

Lehman College Art Gallery

## Anaida Hernández

Hasta que la muerte  
nos separe  
(Till death do us part)

February 4 - May 16, 1998

Organized by Susan Hoeltzel



*Hasta que la muerte nos separe (Till death do us part)* is a major installation by Anaida Hernández. It focuses on the issue of domestic violence and the murders of one hundred women. Based on information collected from police records in San Juan, Puerto Rico, over a three-year period in the early 1990s, it is a dramatic and moving work that has toured in the Caribbean and Europe. *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* has recently been seen in the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José, Costa Rica; the Ludwig Forum Museum, Aachen, Germany; and the Fifth Havana Biennial, Museo de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. The Lehman exhibition is its first showing in the mainland United States. Also on view are two related works by Hernández—a second installation, *Crucigrama*, and illustrations for *Contigo Debajo*, created in collaboration with the writer Ana Lydia Vega.™

The following is drawn from conversations that took place in October 1997 and January 1998.

**Susan Hoeltzel:** For the last ten years your work has focused on social and political issues—domestic violence, immigration, and human rights. *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* was created in response to legislation that was passed in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s?

**Anaida Hernández:** *Until Death Do Us Part* is the title of this installation about domestic violence and the women killed. “Until death do us part” is the blessing that the priest gives to couples when they are getting married. The idea of

this work started with the signing of Law 54 which was passed to deal with issues of domestic violence—and is based on the protection of women and the family. The law was signed in 1989 and implemented in 1990. It was the first law in the Caribbean area that dealt with domestic violence issues. And it has been the model for other countries to try and implement their own law. For example, Costa Rica used it as a model.

It was a very important law also for the family in general. What the law basically does is that it characterizes the act of domestic violence as a crime. It includes not only violence against women, but against children, men, and also against elders. One of the important things about this law was that instead of cataloging every single crime as murder in the first degree or the second or whatever, they started putting it together in a separate category which was domestic violence. And we could count how many people were actually being killed. And that was the way in which new data came in terms of how many cases there were.

In 1992 senators in the government of Puerto Rico started questioning the law and they wanted to change it. Some senators were accused under Law 54 after it was signed. And then feminist groups understood that the law was going to lose a lot of force, so they really didn’t want the law to be touched. I was feeling very enraged. I decided that I wanted to work regarding that situation.

**S.H.** People were trying to get it changed?

**A.H.** That’s how I came up with the idea to present it in the Capitol of Puerto Rico—in a public space—in the

house where the laws are made. This piece was first presented in the Capitol building in San Juan.

**S.H.** So was it shown at the same time as that debate?

**A.H.** It was a little after the whole debate. It took me about a year and a half to two years to complete the piece. But the issue was still there. The piece was shown in Puerto Rico exactly the same week that Lorena Bobbitt was acquitted. And I had been working on this for two years before that happened. So the issue was very much in the news that week. Thousands of people saw the piece.

It has the names and dates of birth and death of 100 women killed in Puerto Rico between 1990 to 1993. And to get to see the police records on the issue was another problem.

**S.H.** So you got these names and dates directly from the police records?

**A.H.** The research was impossible for me to do by myself because the police did not allow me to see those documents. It was interesting because all the groups—organizations of women in Puerto Rico—tried to get hold of that information, and they never had the chance to see the numbers it had on domestic violence accusations or incidents. So I worked with a journalist—Carmen Enid Acevedo from *El Nuevo Día*, a San Juan newspaper. She was assigned to the police. Through her I was able to look at the information.

I still remember when this work was shown—every feminist group in Puerto Rico started calling, asking me how I was able to get all that data, because it was never given to them even when they tried to get it from the police. The information I had received had the names, the dates of death and the ages of the women killed. It had other information that I didn't use at the time, like the weapons that were used, the number of complaints before the death. It was very common to find that the place of death was the home. It was also very common to see, I would say, a third of the men committed suicide. Maybe more.

**S.H.** Some of this information becomes a part of the images?

**A.H.** Some, you can see—pistols, scissors, knives. The center of the piece is a fragmented figure—the fragmented body. I used the metaphor of the fragmentation of the body—legs, hands, mouth, ears—as a metaphor for the fragmentation of the family. The death of women usually represents a devastating experience for the whole family. The family vanishes. I also used the metaphor of the cemetery and the niches in the cemeteries. Some of

the boxes have comments, some of them have numbers, police record numbers. The numbers are usually case numbers; they are complaint numbers. The top row has a motto, three words: "dreams, love, and passions." I put these words in clouds. These are the dreams that never came true—the loves and passions that were never fulfilled.

**S.H.** This is also a theme that crops up in your work dealing with immigration too—people who had dreams that were never fulfilled. You mentioned that your idea for the work had begun in the cemetery in Loiza.

**A.H.** The way I artistically thought about the installation was to work with crosses. Then an artist friend of mine was visiting Puerto Rico. I took him to the Loiza cemetery, where you were, Susan. He wanted to visit the cemetery because a very famous Puerto Rican poet, Julia de Burgos, was buried there. The Rio Grande, the river that goes by it, was flooded, so it flooded the whole cemetery. The dead bodies were outside floating around and lots of crosses floating as well. I decided that it was a good idea to use the crosses, and I started doing my installation with them. Later I saw the niches and thought that the niches would be a better way to pay tribute to the women. I worked on it for a year and a half.

**S.H.** How was the work received when it was shown in San Juan and other places?

**A.H.** The first place that it was shown was in the Capitol of Puerto Rico in January 1994. And when I made this work, I had all the intentions of showing it in that particular place. It was developed as a site-specific installation. And I had lots of problems to actually put it over there. But finally I was able to present it. After that, the following month it was shown in a gallery in San Juan. Between the Capitol and the private gallery, lots of people visited. And I started receiving letters from people in prison for killing their wives. Also letters from people who saw the names of their family members from the board in the newspaper. There was a photograph of the board in the newspaper. And then they started to tell me the particular stories of some of these women. I also got phone calls from people in prison.

Then when I was in Cuba, people who were in the government said that the problem didn't exist. That it was eradicated after the revolution. In Cuba men and women had exactly the same rights, but then I found out that it wasn't like that. A group of about fifteen women came and visited me when the installation was there. And they wanted to talk to me in a very private manner. They started telling me how close they felt when they saw this installation, that they couldn't really mention that a situation like that happened in Cuba. I received lots of reactions from the people in Cuba while I was there.

There was even one woman who came and picked up her shirt, and she started showing me all the scars from knives that she had on her body. It was incredible.

When I was showing this piece in Costa Rica, they were signing a law against domestic violence in San José. They used as a model the law in Puerto Rico. There was a whole issue going on that week especially because of the signing of the law. It was a little bit different than the one in Puerto Rico. Costa Rica and Puerto Rico seem to be very similar in terms of the population and the percentages of deaths relating to domestic violence.

In the Cayman Islands, when I was giving a talk about my work, the person who organized the exhibit thought that not too many were going to show up. It was very common that during these talks or conferences not too many people show up. That day there were about 70 women visiting the conference. Women started standing up and telling their stories about what their situations were. On the first page of the newspaper they started talking about the issue, about the piece, about the situation in the Cayman Islands. Around a week after I stayed there, all these things started happening. The police in Cayman started receiving training on how to identify cases on domestic violence.

**S.H.** You created illustrations for *Contigo Debajo*, in collaboration with Ana Lydia Vega. How did the project begin?

**A.H.** This book almost always has accompanied *Hasta que la muerte nos separe*. Ana Lydia and I got together and decided to create a book. Ana Lydia Vega is one of the most important women writers in Puerto Rico right now. She wrote three stories and I did five etchings for it. It's called *Contigo Debajo* (With You Underneath) which is a very common expression. When someone tells you to "go to hell," the response is "with you underneath."

We discussed the topic of the work and then she wrote the stories and I started doing the images. Sometimes we made word games. We worked on the issues separately and when we got together it turned out that most of the images we used were the same which was very interesting.

It's a handmade artists' book in an edition of one hundred. They were done in Venezuela in Jorge Martínez's workshop.

**S.H.** What are the stories about?

**A.H.** The stories are about the power of struggle between couples, but in a more humorous way. Ana Lydia really has a sense of humor in her writing that is very particular

to the Caribbean. A sort of a playful side. One of the very short stories is of a couple on their tenth anniversary and they're bored with their sexual life. He proposes to have an experiment, to invite a third person into it. She doesn't want to, and he insists. In the end the two women get together. Another one is about a woman who feels someone watching her in the bath and I had one image with a third eye, watching the woman.

**S.H.** *Crucigrama*, the crossword puzzle, is another work in which words are a major element.

**A.H.** *Crucigrama* is the first work I made based on a game. I showed it for the first time in the Cayman Islands. I was playing with words even before my other pieces. I started working on a game of words. It has 420 pieces, 5 inches by 5 inches each piece. Woodcut. The issue I'm working on here is domestic violence.

Since *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* is a very heavy installation, almost 1000 pounds, and very difficult to move around, I decided to create a lighter installation. *Crucigrama* is 18 pounds and fits into a box 35 inches by 35 inches and when displayed is 8 feet by 8 feet.

**S.H.** A lot of your new works use games as a metaphor and have to do with gambling, chance, and luck.

**A.H.** Chance, yes.

**S.H.** This is how life is?

**A.H.** Yes. And everyone plays. Consciously or unconsciously, people are playing all of the time.



**Votos eternos, from Contigo debajo, 1993, etching**

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