

# TROUBLED SUBJECTIVITIES, ELUSIVE SOLIDARITIES – FEMINIST ART ACTIVISM AS MICROPOLITICAL RESISTANCE

**Natacha Vicente**

University of South Africa

natacha.g.a.vicente@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

It is widely held by leftist scholars (Silvia Federici, Jorge Alemán and Suely Rolnik, among others) that neoliberal capitalism has extended beyond the purely economic to colonise all aspects of life, including the psychological, effectively producing what is termed a neoliberal subjectivity characterised by, among other things, persistent denial and inaction in the face of threats brought on by rapacious capitalist practices, not only to prosperity but also to actual human survival. Through the works of Bolivian feminist collective *Mujeres Creando*, intended as incursions into neoliberal subject formation in particular and capitalism more generally, the article will explore the dialectic between macropolitical and micropolitical approaches to social change. By drawing on the theories of Suely Rolnik, Jorge Alemán, and Silvia Federici, the article will argue that the work of *Mujeres Creando* demonstrates that macro- and micropolitics are not separate courses of action, but in fact mutually enhancing tools of resistance, and that art activism is a means by which to encourage solidarity and create new types of social relations and democratic realities.

**Keywords:** solidarity; psychoanalysis; macropolitics; micropolitics; feminism; neoliberalism; subjectivity; capitalism; art activism

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I discuss the art activism of the Bolivian feminist group *Mujeres Creando* as an example of resistance to neoliberal subjectivity formation in particular, and of solidarity building against neoliberal capitalism in general. The group's political intervention in Bolivian society has been ongoing for approximately twenty years,

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and their particular brand of art activism raises compelling questions about feminist strategies for undermining capitalist recuperation. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how the group's art activism functions as micropolitical resistance against neoliberal subjectivity formation, and how the relationship between micropolitical and macropolitical approaches to social change, as carried out by the group, have the potential to be mutually reinforcing tools for encouraging solidarity and creating new types of social relations and democratic realities. By "macropolitical resistance" I mean sizeable social struggles of public interest such as those dealing with institutional reform, while micro-resistance can be seen to operate on a more subjective or psychological level. However, as I will argue in the article, the difference between the two is largely a question of degree, not of kind because, as feminist theory has demonstrated, the personal and social domains are coextensive. By "neoliberal subjectivity" I refer to the process whereby neoliberal capitalist discourse produces highly individualised subjects who operate according to a market logic and who are largely desensitised to the contradictions of capitalist hegemony.

Throughout history, each mode of production has produced not only a particular mode of life but also a corresponding form of subjectivity. As Jason Read (2007) discusses in an article, capitalism poses as a revolutionary economic formation claiming to liberate the individual from the conservative constraints of the past. Its only requirement is that the individual, who is otherwise free to indulge in the beliefs and desires of their choice, "act in accordance with the quantitative flows, selling one's labour" (Read 2007, 8). Yet the perpetuation of capitalism is dependent on the individual seeing themselves as a worker and consumer, for which effect desire and knowledge must be continually recuperated by capitalist processes of commodification and thereby transformed into directly productive forces. In fact, under capitalism the individual suffers from "a fundamental misrecognition of the constitutive conditions of our society" (Read 2007, 5), the alleviation of which must come from new political forms, such as that of *Mujeres Creando*, which not only unmask but aim to subvert the ways in which capitalism endeavours to recuperate all attempts at flight.

*Mujeres Creando's* work is focused on disrupting the hegemonic absorption and subsequent neutralisation of oppositional or radical ideas and actions. They carry out their interventionist agenda on two fronts: through art activism intended to dissipate ideological malaise and rescue individual desire from the forces of capitalist spectacle; and through solidarity-building initiatives that are equally important, as it is through these latter actions that institutional change is achieved and the requisite type of structural support secured that allows for the continuation of their art activism. The ability to successfully articulate these two lines of resistance directly impacts on the kind of politics that becomes possible.



**Figure 1:** Maria Galindo, founder of *Mujeres Creando*, tossing pieces of cake in protest at the vice-presidency's entrance

## The Question of Solidarity

Solidarity is a fundamental cornerstone of resistance in the struggle against neoliberal capitalist hegemony and for the creation of other possible worlds. Anti-capitalist initiatives such as *ollas comunes* in Chile,<sup>1</sup> *trueque* in Argentina,<sup>2</sup> the Occupy Wall

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- 1 The *ollas comunes* were instances of neighbourhood solidarity arising between 1973–1989 (a period that marked the implantation of a neoliberal regime in Chile). Despite the military dictatorship's promise of economic growth, there was widespread precariousness, and the *ollas comunes* (which translates as communal pots) were formed to resolve the basic need of feeding communities. The movement represented not only an attempt at securing basic subsistence, but also served to politicise the participants against the military regime.
  - 2 Argentinian *trueque* started in 1994 and was intended as an alternative to the dominant economic system insofar as it comprised a system of exchange without money. After experiencing explosive growth over a number of years, discord and abuse eventually led to a breakdown of the system.

Street movement,<sup>3</sup> and time-banking,<sup>4</sup> among many others, represent alternative approaches to contemporary collectivity, based not on competition but on cooperation. All of these groups recognise that solidarity is the basic precondition for being able to resist the commodification of life in all its forms and to forge a commons where people can reclaim their land, their collective wealth and their freedom from capital and from the market. By reorganising in this way, through working together in solidarity, people learn about each other, engendering forms of commitment that are conducive to the production of self-reproducing movements whose continuity and transmission of knowledge constitute an obvious political advantage in the struggle for social change.

Encouraging and sustaining solidarity is, however, not an easy process, especially as neoliberal practices have largely eroded community ties across industrialised countries.<sup>5</sup> Instead, we inhabit what Slavoj Žižek terms “a state of collective, fetishistic disavowal” where we refuse to believe that global capitalism is reaching an apocalyptic point (Žižek 2011, x) marked by social divisions and exclusions, ecological deterioration and competition for essential goods such as food and water.

## Neoliberal Subjectivity

This collective lack of awareness regarding a realistic image of capitalism is perpetuated through the production of neoliberal subjectivities whose centrality to the functioning of capitalism has led to a consideration of the crisis of capitalism as essentially a crisis of subjectivity (Alemán 2015). Certainly, the struggle to overthrow capitalist hegemony entails serious macropolitical challenges – large-scale issues with an observable impact in the social domain. However, notwithstanding the seriousness of the macropolitical struggles involved, there are theorists who argue that it is on the micropolitical level – at the level of subjectivity formation – that the hardest battle against neoliberalism is to be waged (Alemán 2015).

As long as “collective disavowal” represents an important hindrance to solidarity building, subjectivity formation itself remains a critical site for intervention in the

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3 The Occupy Wall Street Movement has been well-documented in the media. Originating in Manhattan, in September 2011, in a small plaza called Zuccotti Park, the occupants came to protest against Wall Street, representing themselves as a movement for the 99%, the masses robbed of their share of wealth by the millionaires and billionaires comprising 1% of the American people, a situation which had deteriorated in recent years due to the neoliberal agenda of global capitalism.

4 “A TimeBank is formed whenever individuals or organizations agree to earn and spend TimeBank Hours to meet the needs of friends, neighbors, and the larger community.” <http://timebanks.org/what-is-timebanking/>

5 In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, neoliberalism has led to “the destruction of the institutions of solidarity in the world as well as to the destruction of not only socialist states but also of the social-democratic model of capitalism in the world. It has led to mass unemployment, enormous uncontrolled exploitation, the destruction of the standards in the domain of labor and welfare legislature and social-Darwinization of the relationships at national and international levels” (in Mitrović 2005).

struggle for social change, and a primary locus from which to disrupt the perpetuation of the neoliberal project.

Neoliberalism, originating in the United States and strongly associated with Milton Friedman, Nobel prize winner Gary Becker, and the Chicago School of Economics, was originally intended as an economic experiment grounded in the principles of economic liberalisation, a minimal state and privatisation. In the years since its inception, neoliberalism has proliferated rhizomatically, growing into a complex global phenomenon with disheartening results reaching beyond the purely economic dimension. The influence of the neoliberal system can be understood as extending beyond the market to encroach on the personal and social domains, effectively mutating into a governmentality consisting not only of a series of optimising and regulatory technologies, but also of an appropriation and resignification of the ontological processes of the production of social reality and consequently of the subject itself (Mitrović 2005).

The discursive reorganisation of social reality according to neoliberal principles has implied the concomitant production of corresponding neoliberal subjectivities. Operating according to a market logic, neoliberal subjectivities are often described as “entrepreneurs of the self,” compelled to behave as market actors – consumers, individual investors and entrepreneurs – across several dimensions of their lives (Oksala 2015). The neoliberal subjectivity is therefore typically highly atomised, driven endlessly on by unmediated subject-object relationships that run so fast, and consume so well, that they consume themselves (Olivier 2011). Successively, each rapidly depleted encounter leads inexorably on to the next object for consumption and disposal.

Absorbed by this seemingly closed circuit of capitalist discourse, the neoliberal subjectivity suffers what Brazilian theorist Suely Rolnik (2011) terms a “wound to desire.” Attending for a moment to the Lacanian notion that it is only through its precipitation into language that the self is able to secure a subject position,<sup>6</sup> we can better understand the connotations of the “wound to desire” for the individual. For Lacan, the Symbolic Order is constitutive for the subject. However, due to its particular nature, the symbolic matrix into which the self is precipitated is incapable of fully comprehending the Real – a notion premised on Saussure’s concepts of the signifier and signified in language.<sup>7</sup> The inability of the Symbolic to capture the Real produces a fragmented subject, radically split by a desire it is unable to symbolise in its search for the restitution of that primordial

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6 The ideas of French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jaques Lacan (1901–1981) have had a wide-ranging impact in the areas of poststructuralism, linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, for example. His best known work is a 1966 compilation of his writings entitled *Écrits*. In view of Lacan’s importance as an analyst of language and the Symbolic, I will use his theory of subject formation to analyse the effects of neoliberalism on the psyche of the subject.

7 Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) did foundational work in the areas of linguistics and semiology. His *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*) was published posthumously in 1916.

lack, lost forever at the moment of entry into the Symbolic.<sup>8</sup> According to Lacanian theory, every subject has a unique mode of experiencing the formative breach, which gives rise to an initial heterogeneity; the subject's entry into language is also gendered, giving rise, in turn, to gendered forms of desire, termed phallic jouissance<sup>9</sup> for men and Other jouissance for women. In neither case is jouissance equivalent to the fetishized desire for commodities that is created by capitalism; instead, it is antagonistic towards capitalist discourse because it "can never be accounted for by systems of knowledge and therefore can never be colonized by the imperatives of the master" (Olivier 2011). As "jouissance" is impossible to factor into the calculus of capitalism, it is understood as potentially destabilising (Olivier 2011).

Rolnik (2011) argues that the efforts of capitalism to stamp out potentially destabilising heterogeneous desire/jouissance inflict a wound that contaminates "everything, halting movements of connection and the invention that they mobilise." This idea correlates with Žižek's idea of collective disavowal as an explanation for the absence of responsiveness in the face of environmental, ethical and economic injustice.

## The "Wound to Desire"

So, what to do when faced with collapsed desire, an anaesthetised body incapable of resonating to "the process of differentiation unleashed by the living presence of others" (Rolnik 2011)? That is, what is the remedy for subverting capitalist ideology and unblocking the routes to solidarity? Rolnik argues that the "affective circuit is not a fixed map but a continuously made and remade cartography" (Rolnik 2011). In order to bring back desire, the established order of cultural values and the predominant imaginary cartographies must be subverted so that the individual may be free of the torpor keeping them from making their choices in response to the living reality of others, effectively allowing themselves to be "contaminated by the mysterious power of regeneration of the vital force, wherever it is" (Rolnik 2011).

It is Rolnik's belief that the path to regenerating the "vital force" can be found through the intervention of art's critical force in reality. Art holds the power to reactivate the aesthetic experience, which is the individual's responsiveness and ability to apprehend the otherness of the world (Rolnik 2007). However, she sees this affective relation to the world as currently inhibited by the production of neoliberal subjectivities. In the

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8 While the ideas of Lacan have been criticised by many feminists for their perceived phallogocentrism (even while others such as Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose have made use of his ideas), it is not within the scope of this article to discuss this criticism in detail.

9 This term has been used by many philosophers, such as Irigaray, Kristeva, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari, to mean different things. In this article the term is used in the Lacanian sense, as I am referring to his theory of subjectivity formation. Jouissance is often translated into English as "enjoyment," but Lacan makes use of the term to refer to an excessive enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, linked to the splitting of the subject. (Johnston n.d.)

current capitalist context where everything is subsumed to market logic, “knowledge and creativity have been converted into privileged objects of instrumentalisation in the service of the market, leading some to characterise global neoliberalism as ‘cultural’ or ‘cognitive’ capitalism” (Rolnik 2007). Despite this, she remains confident in the destabilising micropolitical potential of art to unblock the dynamics of transformation, the liberation of life’s mobility, and the affirmation of society’s inventive potential.

## ART ACTIVISM AS MICROPOLITICS – *MUJERES CREANDO*

At this juncture, it is interesting to consider how Rolnik’s ideas on the subversive potential of art as a micropolitics of resistance, as a way to undermine the dominant imaginary cartographies and heal the wound to desire, can be used to unpack the art activism of *Mujeres Creando*. My aim here is to make use of *Mujeres Creando* as an example of one type of micro- and macropolitical resistance that uses art activism and encapsulates feminist principles of solidarity.

Radical Bolivian feminist group *Mujeres Creando* provides an interesting case study in the use of art as a form of resistance to neoliberal capitalist politics of subjectivation, as well as a way to build feminist solidarities, understood not only as solidarity between different feminist groups, but as solidarity between feminist groups and society in general. *Mujeres Creando* defines itself as a social movement and, as previously mentioned, has been politically active for over twenty years in Bolivia. In addition to pursuing a feminist agenda actively on a daily basis by lending its support and energetic participation to protesting cases of violence against women in all of its forms, be they economic, cultural or political, their greater ambition is to bring about the “depatriarchalisation” and decolonisation of Bolivian society. Their activism is played out on many levels, but their politics is centred on taking back the streets as a public space and it is on the streets of La Paz, Bolivia, that they make their voice heard. They are well known for their street graffiti, consisting of pithy, politically charged, provocative phrases, as well as for their street performances, consisting of a combination of sculpture, installation and dramatic expression. These performances are usually played out in busy thoroughfares, such as street-markets, where the public are generally working-class individuals going about their daily tasks.

On video (Galindo n.d.) we can see, in one such street performance, a group of women from *Mujeres Creando* set up a large panel, perhaps two floors high, in the middle of a street market, depicting different symbols of patriarchal society – the king, the pope, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the warrior-angel, the left imperial column representing leftist politics, the right imperial column representing right-wing politics, and the virgin. The symbols are arranged hierarchically, in accordance with the canons of patriarchal order. The process of setting up the panel creates an atmosphere of expectation among the vendors and passers-by. Eventually, from a cut-out in the panel, the virgin emerges. She is divested of all accessories and wears only a plain cloth dress,

making her appear untainted, innocent of any influence. Her attitude is openly curious, and interestingly she is mute, conveying a sense of separateness from the discourses that evidently animate the surrounding crowd. She climbs the panel, considering the symbols with the sort of attention we reserve for things we see for the first time, and begins by removing the king's crown. She climbs down from the panel and wanders about crowning children, who are greatly diverted by this, and a number of vendors, including a very old lady. The symbolic discordance created by the crown on the heads of children and the market vendors seems to entertain the onlookers who, as seen on video, allow themselves to be drawn into the performance.<sup>10</sup> The virgin proceeds to bring the plaster columns of the imperial left and right crashing to the ground, and once again climbs to the top of the panel to strip the king, pope, Father, Son and warrior angel of their vestments, leaving them naked and exposed. With equanimity, the virgin rearranges the order of the hierarchy, displacing the patriarchal heads and replacing them with the sun and the moon. From behind the panel emerges another young woman who helps the virgin saw off the Father's head. The virgin dances gracefully around the panel among the crowd as the other young woman looks on, gently fanning herself with the sawn-off head. After some time, the virgin climbs back behind the panel, reinserting herself into the new order of things she has created.



**Figure 2:** A still from the video recording of the performance showing the “virgin” dancing around the marketplace.

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<sup>10</sup> The video does not include any interviews with the public so their opinion or response to the piece is open to interpretation by the viewer.



This performance, similar to the many others enacted by *Mujeres Creando*, is intended as a form of activism challenging the political status quo. When interviewed about their art (Mujeres Creando 2014), the members of *Mujeres Creando* insist that their actions should not be viewed as art but instead as demonstrations of civil disobedience (Mujeres Creando 2015), although for the purpose of clarity, in this article I will continue to refer to the actions in question as art activism. As Maria Galindo, one of the group's founders and perhaps its best-known voice, has explained, rather than operating in order to receive applause, *Mujeres Creando* views creativity as an instrument of political struggle. In order not to surrender the critical power of their art/activism, the group generally declines to participate in institutional spaces of art such as, for example, art galleries and museums, where the tendency is for any form of critique to be automatically recuperated and neutralised by capitalism (Mouffe n.d.). On rare occasions, the group has decided their participation in an international forum to be of overriding politically strategic value; recent examples include their contribution to the 2014 Art Biennale in Sao Paolo, consisting of interrelated sculpture, procession and performance pieces dealing with abortion, and in 2015 *Mujeres Creando* accepted an invitation to deliver a 10-minute oratory piece at the Venice Biennale. At this latter event, the group issued statements (Mujeres Creando 2015) to the press explaining the reasons why they had chosen to participate and in precisely which capacity. The 2015 Venice Biennale was an important opportunity to disseminate their ideas, with a live audience of up to 500 seats, and as many web-pages transmitting the event on a world-wide scale; Galindo was clear on the fact that *Mujeres Creando* would be present at the event as street-agitators involved not in making art, but in "making" politics (Mujeres Creando 2015). In these terms, art comprises a tool used in the political struggle to undermine the neoliberal capitalist imaginary by offering "a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding" (Mouffe 2007).

## ART ACTIVISM AND CAPITALIST DISCOURSE

While activism is traditionally associated with visible utterances about macropolitical realities, such as strikes in protest of unfair wages, art, on the other hand, is capable of articulating the invisible and unutterable,<sup>11</sup> namely subconscious desire, or, put differently, the individual's resonant ability. Drawing on the idea of an all-encompassing master discourse, Rolnik (2007) attributes the individual's inability to establish a relation to the other and to respond to the sensible reality around them to "the 'imagosphere' that today covers the entire planet – a continuous layer of images that places itself as a filter between the world and our eyes, which become blind to the tense pulsation of reality."

Counteracting the ubiquity of the imagosphere, art comprises a medium through which to undermine the uncritical consumption of these images intended to secure the

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11 This line of reasoning is not meant to imply that art cannot and does not also address the visible, utterable and conscious aspects of life under other circumstances and agendas.

blind compliance of subjectivities to the market mandate for ceaseless consumption. Here, the macropolitical aims of capitalist discourse are served by its micropolitical maneuverings; as Rolnik (2007) observes, under the capitalist regime “economic domination and exploitation find one of their main weapons, if not ‘the’ weapon, in the manipulation of subjectivity carried out via the image.”

The work of *Mujeres Creando* thus arises in reaction to this colonisation of sensibility by capitalist discourse, and to a need to liberate individual imagination and sensibilities. They, along with other activists, have therefore begun to incorporate a micropolitical dimension to their actions. They do so by making use of other images, seeking alternative forms of expression and reception, aimed at bringing about new configurations of the unconscious. The aim of these practices is to elicit a consciousness of domination and exploitation in the participants, as well as bringing into evidence the experience of “these relations in one’s own body, its invisible, unconscious, micropolitical side, which intervenes in the process of subjectivation ... thus it becomes impossible to ignore the unease that this perverse cartography provokes in us” (Rolnik 2007). In this way, Rolnik (2007) is firm in her belief that the allure of the imagosphere can be neutralised, allowing for our dormant resonant capacity to re-awaken.

Art activism, therefore, can be understood as a force for social change, a way to stimulate debate while carving out a space separate from the market logic that Rolnik sees as infecting the hallowed enclaves of art galleries, and which empties art of its vital critical density. By bringing art into the streets, *Mujeres Creando* subverts established categories of privileged and underprivileged, firstly by flouting – on the visible, macropolitical level – the socially mandated standard of art as the exclusive privilege of cultural elites. It seems inevitable that the subversion of this particular dualism should extend – on the micropolitical level – to other similar hierarchical dualisms, based on one’s perceived social, economic or racial inferiority, such as those of “rich/poor,” “north/south,” leading on to other, more complex combinations resulting from the neoliberal turn, such as “entrepreneurial,” “employable,” “functional”/“unemployed,” “undocumented,” “disposable.” Choosing to perform on the street evidently provides the group’s interventions with a degree of immunity from the imagosphere. It also confers a power to their art activism deriving from the embeddedness and singular temporality of each intervention. In this way, each performance is tied to and dependent on the revival of desire in those present for its resonance. Abstracting the interventions from their particular conjunction of circumstances by submitting them to exhibition and replication would result in transforming the pieces into domesticated political exhibitions, effectively cancelling their radical potential, and by extension relegating desire to a disciplinary tool for fashioning governable subjectivities. The streets are the interstices from which to effect a rupture, to wreak symbolic violence on the master discourse, which accounts for why street performances predominate in the work of *Mujeres Creando*, rather than exhibits in the idealised and aestheticised enclaves of the established art world, where the artist, removed from the lived realities their artwork is meant to represent, is less likely to commit to working and living in solidarity.

Through street performances, that is, through the visible subversion of an organising concept of neoliberal cognitive cartography, a micropolitical process is set in motion that affects “our bodies, provoking changes in the tissue of our sensibility and a resultant crisis of meaning in our references” (Rolnik 2006). Neoliberal capitalist discourse produces us as subjectivities whose bodies cease to resonate, but through art activism, the individual may be brought out of its anesthetised condition. The internal crisis triggers an uneasiness that is potentially productive on a number of levels; as Rolnik (2006) suggests, our exposure to art activism potentially “throw[s] our references into crisis and impose[s] on us the urgency of inventing new forms of expression.”

Rolnik proffers a theoretically compelling argument on the impact of art activism that can be applied to the work of *Mujeres Creando*. However, simply observing the reactions of the people stopping to watch the art/activism staged by *Mujeres Creando* does not make it possible to measure if their performances do, in fact, have a productively destabilising micropolitical impact, beyond the obvious entertainment everyone generally appears to experience. Speaking more specifically about the street performance described earlier in this article, without being able to conduct interviews with the audience to measure their reaction, it is impossible to accurately evaluate the extent of the micropolitical influence of the piece. Nevertheless, there are factors that are favourably indicative of how the subversive practices of *Mujeres Creando* hold the potential to destabilise capitalist discourse. As previously discussed, the politics of their production and reception have been managed separately from hegemonic power and institutional apparatus – the piece is autonomously produced and disseminated – in contrast to the frequent gentrification of protest art taking place in galleries and museums (Asavei 2015). In this way, the critical power of the piece is uncompromised, at least to the extent that it escapes cooption by “the establishment.” Admittedly, there is the question of the accessibility or legibility of the artistic form for the non-specialist audience – which appears to be the case here – without access to theoretical interpretative frameworks for the piece. Theoretically, we can assert that the rationale underlying the artistic aestheticisation of political phenomena, as evinced in art activism, is aimed at their defunctionalisation, and on the “violent annulment of [their] practical applicability and efficiency” (Groys 2014). Rooted in the French revolution, in this sense, aestheticising the present regime is equivalent to exhibiting its dead corpse (Groys 2014). While a non-specialist audience might not process the subversive potential of artistic aestheticisation in quite this way, there is, however, no reason to suppose that the political design goes unrecognised when taking into account people’s everyday embeddedness in the context of the piece.

## The Relationship between Micro- and Macropolitics

*Mujeres Creando* strives for rupture with capitalist discourse through their performances. However, hegemony does not give way to rupture very easily, and fomenting social

change through activism is generally a long-term project. For these reasons, the longevity of the group's commitment to creating an alternative society, through varied initiatives alongside their art activism, is noteworthy, and stems from the way they have articulated micro- and macropolitical strategies. In a number of aspects, the group's particular symbiosis of these strategies represents a real-life interpretation of two of Silvia Federici's core concepts – reproductive work and the commons. Federici is a feminist scholar and activist of Italian origin who has been living in the United States since the sixties. She was an organiser of the Wages for Housework campaign, whose aim was to demystify women's work in the home, which is painted by capitalism as an expression of love, and expose it for what it really is – unpaid labour expropriated by capitalism as a precondition to accumulation. Despite playing a fundamental role in the rise of capitalism, the reproductive work carried out by women in the home, entailing all the tasks that ensure the physical, emotional and psychological reproduction on a daily basis of the male waged worker, is made invisible. Tied to these insights is the notion of the commons. For Federici, a commons is created when, through practices of solidarity, groups of people reclaim control over their means of survival so that they are able to reproduce themselves independently of the capitalist system. Importantly, in creating a commons, the false division between reproductive work and political work is collapsed: in the commons the personal is the political.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the commons is especially relevant to feminists, as it is women who have been the main victims of neoliberal capitalism; it has also been women who have largely led solidarity initiatives, working together to protect their families and themselves from the impacts of capital-driven wage reductions, layoffs, and austerity measures. The aforementioned *ollas comunes* (1973–1989) projects in Chile, which focused on shopping and cooking together to feed the community, are a good example of such social cooperation. These initiatives, which numerous times have meant the difference between life and death for many, appear to be aimed at addressing primarily macropolitical factors, but, as Federici has pointed out,<sup>13</sup> the micropolitical (understood as the intangible or abstract) impact of such initiatives is where the truly politically subversive potential of feminism resides. Through the work of social cooperation, feminists have not only developed non-hierarchical, decentralised forms of political organisation leading to lasting forms of commitment within communities, but also, and fundamentally, have arrived at the realisation that the transformation of everyday life, consisting essentially of what Federici terms reproductive work, is not separable from political life, thereby effectively showing the way to the creation of a commons. Federici (De Moor and Federici 2014) defines the commons as “a society built on the principle of solidarity rather than the principle of self-interest and competition. It is a society in

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12 A collection of Federici's ideas is available in her book *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (2012).

13 Macropolitical is used here to denote the visible and tangible aspects of daily life in opposition to micropolitics, which is used to refer to abstract and intangible factors.

which wealth is shared, there is collective decision making, and production is for our wellbeing and not for monetary accumulation,” a vision in direct contradistinction to all the major tenets of neoliberalism.

In the case of *Mujeres Creando*, we see that their art/activism is not carried out in a vacuum; instead it is a part of a long-standing continuum of political and social interventions that complement and enable each other, so that ultimately the efficacy of either approach –whether micro or macro – is augmented and consolidated through its counterpart. Therefore, the micropolitics of the group’s art/activism is intimately bound to and reliant on the macropolitical actions of the group for its realisation and continuity. *La Virgen de los Deseos*, *Mujeres Creando*’s “rebellious temple” (Mujeres Creando 2010 ) in the city, on the border between the wealthier and less affluent suburbs of La Paz, consists of a bar, a library, a restaurant, a nursery, a hostel, a cultural agenda with more than 100 activities per week, and a legal consultancy to address cases of violence against women and usury; all of the activities are managed by the group members and are financially self-sustaining by charging small fees for the services listed (Mujeres Creando 2010). The house is not just the group’s home but their stronghold, a support system for their political incursions. It is because they have created this support that *Mujeres Creando* is able to pursue actions aimed at addressing, in this particular case, neoliberal hegemony, at the micropolitical level of subjectivity formation.



**Figure 3:** The house of *Mujeres Creando* – *La Virgen de los Deseos* – in La Paz, Bolivia.

*Mujeres Creando* thus represents an interesting case study precisely because the group combines two strategies, operating at both the macro- and micropolitical levels of resistance. On the macropolitical level, the local everyday political struggles of *Mujeres Creando* consist of a series of actions that cumulatively amount to the founding of an alternative space/community – in effect a commons – that simultaneously resists and engages with the established political, social and cultural institutions of the surrounding city of La Paz, Bolivia, in a struggle to transform Bolivian society – in their view – from a patriarchy into a genuine democracy. The *Mujeres Creando* house, *La Virgen de los Deseos*, represents a specific site of confrontation with power, and might be considered a point of intersection between the molar body of Bolivian society and the microbodies of this group. From within the house, there are strategic efforts to create a parallel, self-sustaining community, with its own sources of revenue, philosophy and politics. If, like Federici, we understand a politics of the commons to entail a politics of re-appropriation of the conditions and means of reproduction, then members of *Mujeres Creando* are effectively working in solidarity with each other and the surrounding community to build a commons. Crosscutting the macro and micropolitical levels, there is activism in varied forms: the group's founder, Maria Galindo, has published various books expounding the group's philosophy, numerous articles are posted regularly on the group's website, and the group is politically active through public interventions, protest street art, and through their radio station. In combining these levels of struggle, the boundaries between the macro- and micropolitical begin to dissolve, although this in no way appears to imply a cancellation of transformative potential, but rather its amplification.

## CONCLUSION

The theories of leftist psychoanalyst-philosopher Jorge Alemán and cultural critic Suely Rolnik on the production of subjectivities provide useful perspectives on understanding the particularities of the neoliberal subject, and the possible factors that contribute to its insularity and seeming disinclination to solidarity with others, along with its debilitating political dormancy when confronted by “collective disavowal.” The art activism of *Mujeres Creando* demonstrates how particularly feminist modes of political organisation, consisting of a combination of both micro- and macropolitics, represent a potential form of resistance to hegemonic neoliberal capitalist discourse. Through this method of operation, which underscores the enduring astuteness of the organisational insights of second-wave feminist slogans regarding the fundamental implication of the personal in the political and vice-versa, *Mujeres Creando* has carved out a space for transformation in Bolivian society over the past twenty years. They are one nucleus fighting to regain power over their biological and social reproduction; many others share their aim of creating alternative liberating realities where desire once more circulates, the other is recognised, and solidarity is practised, securing the welfare of all and a

culture of well-being for the subject and its home. Feminist modes of solidarity building and political organising could provide the tools to achieve a non-exploitative society.

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