

**Overnight, in beautiful handwriting**, words appear on the walls of La Paz, the high-altitude capital of Bolivia. They speak truths Bolivian women won't say out loud. Deconstructing machismo, anti-gay prejudice and neoliberalism, Bolivian anarcho-feminist group *Mujeres Creando* (Women Creating) takes art back to the streets.

"The face of happiness vanished from art and literature as it began to be reproduced along endless walls and billboards," said the Situationists. *Mujeres Creando*'s graffiti paints happiness back onto the walls. "Coca Cola pays, and paints, so why can't we paint without paying? The problem isn't that the walls are painted, the problem is that it's not paid for," says Julieta Paredes. The street is their canvas, art is political, art is for everyone. There is a politics of creativity, of interventions in everyday life. In exile politically, and sexually, a group of friends started *Mujeres Creando* in 1992 – a group of "affection and defects, creativity and proposal". Two are the only openly lesbian activists in Bolivia. At the time, they explain, there was little talk of feminism – a militant, radical feminism, a feminism of the streets, of everyday life.

They declare: "The intention to be a transforming movement... a movement of cultural space, art, and social proposals, where we paint, we tell stories, we dance them, we cook them, subverting the patriarchal order." In 2002 they faced arrest for making a TV show in which two women in traditional Bolivian dress and bowler hats were shown passionately kissing.

In another notorious campaign, *Mujeres Creando* provided pots of paint to the poor women of the barrios, who painted slogans the walls of the bank they owed crippling debts to. A desperate group of debtors strapped themselves with dynamite and held bankers hostage. As soldiers prepared to massacre them, *Mujeres Creando* formed part of the delegation who negotiated an end to the debt, and safe removal of the protesters.

## Disobedience Is Happiness: the art of *Mujeres Creando*

From an interview with *Mujeres Creando* by Notes from Nowhere

"Crazy people, agitators, rebels, disobedients, subversives, witches, street, grafiteras, anarchists, feministas, Lesbians and heterosexuals; married and unmarried; students and clerks; Indians, chotas, cholos, birlochas, and señoritas; old and young; white and coloured, we are a fabric of solidarities; of identities, of commitments, we are women, **WOMEN CREATING.**"

- *Mujeres Creando*

*Mujeres Creando* is an anarcho-feminist group which began in the year 1992 in La Paz, with three friends – Maria Galindo, Julieta Paredes and Monica Mendoza. They were very critical of the traditional left. They came out of leftist groups themselves, but were sick of the fact that everything was organized from top down, and that the women only served tea, or their role was a purely sexual one, or they were nothing more than secretaries. And so they said, "No, we cannot carry on doing this. We believe in revolution, we believe in social change, but this organization is not for us."

That's why *Mujeres Creando* is autonomous from political parties, NGOs, the state, hegemonic groups, leaders of unions. We don't want bosses, figureheads or exalted leaders. We organize ourselves horizontally, and nobody represents anybody else – each woman represents herself.

You see, our struggle is not specific – it’s not just part of a ‘Marxist revolution’ or a ‘Trotskyite revolution’. It is a struggle with its own character, its own individuality. It is directed at all of society, not only at women, not only at middle class women, or indigenous women, but at everyone – men and women.

We believe that how we relate to people in the street is fundamental. We have a newspaper *Mujer Publica* (Public Woman) which we edit and sell ourselves, and we carry out creative street actions.

We paint graffiti – *las pintadas* – and this is one of the communicative forms that really gets through to people. It started out as a criticism of what the Left is – but also the Right. It was our response to their painting in the streets saying “Vote for so-and-so”. They were affirmative or negative phrases, “No to the vote”, “Yes to this”, “No to that”. What we do instead is we appeal to poetry and creativity, to suggest ideas which aren’t just “yes” or “no”, “Left” or “Right”. All the graffiti and paintings we do, wherever they are, are signed *Mujeres Creando* with the anarchy-feminist symbol.

**“We’re not anarchists by Bakunin or the CNT, but rather by our grandmothers, and that’s a beautiful school of anarchism.”**

– Julieta Paredes, *Mujeres Creando*

We target all kinds of oppression from a feminist perspective – racism, the dictatorship, debt. Our aims aren’t always centred on women’s themes like abortion, reproductive rights, motherhood. The government says: “You can dedicate yourselves to those issues, full stop.” And we may say “No.” Or we may say “Yes, that interests us – we have positions on abortion, birth control, but don’t categorize us!” We are involved in everything: we are part of society. And for this reason we paint graffiti about different things. There is graffiti which provokes men, graffiti provoking the government, graffiti which is only directed at women, graffiti about the political situation.

For us, the street is the principal site for our struggle.

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invasion is only part of a long campaign against the centers, involving occupations, marches of tens of thousands, and legal pressure. Following a three-day roof occupation, the Via Corelli camp in Milan is closed by the government, but later reopens.

>> **January 3** >> The Zapatista Air Force bombards a Federal Army encampment in Chiapas, Mexico with paper aeroplanes.

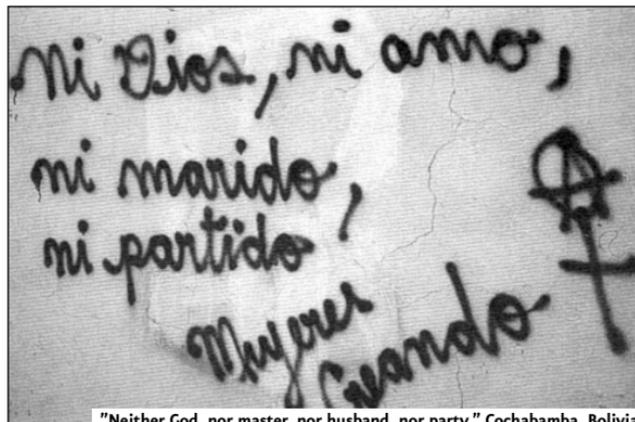
>> **January 11** >> Four thousand peaceful protesters of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) occupy the site of the Maheshwar dam in Madhya Pradesh, India, bringing work to a halt. Police attack and arrest 1500 people on their way to the dam site action. The past three years have seen strong resistance against the Narmada dam construction.

>> **January 15-22** >> Protesting the dollarization of

the Ecuadorian economy, 40,000 members of various indigenous groups converge on Quito to demand the resignation of the president. Thousands more blockade highways throughout the nation. Transportation and oil workers and street vendors declare an indefinite strike to support the indigenous movement. Despite the presence of 30,000 police and troops, protesters occupy the Congress building and the Supreme Court. For a few

For us, the street is a space like a common patio, where we can all be, children, everyone. It is very important that what we do in the street interacts with people, that we speak to people, that they see the graffiti, that it provokes something in them, laughter, annoyance, rage...

They have told us that it is quite fucked up in Europe. I have never been, but Maria and Julieta, who have been, tell us that everything is controlled: whether or not you can march, whether or not you can protest, whether or not you can sell things. Here in Bolivia, you go out into the street and you can see it belongs to the people: people doing things, people selling things – the street is ours. It is more fucked up in Europe and in other countries: they control the people – the police, the state, the



"Neither God, nor master, nor husband, nor party." Cochabamba, Bolivia

municipalities, control them.

Creativity is human – it belongs to all women and men. But many want to dispossess us of this creativity, something that is ours. They want to turn creativity into something elitist, saying the artists are the creative ones, the inspired ones, the ones who inspire each other. We do not allow ourselves to be dispossessed of an instrument of struggle and in everything we do, in the books we make, in the street actions, in the graffiti, we include this element which is important and fundamental to us: creativity. Then some people say to us: "You're artists." But we are not artists, we are street activists. All we do is to use something which is totally human: creativity.

We call our actions *Acciones Callejeras* (street actions), but we don't only carry them out in the street, though we make interventions in different spaces as well. We have intervened, for example at a meeting of the Superintendencia de Bancos, for all those who own the banks. One of us wore a wig, skirt, thick glasses, and, carrying an invitation obtained through a friend, entered the meeting, which would normally be closed to other people. They have a lavish lunch, and wine. So a member of *Mujeres Creando* went in and during lunch distributed leaflets denouncing the banks' interest rates, shouting "You are profiteers!" and she started to distribute some leaflets.

We have resisted neoliberalism in other ways too – we've taken actions against Coca-Cola and McDonald's in our newspaper, for example. Before it was published

**“Emancipation should make it possible for woman to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that craves assertion and activity should reach its fullest expression; all artificial barriers should be broken, and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery.”**

– Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Dover, 1970

anywhere else in the country, we published information about the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). And we have promoted quite a lot about the protests in Seattle, in Prague.

The last mobilization we carried out against the

bankers was very powerful. In our country there are small loans which are given above all to women, but also to men, to peasants. They are called microcredit loans, meant for poor people. Neoliberalism and capitalism asks, “How do we solve the problem of poverty in Latin America? We can’t give them social security, we can’t give them employment security, we can’t give them health, education. So we’ll give the poor a little bit of money, so that they can use their initiative and move forward.” And then they charge huge interest rates on this money, and use it for their own investments.

In Bolivia, microcredit was introduced in 1992. They said to the women here who sold things, who sold sweets: “Señora, we can lend you some capital: you want money, we’ll give it to you,” and they would lend them money. The guarantee for this loan was not private property, it was not your house, it was not your car – because these people were poor – it was a group in which each member provides guarantees for each other. So the bank began to lend and after a time there was a microcredit crisis. The people could no longer pay, interest was very high, and

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hours, a three-man junta of indigenous and military leaders takes power, but is soon dissolved by the army, under threat of sanctions by the US. The protest is called off and Vice President Noboa assumes the presidency, continuing with the IMF policies. However, the coup is supported by 71 per cent of the population, and the uprising simmers beneath the surface of everyday life, erupting for years to come.

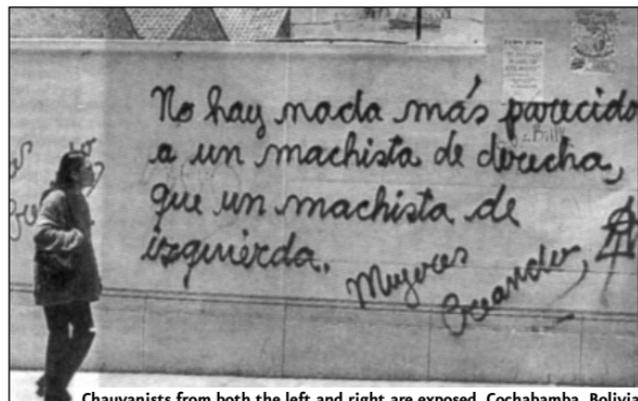
>> **January 27** >> Two thousand industrialists, politicians and other self-proclaimed ‘global leaders’ meet for the thirtieth World Economic Forum (WEF), in the Swiss ski resort, Davos. Small demonstrations have taken place here since 1994 but this year over a thousand protesters turn up and a counter-conference takes place. The ski-resort’s McDonald’s loses its windows, and protesters throw snowballs at the police

who respond with hard plastic bullets.

>> **February 15** >> As Michel Camdessus prepares to give his last major address as head of the International Monetary Fund to the delegates of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Bangkok, Thailand, he is greeted unceremoniously with a fruit-and-cream-pie to the face, delivered, according to the pie slinger, “to give a warning to his successor

the women were fighting amongst themselves, saying, “You’re not able to pay the bank,” accusing each other. It caused many problems. The interest rates were enormous. If you owed \$100, you would end up owing \$5,000! You were poor, but after being lent money by the bank for eight or ten years, during which you had been paying them, you were much poorer than before, you were a woman who worked much harder than she worked before microcredit.

In 2001 a group made up mostly of women from the poorest barrios came to La Paz in protest – an organization called *Deudora* (debtor). We joined together with them, started to think and to act together. We spoke to them about pacifism, we carried out some creative actions against these banks and their interest rates,



Chauvanists from both the left and right are exposed. Cochabamba, Bolivia

**“Political activity does not only happen in political parties or in organized groups; it happens as soon as you are conscious of your actions and your decisions – an intuitive kind of feminism... Through feminism, women come to know themselves and each other, with all our potential, our strengths, our weaknesses, and we discover a freedom that we keep on developing.” – Mujeres Creando**

against money... painting murals in the streets. We brought paint, and the *Deudora* group took off their shoes and dipped their feet into the pots, then lifted each other up to leave their footprints on the wall. This was a symbol of their long journey to the capital. We’ve also marched, we’ve thrown ourselves onto the floor so the police won’t repress us, that sort of thing.

We believe in self-defence, so we appeal to strategies of struggling which are peaceful, but we don’t believe in going out to provoke, going out to throw paint around, going out to hit someone. But we do believe in legitimate defence: if

somebody hits you, you can react, right? We are careful of our reactions, though, because we know that often to react often means you get harmed by the police.

After three and a half months, we managed to get an agreement. We sat down with the large banking and financial associations, and we negotiated. We made a whole series of complaints to them and we managed to achieve an agreement. The bank recognized this, and said “Yes, we have committed some irregularities with you, so we’ll excuse you from your debts.” People whose houses were being auctioned off have managed to keep them. So this action has given capitalism a kick, because financial capital here is all-powerful. The state really looks after the interests of investors, people who put money into banks, into mutuals, into NGOs, people who lend money.

For us, to confront this apparatus has been tremendously hard. We are still carrying on – it’s still not over. We have the agreements, but we are going to return with an international seminar to denounce microcredit, which has been more just to make money, make money, make money, full stop.

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that we expect different policies”. One senior UNCTAD official comments, “Everybody will tell you they disapprove of the act, but I still have to meet somebody who was unhappy that it happened to Camdessus.”

>> **February 15** >> Hundreds of people gather to defend the *Jardín de la Esperanza* (the garden of hope) in New York, US. The garden is bulldozed and 31 people are arrested a few hours before legal protection of the

garden is issued.

>> **February 18** >> One thousand Thai activists march on the UNCTAD conference, burning effigies of IMF director Michel Camdessus, and calling for radical changes to the global financial system, that keeps much of the world locked in poverty. Inside the conference, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika says in a keynote speech that the African continent is

Once an agreement was signed that benefited the debtors, we organized a kind of festival with flowers and bread. The children began to share out the bread with everyone, a symbol of the *olla* (collective cooking pot) of the poor – the poor who share what they have.

**Interview by Notes from Nowhere / Katharine Ainger**

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**Resources:**

- » *Carcajada Cultural Café, Almirante Grau, 525 Central, La Paz, Bolivia*
- » *Mujeres Creando: creando@ceibo.entelnet.bo*
- » *Quiet Rumours: an Anarcha-Feminist Reader, collected by Dark Star, AK Press, 2002.*

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being rubbed off the map by the trade policies of richer nations.

>> **March 8** >> Youth activists of colour in San Francisco, US storm the corporate headquarters of Chevron, Hilton, and Pacific Gas and Electric. These corporations are guilty of, among many other crimes, giving tens of thousands of dollars to a campaign to put a proposed juvenile ‘justice’ measure (Prop 21) on the