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FOUR HEADS, ONE 'PUSSY'

The Struggle for Bodily Autonomy and Reproductive Rights in the Work of the Feminist Artist Collective ZOiNA

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Following Portugal's first referendum on the decriminalisation of abortion in 1998, which saw the majority of voters opposing full legalisation of women's access to this medical procedure,¹ Ana Medeira (1977), Carla Cruz (1977), Catarina Carneiro de Sousa (1975), and Isabel Carvalho (1977) came together to establish ZOiNA in 1999, one of the first feminist artist collectives in Portugal. The term 'zoina' in Portuguese carries multiple meanings, including a temporary disturbance of the senses, a sexual worker, and a misbehaving woman.² Operating in Porto, ZOiNA was influenced by the emerging DIY and artist-run culture, shaping their visual aesthetics and collective art production. Through their fanzine *Rata*, meaning 'pussy' in English slang, the group addressed the topic of women's bodily autonomy connected to reproductive rights such as abortion, sexual education, reproductive healthcare, and women's access to menstrual hygiene. Over its four editions,³ *Rata* served as a powerful tool of visual activism pushing back against patriarchal social norms and advocating for women's rights. Moreover, the deliberate choice of using an inexpensive and do-it-yourself medium such as a fanzine is very significant as it was designed as a vehicle to easily disseminate their message amongst both friends and the broader society. Through visual guerrilla activities, ZOiNA used theoretical texts and images from visual arts and mainstream culture, and their own drawings and collages, transforming feminist academic perspectives (mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom⁴) into activist slogans. Ultimately, through the collective micropolitics of 'acting in concert' (Butler 2015: 66–98), not only within the group but also in collaboration with other colleagues and friends, ZOiNA played an important role in deconstructing stereotypes around women's sexuality and reproductive rights, confronting the conservative and Catholic norms prevalent in Porto's society.

This chapter explores how ZOiNA dialogues with transnational feminist discourses, develops local visual expressions of feminist activism, and contributes to new forms of commonality, subjectivation, and agency via collective feminist art that challenges heteropatriarchal ideologies.

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Four Feminist Women Misbehaving in the Catholic and Conservative Portugal

Carla Cruz and Isabel Carvalho first met in the early 1990s at Soares dos Reis High School, in Porto before studying together at the Fine Arts Faculty in the same city. While participating in the Erasmus program in Coventry, UK (1998), Carvalho introduced Cruz to Catarina Carneiro de Sousa, who shared their interest in gender-related issues. Ana Medeira, a friend of Sousa, also joined their discussions. Sousa, Carvalho, Cruz, and Medeira belong to the so-called *April Generation*, which encompasses individuals born between the Carnation Revolution in April 1974 and 1979. They grew up during the formative years of the recent Portuguese democracy,⁵ witnessing its early stages and participating in its development.

When formed in 1999, the group lived in a society still influenced by the triad of *God, Fatherland, and Family* that inspired the conservative dictatorship that ruled the country for 48 years (1926/33–1974). The dictatorship promoted traditional family values, enforcing pro-natalist policies, criminalising honour crimes, and restricting women's rights. This impacted women's sexual and reproductive health, contributed to deepening role gender stereotypes concerning social roles, and stigmatising female pleasure (Freire 2013: 56–61), body awareness, contraception, and menstruation. Under this regime, a criminal code section (art. 372) permitted honour crimes, allowing husbands or fathers to kill adulterous women with a minimal prison sentence of six months. Furthermore, women's non-virginity at the time of marriage could result in annulment (Civil Code, art. 1639e). Family planning and contraception were strictly forbidden, with contraceptive pills being stigmatised as 'devil's products' (Vilar, 2009 apud Monteiro 2012: 590). ZOiNA, understanding this legacy, addressed these topics in their fanzines employing an ironic and provocative tone.

In the post-revolutionary period, the 1976 Constitution enshrined the right to family planning and established the State's duty to 'promote information and access to the methods and means that ensure (...) the exercise of conscious motherhood and fatherhood' (Article 67). However, its effective implementation was delayed until 1984 with the Sexual Education and Family Planning Law (Law 3/84) (Ibid.: 591). In the same year, exceptions to the prohibition of voluntary pregnancy termination were introduced in cases where there was a threat to the woman's life, foetal malformation, or situations defined as 'rape'. This decision paralleled events in neighbouring Spain, where in 1985, abortion was approved under similar circumstances as in Portugal. Portuguese women had to wait until 2007 when, following a new referendum, voluntary pregnancy termination on request was finally legalised. Similarly, three years later, Spain also approved abortion on request. It is also noteworthy that Portugal and Spain are amongst the Southern European countries that allowed access to abortion on request relatively later compared to France, where voluntary pregnancy termination was legalised in 1975, Italy in 1978, and Greece in 1986. One possible explanation is that both Portugal and Spain experienced the late end of their conservative dictatorships, which, combined with the influence of the Catholic Church, shaped their policies on moral and social issues, including abortion and divorce (Blofield 2006: 161).

Additionally, when ZOiNA was created in the late 1990s, although women had made progress in education and employment rates, disparities persisted. Women experienced

higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and carried the burden of domestic responsibilities (Cf. Torres 2008/2009). This situation reflected a common trend in many European countries. Portugal showed higher rates of full-time female employment compared to some southern European countries, but lower than Scandinavian and North European counterparts (Torres 2008/2009: 37). This was due to the prevalence of low-paid jobs in the Portuguese labour market, resulting in a paradoxical notion of 'modernisation without emancipation'. Having emerged from a long dictatorship, Portugal faced the challenge of rebuilding social policies, which remain largely unmet to this day (Ibid.: 50–52).

In the face of these challenges, ZOiNA found itself at a pivotal intersection of historical and societal forces. They navigated a complex social and political landscape marked by both the increasing influence of neoliberal ideals of individualism, independence, and entrepreneurial spirit (Harris 2004: 6–8), and the constraints of a deeply conservative society where gender inequality prevailed, abortion on request remained illegal, and women continued to face scrutiny and limited agency over decisions concerning their own bodies. Nevertheless, in spite of these constraints, ZOiNA was at the forefront of a new generation that emerged in 1990s Portugal that questioned and challenged deeply ingrained gender-related stereotypes associated with women's sexuality, gender roles, and reproductive rights. This generation's drive for change was fuelled by Portugal's growing embrace of Western culture, allowing them to engage with mainstream cultural influences spanning music, cinema, lifestyle, and fashion. After a long dictatorship, during which the Portuguese civil code stipulated that women required their husbands' permission to travel abroad until 1969, ZOiNA's generation became the first with the economic means to travel and enjoy privileged contact with other European societies, thanks in part to international exchange programs like Erasmus.

Therefore, despite the deep-rooted societal constraints they encountered, ZOiNA's generation marked an important shift towards a more progressive and inclusive society. They supported humanitarian causes, such as the struggle for East Timor's independence (2002) and led the charge against increasing tuition fees in Portuguese universities and the barriers to higher education, championing affordable and accessible learning. Their advocacy extended to LGBTQI+ rights, with the formation of organisations to raise awareness and promote equality.⁷ Moreover, they played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights, advocating for gender equality, reproductive rights, and the eradication of gender-based violence, ultimately contributing to the full legalisation of abortion in 2007.

This was the case with ZOiNA. As Carla Cruz (2023) confessed, although not unanimously held within the group, she firmly believed in the transformative power of art as a catalyst for social change. Cruz explained that they approached their artistic practice with a 'militant' mindset, recognising that 'our activism was not limited to politics alone but was intricately intertwined with our artistic practice'.

In the four editions of *Rata* (Figure 6.1), the group used visual guerrilla strategies. These tactics included appropriating and quoting texts and images with critical perspectives (academic, activist, or artistic) that aligned with their mission. Additionally, they displaced texts or images from their original context, placing them in different settings to imbue them with new meaning. ZOiNA also used allegorical drawings, often created collaboratively. These drawings blend influences from magazine advertising and comic books with a personal, confessional style. This fusion intersected the artists' private and

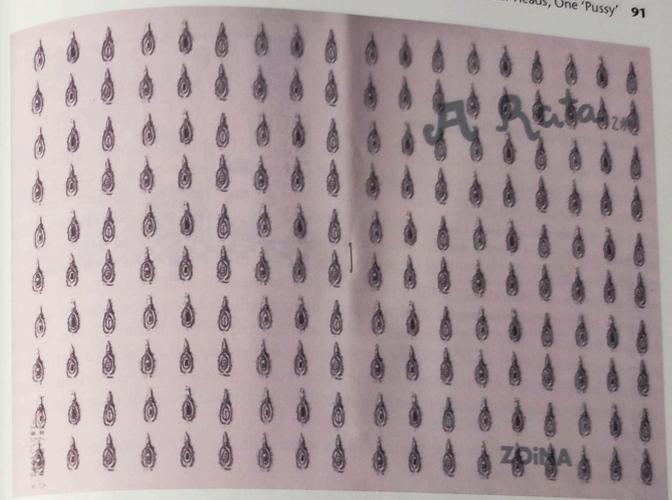


FIGURE 6.1 Rata#2 (cover)

Photo: courtesy of ZOiNA.

public lives in both content and aesthetics and maintained a continuous movement between elements drawn from mass and subcultural spheres. Moreover, the use of caricatural and satiric schematic drawings, characterised by unvarnished lines reminiscent of a deskilled illustrator, served as a pedagogical strategy. This approach aimed to deconstruct naturalised national and cultural stereotypes prevalent in media culture. Similar to the Situationists' use of *détournement*, ZOiNA exposed the perversion behind these stereotypes through simple drawings and the subversive manipulation of corporate ads, lifestyle and women's magazines, amongst other found materials. Their pedagogical and protest dimension is also evident in the way the group employed slogans that might contain quotations or be of uncertain authorship, blurring the lines between their own contributions and found material.

Despite having limited financial resources, ZOiNA actively organised and participated in several collective and individual exhibitions, such as *Pink Lotion - Desafio Prático Político-Sexual* [Practical Political-Sexual Challenge] (2000, Caldeira 213, Porto) and *Zona Lúdica* [Play Zone] (2000, Coimbra and Lisbon), and organised public space performances such as *Fora de Campo* [Offside] (2004, Leiria, Lisbon, Coimbra, Braga, Guimarães, Faro, and Porto).

Collaboration was at the core of their creative process, where authorship was collectively embraced regardless of individual contributions, both within and outside the group. As described by Cruz, 'the creative process was a true continuum between our

friendship and our lives' (2019). For ZOiNA, female bodies were seen as battlegrounds for political struggles (Sousa 2020). Now, we will delve into how *Rata* became a means for them to pursue their fight.

Bodily Autonomy and Collectivism

ZOiNA's advocacy for women's right to bodily autonomy primarily revolved around exposing and deconstructing stereotypes rooted in biological essentialism related to reproduction. An illustrative example is a quote from an interview with Judith Butler in *Rata#4*, where the author challenges the traditional imposition of motherhood as an inherent prerogative for the female sex, thereby questioning fixed notions of female identity (Butler 1994: 33). A second example involves a Bible quote, inscribed on a bathroom wall within an exhibition context, that reads: 'To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire will be for your husband, yet he shall rule over you" [Genesis 3:16]. While Butler's quote stands as a political statement for ZOiNA, the displacement of the biblical quote to a bathroom wall and its subsequent feature in the fanzine titled 'pussy' (*Rata#2*) serves both as an act of profanation and a form of denunciation, exposing patriarchal content that subjugates women.

Collective drawings are one of the most important features of *Rata* and one of ZOiNA's most used visual strategies.

In *Rata#2*, ZOiNA combines an allegorical drawing with a blunt illustration (Figure 6.2) to address the topic of reproduction, specifically focusing on how capitalism exerts control over the female body by colonising its reproductive organs to perpetuate the cycle of capital production. Through visual stylistic features such as metaphor and simile, the drawing portrays a caricature of the Empire State Building (ESB), an iconic symbol of capitalism and the US economic empire, emerging from an inverted uterus. This depiction of capital 'ejaculating' from the summit of the ESB serves as a stark critique of how male authority perpetuates a predatory economic system and disseminates destructive ideologies, including Nazism and Christianity, both of which are symbolised in what appears to be the ovaries. Skyscrapers, representing a world dominated by male power and fuelled by aggression, underscore the exploitation of women's reproductive role as a source of labour.

Here, there is a parallel between the female reproductive system and Mother Earth, linking both to fertility and the ability to sustain life. Just as capitalism exploits and commodifies the Earth's resources, it also exerts control over women's reproductive organs, colonising and commodifying women's reproductive capacity. This mirrors the exploitation suffered both by women and the Earth within a patriarchal capitalist culture. Through this intervention, ZOiNA challenges binary thinking in knowledge production related to the political organisation of the world based on what Katy Deepwell (2020: 9–10) describes as 'gender order' that aligns with a 'hierarchy of power and privilege'. In doing so, ZOiNA also challenges clear distinctions between production and reproduction, reaffirming the urgency to reassess how life, love, and care are socially reproduced (Ibid.: 18).

Despite the departure of one of the group members just one year after its formation, due to irreparable conflicts, ZOiNA sought to restructure and continue its activities. Thus, *Rata#3* features a self-portrait of the collective (Figure 6.3), symbolising a hydra,

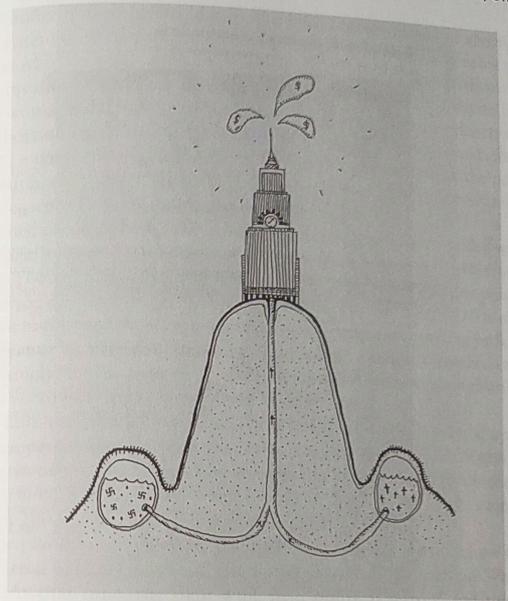


FIGURE 6.2 *Rata#2*

Photo: courtesy of ZOiNA

known for its regenerative capabilities. Although they share a common body, it is the coordinated efforts of the three heads that enable the group to engage in artistic and activist work that would have been unattainable individually. Isabel Carvalho (2023) pointed out that:

The materials [of *Rata*] often originated from exhibitions, serving as inspiration and proposals for us. We would take what troubled us and create our own collective works, such as the drawing of the three heads. The collages were also made collectively. Ultimately, everything became a collective endeavour. *Rata* was a container for micro and macro stuff we used [in our work]. Although egos existed, the primary goal was the collaborative construction of something common.

In Portugal still dominated by Catholic values, where societal expectations confined women to marriage⁸ and traditional caregiving roles while deeming discussions on sexuality taboo and considering abortion an affront to life, collective collaboration served as what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017: 33) calls a transformative *crack within society*. This visibility contributed to the feminist struggle, ultimately culminating in the full decriminalisation of abortion in 2007.