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'Her Dress Hangs Here': De-frocking the Kahlo Cult

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The 1990s have witnessed a shift in the art establishment's attitudes towards art produced outside of its traditional parameters. The work of previously marginalised artists has become an area of rich speculation among art dealers priced out of the 'modern masters' market. Almost every year has witnessed the discovery of new artistic terrain — graffiti art, Soviet art, Australian art, the art of Latin America. The major auction houses have moved with the times and have found new ways of selling works which in both form and content would have proved an unstable investment a decade ago. The current status of the work of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo is a dramatic example of this change. Once known primarily as the wife of Diego Rivera, her reputation outside of Mexico now far supercedes his: since 1979, sale room estimates of her work have risen from \$40,000 to over \$1 million, and in 1990 a work by Kahlo broke all records at Sotheby's New York for a Latin American artist.

The enormous rise in the economic value of her work has developed in tandem with the increased critical and popular response to her particular blend of naive style and incisive content. While the first wave of popular interest arose with the 1982 Whitechapel exhibition instigated by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen,¹ it was the publication of Hayden Herrera's biography of Kahlo in 1983² which has led to her current cult status. Since that date she has been the subject of TV documentaries, a feature film ('Frida' by Paul Leduc), a stage play, numerous publications and the inspiration for designer clothing. In May 1989 *Elle* magazine ran a 16 page feature on Frida Kahlo as the 'spirit of Mexico' (Fig. 1), while in *Vogue* (Feb. 1990) there was a 10 page interpretation of 'the romance of Frida Kahlo's Mexico' (Fig. 2). Almost as a logical outcome of this media blitz, it emerged in the summer of 1990 that Madonna, already a devotee of Kahlo's work, was commissioning a screenplay based on Kahlo's life.



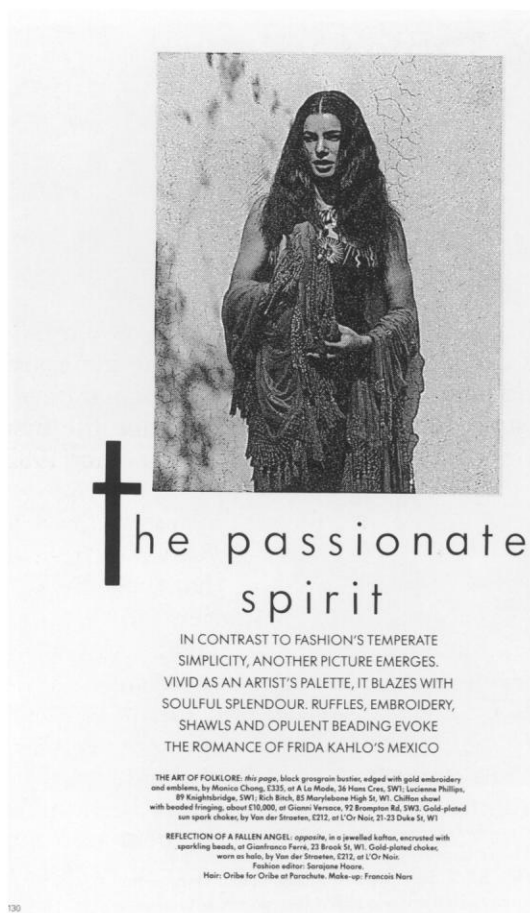


Fig. 2. *Vogue*, February 1990, p. 130–1.

As with most artists who have become mythical personalities in the popular imagination, such attention has focused primarily on the anecdotal and tragic details of Kahlo's admittedly fascinating life. The passionate obsession with her husband Diego Rivera, her flamboyant appearance, but most of all her physical and emotional pain have come to dominate responses to her work. While Kahlo's art helped her to deal with the vicissitudes of her life, for most audiences it is her life story which allows access to her art.

In this one can draw obvious parallels to the appeal of Van Gogh, a traditionally popular artist recently made fashionable by the media attention generated during the centennial of his death. The archetypal dropout/spiritualist became an appropriate icon for the sixties revival of 1990's long hot summer. Yet despite the iconic status of Van Gogh's 'tragic' life,³ it is the appearance of his work by which he is ultimately signified, his thick impasto brushstroke, his vibrant yellows, the urgency of his creative drive. In the case of Kahlo the popular image is of the artist herself, the characteristic brows, the elaborate hair, the Mexican costume (Fig. 3). It is primarily her appearance, not the formal language of her art, that has graced the pages of *Elle* and *Vogue* magazines. The *Elle* feature transposed the 'Kahlo style' to Kahlo lookalikes in contemporary clothing balanced around segments of Herrera's biography of

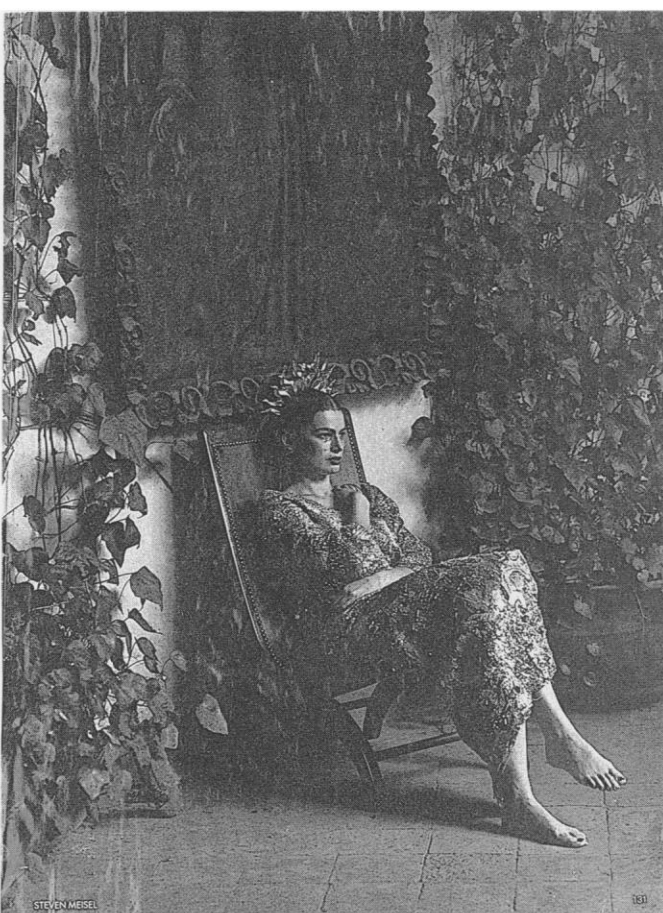


Fig. 3. *Elle Magazine*, May 1989, p. 28.

the artist. In the later *Vogue* piece only the style remained as the far more overtly sexual, Kahloesque models lounged and pouted in their 'Mexican' interiors. There is a poignant irony in the way clothing, which on one level served to hide Kahlo's broken body, falls or is lifted by the model to reveal a luxuriantly perfect physique (Fig. 4). The visual references in the two magazines are as much from photos of the artist as from her work. In both features she is also seen to embody a wider set of assumptions about Mexico itself; exotic, passionate, yet constantly struggling against pain and deceit. While *Elle*, *Vogue* and subsequently *The Independent* (Fig. 5), stressed different facets of Kahlo's public persona, they all shared the emphasis on 'her', as an encapsulation of stereotypical images of Mexico, rather than her work. It is her body as the canvas, her appearance as art. The art of self-expression becomes self-expression as art.

Of course, the line between art and life is a particularly hard one to draw in Kahlo's case. The majority of her work is self-portraiture; her aesthetic concerns grew from her fascination with the falsity of appearance. Dressing up, role playing and masquerade form the conceptual basis of Kahlo's work. In *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1944) (Fig. 6), she paints herself wearing Rivera's suit, challenging traditional expectations of femininity and attempting to appropriate his authority (while simultaneously threatening castration). More disturbingly, in *The Mask* (1945) (Fig. 7), she throws doubt on too straightforward a reading of her self-portraits as



Fig. 4. *Vogue*, February 1990, p. 138.



The rediscovery of the work of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo has inspired a far-fetched fashion for summer. Her unforgettable face and revolutionary dress sense are provoking enthusiastic imitation — but will the eyebrows catch on?

Fig. 5. *The Independent on Sunday*, 8th April 1990, p. 37.

revealing of her inner emotions. Where does the mask fall? Does not the ritual repetition of those familiar features 'mask' far more than it uncovers?

There is, however, an inevitable logic to the appropriation of her meticulously constructed image, a process which the artist was mocking as early as 1933: '... some of the gringa women are imitating me and trying to dress "a la Mexicana", but the poor souls only look like cabbages and to tell you the naked truth they look absolutely impossible.'⁴ The 'impossibility' stemmed from the failure of such followers to recognise the symbolic importance of Kahlo's choice of clothing, a failure also intrinsic to her recent magazine appearances. The particularities of post-revolutionary Mexico are frequently subsumed by the decorativeness of the ethnic, by the generalised attractiveness of the radical avant-garde. For Kahlo, however, choosing to don the costume of the Tehuana, as for example in *Tree of Hope* (1946) (Fig. 8), was to embody a powerful icon of cultural identity. Mexican Indian dress is extraordinarily diverse and by and large geographically specific, varying from region to



Fig. 6. Frida Kahlo: *Self-portrait with cropped hair*, 1940, 40×27.9 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 8. Frida Kahlo: *The Tree of Hope*, 1946, 55.9×40.6 cm. Coll. Isidore Ducasse Fine Arts Inc.

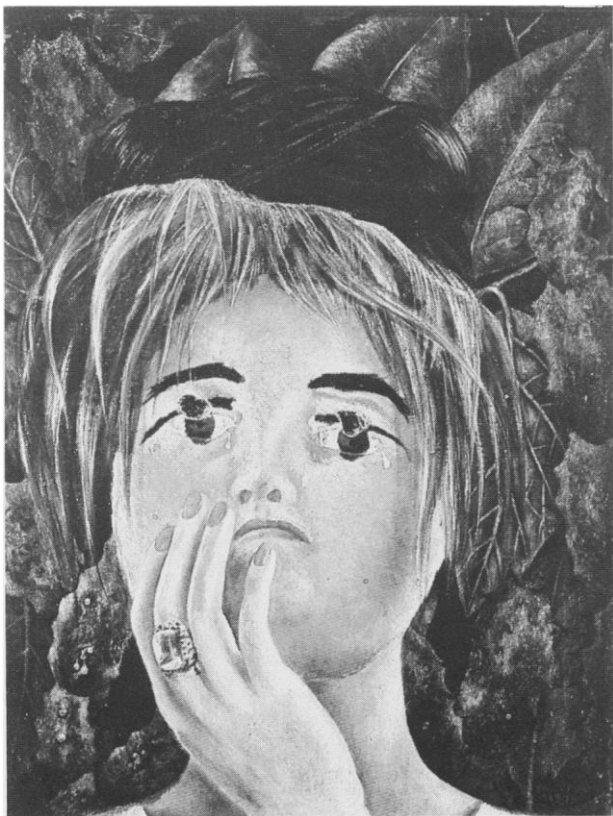


Fig. 7. Frida Kahlo: *The Mask*, 1945, 40×30.5 cm. Coll. Dolores Olmeda.

region. The Tehuana dress is by no means the most decorative variant or the closest to pre-Hispanic forms of clothing. It is the mythology surrounding the women wearers of the costume which directed Kahlo's choice. The ostensibly matriarchal society of Tehuantepec led to the adoption of the Tehuana, in post-revolutionary Mexico, as the image of the strong Indian woman; the undefeated counterpart to the despised 'Chingada', who, conversely is the female embodiment of Mexico's hybrid post-conquest culture. In a culture where sexual metaphors are frequently used to convey racial and political conflict, the Tehuana represents that aspect of Mexico's indigenous tradition unbowed by centuries of colonial and male rule. Kahlo's adoption of Tehuana dress, while being an attractive disguise of what she saw as a less than perfect body, asserted both a feminist and an anti-colonialist position.

In Kahlo's work there is a powerful mix of these discourses, yet her role as an archetypal woman painter has come to dominate responses to her work. It is through her emergence as a cult painter of the feminist movement of the 1970s that her current reputation has evolved. Her work almost perfectly illustrates debates as to the nature of traditional exclusions of a woman's art. The fascination with functions of the body, the analogies between artistic

and physical creative processes, self-portraiture used to reveal the female body as the site of patriarchal aesthetic discourse; all of these mirror the concerns of many women painters of the 1980s.

In their formal language, Kahlo's works are exemplary of certain feminist arguments; the adoption of the decorative, the intimate and non-fine art mediums reveals the restrictive nature of traditional definitions of 'high art'. This 'appropriateness' of Kahlo's aesthetic to contemporary debate has tended to remove her work from its historical context, to stress the collective and the cross-cultural. Although this is not in itself to be dismissed as a tactic, it has diminished the complexity of Kahlo's achievement as a specifically Mexican painter, operating within the particularities of her historical moment. More problematic is the way in which such a dislocation has led to the acceptance of her 'Mexicanness' as mere decoration of the essentially feminist themes of her work, thereby defusing a substantial part of the art described by Breton as a 'ribbon round a bomb'.⁵ It is the ribbon that runs through the pages of *Vogue*, the glossy surface of the images in direct opposition to a work such as Kahlo's *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1939) (Fig. 9).

In this painting, a memorial to a woman's tragic death is transformed into an indictment of the culture which destroyed her. Hale's suicide became a poignant metaphor for the oppressive nature of the social values of New York and North America in general. The story behind Hale's death was one with which Kahlo obviously identified, and within which dress formed an important symbolic function.



Fig. 9. Frida Kahlo: *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1939, 58.1×47.5 cm. Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona.

Before jumping from the window of her apartment, Hale had dressed meticulously in her most flattering dress, the corsage of yellow roses a gift from a male admirer. In Kahlo's painting, the figure falls from the fantasy world she has inhabited to the harsh bloodspattered reality of the street, literally coming down to earth. Hale's eyes stare knowingly at the viewer, a human sacrifice to an alienated and consumerist culture. The horizontality of her fallen body is juxtaposed to the vertical thrust of the apartment building. She leaps from an architectural monument to a phallogocentric world. Although destroyed, she has also escaped. The painting, dedicated to Hale's mother, was commissioned by a mutual friend of Kahlo and Dorothy Hale, the managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, Clare Boothe Luce. The painting was agreed to by Luce in part to recompense for what she saw as her misjudgement of her dead friend. Having lent Hale money to pay her rent she had been angered to discover her spending enormous sums on an haute-couture dress, and refused to turn up to what, in retrospect, became Hale's farewell party. Later it was revealed that the money had come from a different source. A male friend had tried to dissuade Hale from seeking a much needed job and had given her a thousand dollars to buy 'the most beautiful dress in New York', telling her that what she needed was to find a rich husband.⁶

On one level this work deals with a generalised 'woman's experience', yet the metaphorical power of Dorothy Hale's dress derives from Kahlo's use of clothing in her own self-portraits. Dress not only covers and decorates the body but instils in the wearer its own characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Hale's black velvet dress is cursed because it represents the values of the 'Gringolandia' so hated by Kahlo. In those paintings where Kahlo wears European dress she is passive, weak and unable to control her own destiny, but in the Tehuana costume she is strong, powerful, hopeful. Unclothed, her body becomes yet more vulnerable, but as Jean Franco states:

The unclothed body is not a 'self' but a socialised body, a body that is opened by instruments, technologized, wounded, its organs displayed to the outside world. The 'inner' Frida is controlled by modern society far more than the clothed Frida, who often marks her deviation from the norm by defiantly returning the gaze of the viewer.⁷

Kahlo's naked body becomes not just the tortured self of her personal biography but a visual counterpart to the injured and defiled manifestations of Mexico's colonised past: La Llorona 'the weeping woman' of popular myth and La Chingada, the raped and abused mother described in Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.⁸ Descended from an Aztec mother goddess, Llorona is a long-suffering mother figure, symbolic in a wider sense of the trauma of the

Spanish invasion. Driven mad with grief by the loss of her child, she is thought to wander the streets weeping and crying out a ghostly memory of the pre-Conquest past. At its most simple, *La Chingada*, as the mother of mestizo culture is 'the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived'. The female soil possessed and misused by the masculine force of the Spanish invaders. The Indian Mexico raped and abused by the conquistador yet bearing his bastard child. The rhetoric of the Tehuana opposes the nihilism of traditional feminisations of colonial trauma, and asserts the potential of a dignified cultural resistance.

A major, though often ignored, work by Kahlo demonstrates the cultural politics underlying her art. *My Dress Hangs There* (1939) (Fig. 10) is one of the artist's most formally adventurous works, mixing photographic collage with paint to produce a critique of North American culture. Kahlo does not appear in the work, her Tehuana costume hangs empty in the centre of the composition, suspended between a toilet bowl and a golfing trophy. On one level *My Dress*... is a coda to *Self-Portrait on the*

Borderline (1932) (Fig. 11) of the previous year. This small painting on metal, in the style of a Catholic votive image, shows the artist poised between the technological inhumanity of a capitalist North America and the archaic fertility of Mexico. Interwoven with these images are subtler references to the metaphorical borderlines which separate Latin American culture from that of Europe and North America. This is done by a series of juxtapositions; the past versus the present; female nature versus masculine technology; growth versus exploitation; and in its very material presence, the traditions of fine art versus the popular.

At the same time the ambivalence of her own, and modern Mexico's position is manifested in the figure of the artist. The paper flag of her homeland is contrasted to the modernity of the cigarette held in her other hand. The red and green of the Aztec necklace links it compositionally with the indigenous plants to the 'south' of the painting, the pink colonial-style dress tonally blending with the skyscrapers to the 'north'. *My Dress*... again suggests a conflict, but the ambivalence is gone.

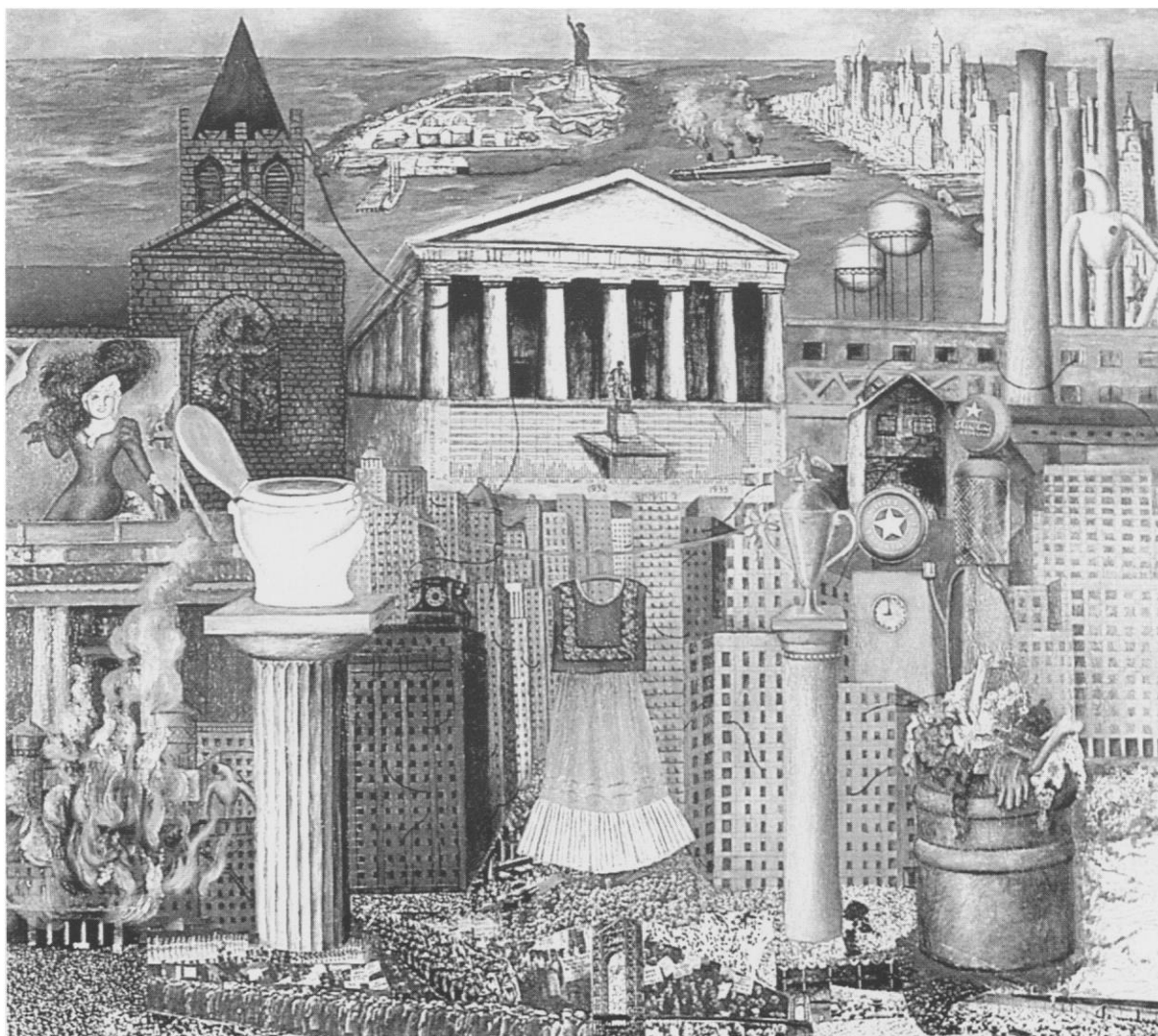


Fig. 10. Frida Kahlo: *My Dress Hangs There*, 1939, 46×50 cm, estate of Dr. Leo Eloesser.



Fig. 11. Frida Kahlo: *Self-Portrait on the Border*, 1932, 33×45.8 cm. Coll. Mr & Mrs Manuel Reyero.

Nature has been banished, technology and its concomitant values reign over a harshly masculine world. Three elements refer to the female presence, all of them dealing with an essential lack. The empty dress, a peeling poster of Mae West and in the far distance the Statue of Liberty.

Although occasionally humorous, the work presents a bleak view of urban alienation. The Church, Wall Street, and Industry are joined by a network of telephone lines, forming a remorselessly inhuman environment. Beneath this man-made mechanism of oppression are the people, literally distanced from their surroundings by Kahlo's use of photo-collage. In the forefront of this scene flutters the dress, incongruously vibrant despite its suggestion of loss. Dislocated from its political context, it hangs like a *piñata*⁹ above the teeming streets of the city; decorative yet potentially explosive. There is no place 'there' for the values the Tehuana dress

represents, its folds are given meaning by Kahlo's search for a cultural identity. Within the confines of the painting it becomes a silent emblem of protest, a reminder of political alternatives. The physicality so characteristic of Kahlo's work is missing, no flesh, no blood, just the tawdryness of the peeling poster and the hollow reminder of lost Liberty.

The inter-relationship of body and dress so self-consciously referred to in many of Kahlo's most polemical works (Fig. 12) has been strangely inverted by her current popularity. Her 'Mexican-ness' has become a stylistic gloss, decorative, colourful, pretty, even individualistic. The colonised body which Kahlo clothed in revolutionary idealism has lost its function as a symbol of nationhood becoming instead an icon of female suffering. What is obscured by this process is that it was through clothing, in both art and life, that Kahlo attempted to redress the wrongs of history.



Fig. 12. Frida Kahlo: *The Two Fridas*, 1939, 173.5×173 cm. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico D.F.

Notes

1. 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', *Whitechapel Art Gallery*, 26th March–2nd May, 1982.

2. Hayden Herrera *Frida, A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York, 1983).

3. The specific relationship of Van Gogh's life and art and the importance of that relationship to popular responses to him, is analysed by Griselda Pollock in 'Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History', in *Screen*, (Vol. 21, No. 3 1980) pp. 57–95.

4. Herrera, *loc. cit.*, p. 173.

5. André Breton, 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera', *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London, 1972).

6. Herrera, *loc. cit.*, p. 290.

7. Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (London, 1989), p. 107.

8. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (London, 1985), pp. 67–79.

9. A *piñata* is a papier mâché figure stuffed with sweets and fireworks that is set off during fiestas.