

Elda Harrington

The year-long lecture series, Women Art Technology, brought nine internationally and nationally renowned women artists and scholars to the University of North Texas. During the spring semester 2008, it was supported by a Hispanic and Global Initiative Funds award, which funded the visit of Elda Harrington.

Harrington was born, lives and works in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She trained as a lawyer and since 1984 has created photographs as well as curated, edited, taught and directed photography and the cultural management of photography. She exhibits her photographs internationally and examples are included in the permanent collections of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, National Library in Paris, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Museum of Photograph, Charleroi, Belgium and private collections in Europe, the United States and Latin America. In 1987 she established the la Escuela Argentina de Fotografía. It has branches in Buenos Aires, Pilar, Cordoba, Salta, Mendoza, and Ushuaia. She also founded the Festival de la Luz, which has developed into an international collaboration of 35 festivals in 16 countries in 3 continents. In 2000 she was an adviser to the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Buenos Aires. In 2001, she served as an adviser to the Directorate of Cultural Chancellery, Argentina, in the area of photography.

Harrington visited the University of North Texas April 1-4, 2008. She presented a workshop sharing her activity as a director of a photography school and organizer of photography exhibitions and festivals. In addition, she presented a public lecture about women artists using technical media in Latin America. On April 2 she was interviewed by Lisa Nersesova, a graduate art history student assisting on the Women Art Technology project. Also present were project directors Dornith Doherty, Professor of Photography, and Jennifer Way, Associate Professor of Art History as well as Sarah Westrup. The interview was transcribed by Allison Kidd and Sarah Westrup, both University of North Texas Emerald Eagle Scholars working on the Women Art Technology project. Their transcription removes crutch words and some false starts from the transcript.

Lisa Nersesova: Please tell us more about what you're working on and what you were saying, you know, how you began with digital photography and all that.

Elda Harrington: All my life.

[laughter]

LN: Well, whatever you want to tell us.

EH: Well, I began in photography in 1984. Before I was growing up but there was nothing creative for me to work with. I couldn't find anything creative so during a time I left and during a time... I always took photos since I was a child, I like this very much. And I decided to begin studying very late, but never enough late. So, I began studying

photography for three years and then for different circumstances I decided to form this school. I decided at that time it was 1984 and there were no schools for photography.

LN: No photography schools?

EH: No, no, only there were photographers that they gave classes in their studios or photo groups with another mind, very closed mind. But that's...okay? Nothing else. And I had studied in different places, so, because there was no classes or studios, and so I decided to what do you call it now a days is with my partner for the last 20 years, to create a school with our experience, we have the experience what things are good and what things we will never do it. So we found a production team of photography and with the idea of organizing first courses and then workshops and then a career ...so now we have a lot of students, around 300 students in all the branches. The main is in Buenos Aires in the north of the city and we have some other branches one in the north of the country one in the south and one in the middle. So, we work very hard trying to go ahead with the school and the new technologies each time, adding I am being paying attention to-

LN: Overwhelming, yeah?

EH: Yes, and now there are other schools. We were the first but we were not the- we were alone for 3 or 4 years.

LN: And then other people caught on.

EH: Yes, especially our ex-professors.

[laughter]

EH: They thought it was a good idea. So we had to fight our days. But our society today's got different with photography, everything is well received. So as I told you, in 1989 two years later we decided to organize the first meeting that through time became the festival of photograph – what began at this school with idea of celebration and the creation of photography in 1989 - and we continue with both things since that moment. We have 25 professors now. We continue with the festival that the 10 first years were annuals, every other, and since 1989 after 10 years we decided it was a good period to become biannual.

LN: Biannual competition?

EH: Yes, because it was very hard work and you want invite people from abroad and every year is not enough time to organize it and for the companies that support us it's not enough time to recover. And for us it's not enough time to recover, because each festival I lost 5 kilos.

LN: Oh my gosh!

EH: Yes, because it's a lot of work, we began 3 people and after 20 years we are still 3 people. The festival grows but the group doesn't. We have many collaborators but they do it when they have time. Because the festival is completely free and it's private. Every government support is too institutionally? How do you say?

LN: I'm sorry? Biannually?

EH: No, - the government does not support us with money, they support us with institutional support. To say very clear we are for national interest we are from cultural interest and we are for tourist cultural interest we are so, so...they don't leave us money, never did but we can do it anyway, it's the only way you can change things, doing things for passion instead of for money. There is no other way, if you don't do it like this, you don't do it. So everybody help.

LN: So, you were talking about how the government didn't support-

EH: Yes, in 1989 they did not support... It's a long story of Latin American problems.... Argentina is the worst, I think. Because when I organize the festival or any project I go to the Latin American Embassy and most of the time they help, not all of them, but most of them help. When somebody organizes a project out of Argentina and go to the Argentina Embassy they never help.

LN: Really?

EH: No, never. Never pay transportation, no...I know that they don't have budget for paying airline tickets or transportation for exhibitions- they been through a diplomatic ravage but nothing else. They don't have it, they don't give us anything. But we work with the support of the companies, private companies and of course with the school. The school is the main sponsor of the festival. Alejandro and I work very hard before this, because the way we organize the festival is we prepare a program and then we divide and organize everything and ... percent and the money. What are we going to do to support it? So, organize first the project and then we get the money we go to the rest of the world. It's a way of living. In twenty years we never fail. So this is another project I am in, since the last 20 years. It took me a lot of time because we had to organized exhibitions - national ones, international ones, portfolio reviews and conferences. Of course there were people that helped. Yesterday night I had a lot of time. I was working and we went to the Embassy and tried o convince them-

LN: To help?

EH: Yes, to help us. Generally we succeed.

LN: Oh? Very good.

EH: The last time the festival was much known because the press. The press is a very important so the photography is known to everybody. Nowadays it is fashionable. So, during the last 6 years the press has come to us and we have the support of the principle newspaper of Buenos Aires and the rest of the country so they are a sponsor there. The news paper in Buenos Aires is La Nacion. And La Nacion is the sponsor for the festival so we had advertising in it that makes us get support and they will have notes every time. Everyday we have a note, this is important to be known. But of course, if the main newspaper supports us all the rest of the newspapers, the radio, the T.V., the broadcast-the distribution of information is very good, is excellent. That helps a lot. Because in the last festival, we had 1,000,200 people visiting exhibitions.

LN: And how many artists?

EH: 800 artists and 300 exhibition 5,000 kilometers. That's numbers but the newspaper, the press like the numbers. Generally the press likes the numbers, how many exhibitions? How many? I say, no, how they are.

LN: Just the numbers.

EH: They mind how many, how much, nothing else is the question of the press in general to announce the festival. But yes, last year was a huge festival because there were 30 cities participating all around the country. All open at the same day, same hour, so we had to organize everything to arrive to this moment. But in the future, I think things will change. Because we think that the- we prefer to do- in the world is like this no? we prefer less to organize, fewer exhibitions and better works. I think that all were excellent exhibition in general, but we have two classes of exhibition. We have the official exhibition that the great artists organize, and the festival of the galleries or they propose their own artist. And this year we decided that they can add to the festival but we will not do anything with the exhibitions. So will have fewer exhibitions, maybe if they don't want to work in these conditions but we prefer to have 30 or 40 exhibitions. Very well done, half from Argentina and half from abroad. One in each city, of the rest of the country of the 13 important cities one in each main place of the city and the others add if they want. This is referring to the festival. I'm in another project now, I am organizing the board, not alone of course, the first photographic Latin American auction. We never did an auction because the conditions of the market were not good. But we think it's a good moment at least. After the twenty years of festival, after the first fair of photographic, photo-fair that took place in Buenos Aires we were an advisor of them. They knew about business and we knew about photography. So we helped in this area, but it's a fair with galleries and selling photos. They don't sell too much, but we think it's a moment, a good moment to organize an auction. We are organizing now this auction we invited 110 photographers, main photographers, we thought Latin America, we invited them, we sent them a letter, and invited them to donate the 80 % of the work to a foundation that helps with multiple sclerosis and 20 % for them, the artist. But the artist had to get the photo framed, so this 20% either goes to the people of Argentina, and other people from the country give us the work unframed and we do it. The auction will take place in August too; the festival is in August, at the end of August because it's a good

moment for photography and the press. It's a good moment for everybody is thinking about photography so it's a good moment to sell them. We are organizing with...

Jennifer Way: How many pieces do the photographers submit?

EH: Each photographer will ask 1. Yes, more is enough to ask for- what I will tell you in Argentina is that we have 2 important collections of photography, I may say 3 at this moment. A collection of fine art in the modern art museum and the other two in Buenos Aires. The collections grow from donations, they never buy photography. So, that means something very important. So if the artist does help, there is no one to help them- so, we had to lose some, but there are people who want to help. So in this auction we are working - it will be organized by ... we will have the auction online. We are preparing a very important catalog. 1,600 pieces of the catalog to send to the museum's collectors, festival, and people who can buy, companies and people who can buy. In the board there are interesting people to push this. We are 6 people 2 are fast hard-working with the artist. This is another project that takes a lot of time. This is something in which I believe and I hope I succeed with it. And I am in another project because I organize exhibitions for some places in Argentina and now I'm working for cultural center...and Cultural Center in Martina. They are both cultural centers, they invite me to organize exhibitions for photography. I'm organizing something for Panasonic, I'm sponsored by Panasonic. I am organizing a project for them. For next year I'm preparing an exhibition for Mexico because in 2009 it will be ...Photo festival of Mexico. It will be Argentina and Mexico; Argentina will be the invited country. This is organized by Alejandro Castajanos and Estela Trevino and they invited me to organize some exhibitions there, I will think about it when I come back home because they invited me to Foto Fest 2 weeks ago. I prepared an exhibition for next year for... and Lithuania. And that's it.

LN: That's it?! No more? I don't think your -

EH: No, no, no that's it up to today.

EH: I decided okay, this year I will not accept anything, and yes I have 2 more I forgot.

EH: You see we are organizing, and that means I am organizing, the first meeting of directors of festivals of Latin America

LN: Oh!

EH: Because we are in a very good position because I was invited to 3 festivals in Brazil, I was invited to Peru, I was invited to Chile, I was invited to Uruguay, and I was invited to Venezuela. So, I thought there was many festivals, but we don't know when the others - when I go to Venezuela nobody knows there is a festival in Chile or Uruguay. When I go to Chile they don't want... happen in the rest of the country of Latin America. So this was a project made with Alejandro Castellanos and we decided that Mexico at the

north and Argentina in the south we will organize the rest of the festival and the meeting will take place in Buenos Aires in August. My August is worst than yours.

LN: Obviously, I'm not competing!

EH: Because many of these directors of festival are coming to Buenos Aires to review portfolios. And this is a good moment to organize to because they are in Buenos Aires. So we only had to invite the rest. So we are going to organize the first one, this will be August 16 and 17, this weekend and the next festive of lights meeting will take place in Buenos Aires, too, in November. So after August I die!

LN: Ha!

EH: I all ways says, "I'm not going to accept nothing else", and this good idea lasts only 10 minutes. When somebody offers something interesting I say, "I have to do it." Last year I was invited to make a very difficult project and first it was- Do you know what the Mercosur? Mercosur is the association of seven countries in South America. It's like the European Community, but this consists of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, and Venezuela. Seven countries, commercial and cultural interchange. It doesn't work perfectly, but it works and they want to organize a photo exhibition of these seven countries, of the Marco Sur. Because it took place in Buenos Aires a meeting of all the directors of all the culture centers of these seven countries of the Marco Sur. And it was a good moment to offer an exhibition of the 7 countries. When the director of this project called me and invited me to have a coffee I only thought she was telling me, I know her very well, she was telling me the idea. And I said, "Excellent, great, good idea to do it with photography", and in a moment she said, "So you agree to do it?"

LN: Ha!

EH: "No, I agree it is a good idea." "Well if it's a good idea then you can help." "Yes, I can help you but I cannot do it."

ALL: Ha!

EH: And in this moment I knew that I was doing it! But I did it in the way I'm working in the last year. That I love this idea. It's working with Internet. I contacted the artists, I did it twice, this was one, and the Marco Sur exhibition was one. I contacted the photographers I choose for each country, in this case, and I told them the idea. The idea is that they send the files ... with no cost to the artist. So I download, I print, I frame, I make the exhibition and then this work I donate to one other the museums that have a collection of photography. So that artist is happy because without any cost they have their pieces, their work in an important collection of photography in Argentina. With no cost the museum is very happy because they have good works with no costs and for me its very easy because I don't need to pay for transportation... it is very expensive to Argentina because we are so far and not in all cases can we do it, but in some works we

can do it and it was a success because we did it in that way. I investigated through the Internet the different artists from Venezuela, from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, but I did not know anyone from Paraguay so I was very excited to meet them. There is not as much photography in Paraguay as in the other countries. So it was a very nice project and I want to organize in the same way again with someone. I did a project last year with Fernando Castro, Fernando Castro is a curator and scholar from Peru who lives in Houston. He organized- I was director of the project, he was the curator an exhibition in Buenos Aires of 8 artists from 6 countries from all over the world in this way and everybody was very happy and the exhibition was excellent. And its another project for us that's easy for us to do it. In Foto Fest 2 weeks ago there were 2 artists that I liked very much, one from Korea and one from China. For me to bring the work from Korea or from China to Argentina is absolutely impossible and I don't think that the embassies pay so much, just an idea I taking to Argentina from Gracellin TuVudes' exhibition that is traveling from – its in Dallas this exhibition in University of San Marcos, the collection, and the transportation from Dallas to Buenos Aires is \$10,000. So, can you imagine from china, on the other side of the world. So it's impossible, but through internet it's the same as he is in Uruguay, or 50 km from Argentina or he's in China, from me the same. And both of them agree to do it so maybe I will try to organize this exhibition/

LN: You touched a little on the beginning about your own training. Could you speak a little more about the, of how you got started, if you went to school-

EH: I started when I was born!

LN: Haha.

EH: No, I started when I was 15, my father gave me a camera and my brother taught me how to use it. And since that moment I always have my camera with me. Now it is easy because the cameras are very small, very light, but I always took a camera with from this moment. And I told you I began to study photography when I studied the law, but I ...

LN: Do you still find time to do your own pictures and all of that?

EH: Yes, for a very long time I had no time. I had no time and I didn't want it because when we want something we find time, for everything. Yes, in the last time I was so busy after 2003 my bother died and after this moment I began to work again and that was a necessity. From this moment I needed to work again, I began with 2 works, one work, or 2 works, one is in my website, and the other is absolutely new. The other one is a work that I make when I drive. Everybody looks at me - especially the other cars. Yes, I take photos when I drive in the rainy days.

JW: Do you open the window?

EH: No, why? Why open the window?

JW: Do you photograph from inside your car?

EH: From inside in the front.

JW: Through the windshield? Through the glass?

EH: Through the glass. I will show you. I will bring some small catalogs. I have them at the hotel, Yes, I spend a lot of time in my car driving. I can drive with my eyes closed because all my life I spend in my car. Well you Buenos Aires has much traffic, but I don't take photos only in Buenos Aires. Along any road, in any place in any city, when it begins to rain I take my camera and take photos on the way. I always make a joke with this - you know that all jokes are similar to truth. I've been married for 38 years, and when I ask my husband to stop to take a photo he stops 3km ahead. And I said, "No, there is no photo"

-“Well, walk behind” he said.

-“Walk behind? No, continue.”

So it was many times like this so one day I decided, “Don't stop, I will take it through the window,” when it is rainy. I'm very nostalgic so when it is raining I like to take photos and he- I don't know the name –

LN: Windshield wipers?

EH: Yes, I say, “Please stop it because I can not take the photos.”

-“No, no, its very dangerous.”

So I said I cannot divorce because of it so let me drive! In the future I will do it when I drive.

LN: Haha.

EH: Since this moment when I drive and I take my photos. Some people speak on the telephone, while I take photos. It's the same danger.

LN: Haha.

EH: So my last work is it is a working progress. Yes, it is a work in progress because I didn't finish it. When a project is finished- I like to do it so it continues. Maybe in the future I change the color, maybe in the future I go on trains. I don't know- the only thing I change is from an analog camera to a digital one.

Sarah Westrup: So are the rain pictures in the car done in digital or film?

EH: Some in digital some in analog. At the beginning it was analog because I have in the car my small analog camera. Now I have a digital but it's the same because I don't change anything in the computer. There's nothing to change but chance, but I have another work that is a work in progress of course. Nobody knows. It's the first time I will show it because it's a digital work. It is collage, painting, drawing and photography, and some - how do you say - personage? Famous people that are symbols?

LN: Celebrity?

EH: Maybe.

JW: Icons?

EH: Icons, that's the word - icon. It began in 2002. Do you know who Evita was?

LN: Yes, thanks to the movie.

EH: The movie, yes. Evita was a very important icon in Argentina in the 1940s. She was the first lady, the wife of the president Peron, during a long time and she became very famous because she did a lot of things for many people, especially for poor people and for women. And she came from a very humble family and she was a beautiful woman, a very courageous woman with a lot of ideas and she got ill and died when she was 33. She was the first lady at that moment, so she became a very important icon and 2002 was the 50-year anniversary of her death and in Argentina some people- she's a political woman, first of all, but outside of Argentina she's not a political woman but an icon. But in Argentina the people who are against the Peronistas, with Peron, associated with her wife, of course and when in 2002 some people were an organization of an exhibition of Evita it was a very interesting project. We were 33 women for Evita. Women from different disciplines, painters, sculptors, photographers, drawers. 33 women for Evita, 33 because one each year of her life, and I was invited as a photographer. And at the beginning I said "No, no thank you, because I'm not political," and then the curator, as a woman, told me "Please don't say no, think about it", and I said "Okay," and I began to read some books about Evita and in a book I found a phrase that moves me. Evita said in '47, in '46, or '47 a phrase that said, "This country will be saved woman, but not any woman, by the mothers." Then 45 years later after we had a terrible government, military government and 30,000 young people was missing forever. The never reappeared and their mothers were the only ones who protested against the government and made sure the world know what was happening in Argentina. These women had a white handkerchief and every Thursday walked 2 hours around the park in front of the government house, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Every Thursday the press of the world put their eyes on them and they were very important for the end of this government. And when I read this phrase of Evita, 45 years ago, I was moved. So I accepted to be part of this exhibition and I made a photo, I will show you tomorrow. It's a relationship between Evita and the mothers of the white handkerchief. They are called Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

SW: What year was it that when they would march in front of the palace?

EH: When?

SW: Yes.

EH: It was during the military government, it was '76 – '83 and supposed it was not all the time, the last 3 years. Maybe the 2 last years, but it continue today.

LN: Really?

EH: Now they are the grandmothers of the Plaza because they are trying to recover their grandchildren because their child were captured and killed by the military. So they are trying to recover, nowadays, to recover the grandchildren who were not killed but kept and adopted, so they continue doing this round. Well, this was the point, I began with this series that I will show tomorrow, it's a work in progress.

LN: Thank you.

EH: But as I like so much this tool of the digital. I love it. Really what appears of this tool allows us to do things like invite people form China. I have a grandchild and when her mother wants to take a bath she puts her near the computer and my other daughter sings to her.

LN: How interesting.

EH: This is the use of technology in life. So technology is a marvelous tool nowadays and I'm fond of it. I use as much as I know. I would like to know more. I'm trying to take classes all the time.

LN: In the middle of everything.

EH: Yes, yes but for my work and new technology and for my work it's necessary to know the new tools to work to facilitate life because before my daughter called me and said, "Can you come home because I want to take a bath because I want to do some things and Sofia is crying," and now she put her in front of the computer and my other daughter sings. Life is easier with this so I'm open to all these things. So in the moment that you invite me I said, "Why me? Why me? Women, art, and Technology. Yes, woman I am , of course. Was it for my love of art and technology? I'm not technological - this is the idea of my three daughters." When I ask something, "Mama, you don't understand." No, but you were born in these times when I was born in the times of the radio. So I understand very well the radio and when I ask some friends they tell me, "Elda, you are stupid. Everyday how long are you at the computer?" "No less than eight hours a day." So and here I am.

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