



# La baila mecánica

Julia Buenaventura

To Patricia Ariza

To Santiago García

In 1957, Feliza Bursztyn returned from Paris, where she had been studying sculpture with Ossip Zadkine, one of those artists who appear in the classic photograph of expatriates in New York in 1942, beside Roberto Matta and Yves Tanguy, just in the opposite corner to André Breton and below Piet Mondrian. In that photograph from 1942, they are all around forty or fifty years old, exiled, at the height of the Second World War. When Bursztyn met Zadkine, some time had passed; the teacher, back in Paris, had opened one of those workshop-schools where young people, far from chasing a qualification – because these places do not even award one – go to learn. Indeed, it reminds me of the workshop where the Brazilian painter Anita Malfatti became Anita Malfatti, the independent school opened by Homer Boss in early-twentieth-century New York. “How long did you study with him [Zadkine]?” Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda asked Bursztyn in a posthumously published interview:

Four years. A whole lifetime. He had a wonderful studio. He would offer us a drink. It was my initiation. We used to arrive at school at seven in the morning, in the winter: imagine the cold. The old man gave us a glass this big full of brandy to warm us up and we set to work. At that time, he used to come once a week with a stick and knock over everything we’d done, saying: “*merde, merde, merde!*”. And finally he said: “Why don’t you go back and practise?”, and the following week he came back and knocked everything over again.<sup>1</sup>

Back in Bogotá, Bursztyn was twenty-five, with three daughters and a marriage. In Paris she had made some small bronzes, human figures with thin legs and big bellies (fig. 2). Well, since there were no foundry workshops in Colombia, Bursztyn stopped exploring bronze and devoted herself to drawing and getting to know a city that was outside her restricted social circle (families of Jewish traders). It was in that very

1. Feliza Bursztyn in her studio with *La baila mecánica* (The Mechanical Ballet), c. 1979  
Courtesy of the Archive of Pablo Leyva. Photo: Raphael Moure