comic creators in Argentina, which is strongly related to the collapse of the Argentine comics industry in 2001 as a result of the national economic crisis,²⁰ produced mixed results. It caused, on one hand, the precarisation of the working conditions for comics artists who had previously held regular, salaried jobs as employees of publishing houses with successful periodical publications. The bankruptcy of these publishing houses would leave the youngest generation of Argentine comics artists ‘orphaned’, with no other means of getting their work in front of an audience but by producing and editing their own magazines. These attempts at replacing yesteryear’s industry would prove to be short-lived and irregular, but it would spawn narrative and graphic experimentation.

On the other hand, despite the precariousness and instability of the cultural industry economy, the end of the comics industry would unleash new creative potential which perhaps had lied dormant until then. Without the rules of the market that constrained new perspectives and narratives – notably, the participation of women as creators –, new trends would start to emerge in what we could consider the first post-industrial generation of comics artists in Argentina. This period meant a progressively accelerated expanded entrance for women as authors for the first time in Argentine comics history. Furthermore, female participation projected new approaches beyond classical binary divisions: LGBTI+ comics have been gaining a significant presence in the last few years.

Also, these exchanges have allowed the establishment of an international – mainly Latin American – network, something that goes beyond the classic ‘national industry’ perspective which had been developed through the 20th Century. In this way, Argentina offers a place for many Latin American creators to share and experiment with their work, since it’s a country with a tradition in comics making – something not that common to the rest of the South American countries –; but also with a more active and relatively progressive civil society which allows the existence of movements with demands for more feminist and LGBTI+ rights.

These profound changes experienced by the field of comics production at the beginning of the 21st Century demanded new strategies for surviving the new context. Some of those strategies would consist of working for foreign publishing comics industries (such as in the USA, and European countries such as France, Italy and Spain), but also to start making use of new available digital technologies including the Internet and the blogosphere that experienced a rapid growth during the first decade of the 21st Century.

The latter would allow the recomposition of an audience, new exchanges between authors and the possibility to make oneself known without the need to work for an editor in a publishing house. This would also allow more creative liberty, since the filter would not be set by industry standards but by the new logic of direct interaction with the audiences via the commentaries section of blog pages. Thus, for a generation of comics artists whom had learned the craft in the 1990s, the challenge would be to adapt to new technologies and production logic. At the same time, a new wave of creators would start producing directly for the internet. If successful, their works would eventually get printed and circulated in print.

This also resulted in the creation of new independent publishing houses that turned to the graphic novel as the new leading format, leaving behind the need to publish a monthly or weekly comics magazine. Another important factor in the reactivation of comic production in Argentina would be the support of public institutions. This means, state policies that funded prizes, conventions and promotion. Comics conventions such as *Tecnópolis* (2013-2016) and *Crack Bang Boom!* (2010 to date), among others, would allow artists and independent publishing houses to access a more massive audience, while strengthening ties between them and establishing a sense of community.

²⁰ During Fernando de la Rúa’s presidential term (1999-2001), Argentina entered the 21st century heavily indebted, with the highest unemployment rate in its history (25% of the population) and a deep economic recession. A popular uprising would force President De la Rúa to resign in the last days of December 2001, two years after he had taken charge. Argentina’s economy would eventually grow again, but it would never recover its former economic indicators.

Within this context, independent festivals sprawled and proved to be resilient to government changes and economic upheaval. These new circuits are key to sustaining artists' efforts to continue producing comics while allowing them to be in direct contact with audiences which have diversified during the last few years.

As we have seen in the case of Chicks on Comics, the more 'artsy' approach to comics has led to more contacts with art institutions – contacts which traditionally have been scarce. Usually, this also implies having to overcome the prejudice and biased ideas around comics as a denigrated art form, formerly carried by said institutions. This has been possible in part thanks to the transnational networks created thanks to the changes in communication technologies, which helped develop strategies on how to profit from international funding programs and negotiations with art and state institutions.

Younger generations of comics artists, to which Paula Sosa Holt and Sukermercado belong, have accessed comics circuits built over this foundation and boosted by the new dynamics provided by social media, which replaced weblogs. However, they also have the possibility of printing their (originally) digital comics thanks to the existence of a functional network of small publishers.

Without a doubt, this liberation of creative forces is related to the way independent comics in the late 1980s and early 1990s experienced an 'authorial turn', and an 'autobiographical turn', which has focused on the authors' personal experiences and obsessions. However, while this narrative trend sometimes seems to find a limit in its solipsistic view of things, contemporary Argentine comics seem particularly affected by the political landscape that sees a new feminist wave spot on the centre of the debate and the demands for societal change. Topics such as sexuality, gender, the political dimension of private life and the interrogation as to what it means to live in a society – and what kind of society – can be said to be the aesthetic, ethical and ideological core of contemporary production in Argentinean comics.

Needless to say, this does not mean there is a homogenous discourse on how to face these issues. As the different testimonies and dialogues have confirmed, there are many different points of view depending on the author and their approach to comics. This is closely related to the way newer generations have distanced themselves from the classical Argentine comics tradition and canons, while embracing other sources of inspiration and influence – from manga and superheroes to experimental or mainstream films, art, design, illustration, and so on. This is reflected in the declarations of Paula Sosa Holt and Sukermercado.

Therefore, the changes provoked by the end of the industry at the beginning of the 21st Century led a new generation of comics artists to develop a different approach to their work. This approach is related to the connection with others in a larger network of creative relationships, and with the way comics have shifted from a way of earning a living to a more or less autonomous form of expression. This shift bowled over much of the gate-keeping practices and structural inequalities which impeded the significant entrance of women in the art form. What is more, the introduction of new influences such as manga, animation and autobiographical comics, which challenged the classical action and adventure comics which had formerly been the mainstream in Argentina, helped attract more diverse reading audiences composed in large part of women who would, in time, make the jump into production.

Moreover, as a result of the authorial turn, comics as an art form started to be regarded as a personal expression of certain issues, acknowledging not just the need to reach an audience by entertaining them, but also by taking a stand and engaging politically with certain current issues, contributing to activist demands in the public arena. This is seen in the way comics made by women authors have incorporated feminist demands and concerns in an almost organic way, sometimes worked into the story (as is the case of *La Sombra Del Altiplano*) and sometimes with in a more militant approach (as is the case of collectives such as *Línea Verde*). In the face of a new economic crisis and a wave of political conservatism engulfing the region, Argentine comics face – once again – a challenge to sustain themselves in the near-future. It remains to be seen what will happen and how artists and collectives will endure the coming times. One thing is sure: imagination, creativity and commitment is still their commodity, one that becomes even more valuable the more unstable Argentine reality becomes.

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