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# TABLE of CONTENTS

8 Fotografía Cubana, Absolut Revolution (1959-1969)  
Grethel Morell Otero, Ph.D. Student, Facultad de Artes y Letras, Universidad de La Habana

23 Internationalism, Brasilidade, and Politics: Waldemar Cordeiro and the Search for a Universal Language  
Adrian Anagnost, Ph.D. Student, Department of Art History, University of Chicago

42 ¿De quién son estas memorias?: Los rubios, Memory, and History  
Mary Beth Woodson, Ph.D. Candidate, Film and Media Studies, University of Kansas

Ila N. Sheren, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Architecture-History, Theory and Criticism Section, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

80 Artist Spotlight: Curved and Pointed  
Katy Cannon, M.F.A. in Sculpture, Department of Art and Art History, University of New Mexico

91 Integration and Resistance in the Global Era: A Review of the Tenth Havana Biennial (2009)  
Tijen Tunali, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Art and Art History, University of New Mexico

103 The Role of Alain Badiou's Inaesthetics in Visual Culture: An Interview with Adrian Johnston, Ph.D.  
Hilary Ellenshaw, M.A. Student, Department of Art and Art History, University of New Mexico
La fotografía cubana en la primera década de Revolución Fidelista (1959-1969) no mostró, en toda su vastedad, lo que fuimos: trasmutados testigos de la lógica narrativa en una historia atípica, muy atípica. Historia social única en la región, de mítica lucha de liberación nacional desde el siglo anterior, ahora con fuertes basamentos de carácter socialista. La fotografía cubana enseñó cómo se sintieron, o hicieron sentir, los sujetos frente a la cámara. Con permiso de los cazadores del instante, espontáneo escuadrón de fotorreporteros sin escuela.

ANTECEDENTES. APUNTES DE LOS 50
Indiscutible y bien conocido es el hecho del giro en la representación y el uso de la imagen en la Cuba posterior al triunfo de la Revolución, y por ende, el desplazamiento o sustitución del objeto fotográfico. Ese cambio de lectura y validación de la imagen no responde a una ingenua, súbita aparición o forzada conducción de un proceso. Tiene sus orígenes en labores y lecciones de etapas precedentes, herencias que no siempre se han tomado con justeza y hondo juicio. La competitividad, tanto en las compañías publicitarias como en las revistas de avanzada y sus escuelas de fotoperiodismo en los años 50, fueron factores determinantes. Recordemos el concepto de la gráfica y la selectividad de los profesionales de la imagen en las agencias de publicidad habaneras y en las publicaciones periódicas estables y de prestigio, como Bohemia (1908–hasta el presente) y la revista de variedades Carteles (1919–1960). Carteles por ejemplo, contaba en su staff fotográfico de los 50 con los experimentados Generoso Funcasta (1910–1965), José Agraz (1909–1982) y Newton Estapé (1913–1980), o con las colaboraciones de Raúl Corrales y Alberto Díaz Korda. Albergaba la confluencia de escritores e intelectuales agudos (Rini Leal, Cabrera Infante), la veterana academia y una nueva promoción de fotorreporteros (Ernesto Fernández), funcionando como un laboratorio para la buena imagen.

Definitivas influencias también fueron el Club Fotográfico de Cuba (CFC, fundado en 1935 y vigente hasta 1962) y la obra magistral de algunos nombres. El Club había implantado en un sector fotográfico el gusto
depurado por la técnica, la composición y los temas clásicos; mas fuera de ese grupo logró irradiar la persistencia, el desafío por el acto creativo, y sobre todo la internacionalización de obras y hacedores, fotógrafos de condición empírica que llegaron a obtener distinciones y lugar en importantes eventos y sectores cosmopolitas.¹

De José Tabío Palma (1915-1975) se aprenderá el enfoque “honesto”,² el compromiso crítico y la certificación del valor testimonial por encima del pintoresquismo o la anécdota visual, único en su obra dentro del panorama nacional desde los años 40. Del extraordinario Constantino Arias (1920-1991) se absorberá la movilidad en las maneras de captar el documento y la entrega al oficio. Su trabajo abarcará el reportaje por encargo, por acto de supervivencia o por actitud de identificación social, la foto de ocasión, la crónica intencional, y la foto live en el momento y el lugar adecuado, desde los mismos años 50.

LOS 60, SUS INICIOS
Cuando se inicia un nuevo epígrafe de la producción fotográfica en la Cuba de los 60 no se partía de un punto cero. Lo que en esta ocasión, como en todas las aristas, el arte fue determinado y reglamentado por el profundo cambio político, social y económico que vivió la nación. Cierto es que los años revolucionarios, sus interpretes y rectores, han aportado al decursar de la fotografía, como también han sesgado y “bienaprovechado” funcionalidades, entregas y asimilaciones. Como nunca antes –y creo que después– en el boom de los 60, de los primeros 60, la fotografía alcanzó el valor comunicacional-masivo y empático, a niveles extra-artísticos, supra sociales, y fuera de todo localismo. El triunfo del Ejército Rebelde, con Fidel Castro al frente y otros comandantes de clara simpatía popular, tuvo en el ejercicio fotográfico documental uno de sus más fieles aliados. Espontáneos y naturales aliados.³ Tanto para la construcción de una memoria histórica-colectiva, el soporte dúctil de las estrategias discursivas hegemónicas, como para el registro irrefutable del hecho (verdad y realismo respiraba el foto-documentalismo de entonces; los retoques del laboratorio tradicional a este tipo de imagen eran nada comparados con lo que hoy el photoshop pervierte). Valores aplicados y magnificados básicamente en el cartel político –la valla– y la reproductividad emotiva-comercial de iconos. Aspecto este último atemporal y trascendente, con raíces en la
propia historia patria como el uso fotográfico de la iconografía mambisa en los años “entre Imperios” (1899-1902), trasmutada en emblemas populares y reproducidos en toda suerte de objetos vendibles y coleccionables: postales, gallardetes, broches, banderolas, abanicos.

Si la Revolución de 1959 significaba todo, la fotografía, más que sumarse cual pasivo espejo, contrapesaba y enaltecía el efecto social del todo. Desde la validación pública, hasta la unicidad del objeto fotográfico (reiteración del motivo), pasando incluso por el simulacro (el reencuentro de Fidel con la Sierra Maestra, registrado por Korda en junio de 1962). El hecho heroico era el suceso, la fotografía era su rostro. Con la generalidad de los fotógrafos, sin contradicciones con la nueva vivencia y sin distinción de estilos, militando en el mismo bando. Es lo que se llegó a dictaminar como la “épica” de la Revolución. Todas nuestras cámaras apuntaron a las imágenes gloriosas, al estampido y liberación del “hombre nuevo”. El relato dominante y sus consecuentes efectos fueron respaldados por el lente. Todos los motivos confluyan en la figura del líder, los milicianos, la explosión popular en calles y plazas.

La llaneza del registro documental fijó una nueva función de la imagen en –y desde– aquellos primeros años (1959–1962). La síntesis y unidireccionalidad del contenido, las composiciones limpias, el efecto teatral y contrastante del blanco y negro (sí, en términos fotográficos fue una rebeldía triunfante en b/n) y las lecturas únicas de una propuesta visual sin dobleces, favorecieron la intrínseca utilidad propagandística de la imagen. Y más cuando sus fotógrafos de cabecera provenían de diferentes experiencias formativas, incluida la prensa, y con una nada despreciable dosis de trabajo en la publicidad. Los primeros en montarse al “carro de la Revolución”, y reconocidos como tal, transitaron sin ahogos del anuncio al fotodocumentalismo histórico. De las agencias al periódico Revolución (1959–1965), del fashion a la inmediatez. Korda (1928–2001) había sido fotógrafo de estudio (Korda Studios, fundado en 1954 junto a su colega Luis Peirce), trabajando por encargo la publicidad y la moda, partiendo de la influencia de Estapé y aspirando a la doctrina Richard Avedon. En 1959 se incorpora a Revolución, órgano de prensa oficial del nuevo gobierno, dirigido por Carlos Franqui, y a fines de enero de ese año acompaña a Fidel Castro en su primer viaje al exterior (Venezuela, enero 23) poco tiempo antes de ser nombrado Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario, junto
a Corrales, Osvaldo y Roberto Salas. Los cuatro fotógrafos que devienen lentes presidenciales y que más promoción internacional alcanzarán luego.


Liborio Noval (1934), agregado con posterioridad al corto listado oficial de los “maestros” de la “épica” después de ganar proximidad a la figura de Fidel, era de oficio autodidacta desde 1957 abordando disimiles géneros. Ernesto Fernández (1939), maestro aún por posicionar en la Historia, ya había pasado por la escuela de *Carteles*, siendo vivaz discípulo de Funcasta y Agraz.

Mario García Joya *Mayito* (1938), lente activo amén de su juventud, traía el conocimiento de la escuela de arte (Dibujo, en la Academia San Alejandro), y del breve paso por la publicidad como ayudante y fotógrafo de una agencia entre 1957 y 1958. Perfecto Romero (1936), inusual caso de fotógrafo-soldado y también con una obra por investigar, salía de la lucha de guerrilla en las montañas, el Escambray, aceptado como corresponsal en la Columna Invasora del *Che* Guevara.

**LOS LÍDERES, EL PUEBLO**

Interesante resulta distinguir cómo estos fotógrafos más afamados abordaron la figura del líder y las transfiguraciones del pueblo. El retrato de los líderes va a oscilar entre el intimismo y la natural actitud del ojo entrenado, entre la urgencia de testimoniar y la cautela de quien también es privilegiado testigo, entre el impacto del modelo “bello” a seguir y la exaltación de la figura. La admiración y el respeto por las personalidades, así como la tipificación simbólica de los uniformados –los célebres barbudos
verdeolivos— no eximieron la búsqueda de un encuadre embellecedor, de una toma preciosista y de efectos hiperbólicos. Mas cuando toda propaganda, política o no, persigue el mismo fin.

Algunos de estos fotógrafos esparcieron de tal modo el discurso visual que consiguieron hacerlo atávico y genérico, fórmula vigente hasta los días que corren. Se desplazaron desde ese registro hermoso y alegórico, laudatorio y acrisolado del líder, hasta la mirada más familiar, más cercana del héroe. Sobre todo cuando se convirtieron en los cronistas más próximos del líder. El caso más conocido es Korda con la figura de Fidel. Sin demeritar por supuesto el abundante trabajo preservado de los Salas (Che Guevara y Fidel) y de Perfecto Romero (Camilo Cienfuegos).

Por su parte, el retrato de la gente de pueblo —que era todo sujeto que salía a las calles tirado por la emoción, no solo el proletariado—, se recrea también en su gran momento. El perfil popular se ensancha. Ahora será un pueblo transformado en cientos de anónimos líderes apasionados, euforia sincera, usual, que saltaba frente al lente, posada por vocación en el regocijo de su primer plano. Un primer plano que se ganaba además por derecho propio.

CUBA INTERNACIONAL
A la par de esta solidez de las individualidades en el modo de discursar fotográficamente, fue asertiva la conformación de un cuerpo gráfico impreso que respondiera desde la estética y el sentido a los fines representacionales del estrenado gobierno. En 1962 aparece la revista Cuba (más tarde y hasta el presente llamada Cuba Internacional), emergida de INRA (rotativo del Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria, fundada por Fidel en 1959), de dimensiones y estilo editorial similares al magazine norteamericano Life, y que en esta ocasión perfila aún más el propósito socio-cultural de mostrar al mundo el proceso insular. Cómo, qué y quiénes eran los cubanos, su accionar, su líder y sus empeños, fueron inminentes premisas visuales a fotodocumentar.

Cuba... de amplio formato (35 x 26.5 cm, 74 páginas y de tirada mensual) y con excelente diseño de imagen a hoja completa, se convirtió en hito del periodismo escirtrual y gráfico de la época. Contaba con un grupo de fotógrafos de primera línea que, en su mayoría, se mantuvieron estables
en la publicación por años, ya fuesen como miembros o como asiduos colaboradores. Ernesto Fernández colabora desde 1959, Enrique de la Uz converge entre fines del 60 e inicios del 70, Iván Cañas y José Alberto Figueroa fueron del staff por un tiempo estimable desde fines del 60, doce y nueve años respectivamente.

EL REPORTAJE DE GUERRA, LA IMAGEN DE ATENTADOS URBANOS
La audacia del fotorreportaje bélico y la imagen de combates irregulares y atentados en ciudad fue incontrastable, más en los primeros tiempos (1959–1965). Años de profundos cambios internos, tensiones de guerra fría y considerables estragos provocados por agresiones externas. En el reportaje de guerra Ernesto Fernández es el gran ejemplo. Su obra compendia la historia militar de estos años, la temeridad del fotoperiodismo cubano, y la exactitud de la triada visual composición-discurso-veracidad del documento. Fue uno de los primeros corresponsales, junto a Sergio Canales, en llegar a Playa Girón (abril de 1961), cuando mercenarios pagados por EEUU desembarcaron en Playa Larga y Girón, provocando una de las guerras de más repercusión en Latinoamérica. Una guerra que en solo tres días se abatió, fijando la posición del país frente a la política imperial estadounidense y legando cientos de imágenes. La Crisis de Octubre o Crisis de los Misiles (1962), ocasión en que se enfrentan dos potencias (EEUU–Unión Soviética) asumiendo como escenario la isla del Caribe, al punto casi de suscitar un conflicto nuclear. En el instante que Fidel Castro ordena derribar los aviones espías en la base militar de San Antonio de los Baños en las afueras de La Habana, Fernández estaba con su cámara.

La guerra civil de los alzados en el Escambray (1963, etapa también conocida como Lucha contra bandidos o Limpia del Escambray, cuando el gobierno enfrenta a los alzados contrarrevolucionarios en las montañas de Las Villas–Sancti Spíritus) y la Lucha contra Piratas (1965, las emboscadas costeras en captura de mercenarios que arribaban a la cayería norte de Las Villas, desde Playa La Panchita hasta Isabela de Sagua), también fueron sucesos que no escaparon a su lente.

En el reportaje de atentados urbanos despuntan imágenes como las de la explosión del vapor francés La Coubre en el puerto de La Habana (4 de marzo de 1960), en tres de sus intervalos: José Agraz en el estampido,
Venancio Díaz en las tomas de la embarcación escorada y la marcha de los soldados y dirigentes en las calles, y Korda en el acto–discurso por el sepelio de las víctimas al siguiente día.

**TIEMPOS DE MULTITUDES Y SOFLAMAS**

Ese tipo de concentración popular, requerida por alguna estrategia o alocución política, por mitines de protesta, paradas militares, ceremonias fúnebres o fechas conmemorativas, pobló el hacer de los principales fotóreporteros de la época. Tiempos de multitudes y soflamas hacían fotos de multitudes y tribunas. Aunque, el fotógrafo persiguió tanto el ángulo de la grada, su locutor y la muchedumbre contrapuesta, como la toma atractiva de los personajes y rostros de pueblo. Contrapicadas, primero planos, figuras centradas, miradas “a futuro”, que exigieron muchas veces del fotógrafo preparar posiciones, adoptar actitudes emergentes, como quien calibra el fusil presto ante cualquier batalla. Así lo expresan las fotos de Korda a reporteros en funciones acostados en el pavimento o acuclillados, encorvados, torcidos sobre algún estrado en busca del mejor encuadre; o las imágenes de sus propias pericicas, sumergido en el alcantarillado con la calle a nivel de cuello o cabalgado sobre alto farol de alumbrado público.

Por solo mencionar hechos de vasto registro y circulación, aparecen la entrada de Fidel y Camilo a La Habana (8 de enero de 1959), Camilo al frente de la caballería que arriba a la capital (mayo de 1959), “La Caballería” (abril de 1960, grupo de milicianos a caballo y abanderados en apoyo a la confiscación de la United Fruit Sugar Company en Cuba por resolución de la Ley de Reforma Agraria), la Primera y Segunda Declaración de La Habana (septiembre de 1960 y febrero de 1962, respectivamente), el acto por la inhumación de las víctimas del bombardeo del 15 de abril (1961) cuando se proclama el carácter socialista de la Revolución Cubana, los desfiles anuales en celebración del 26 de Julio o Primero de Mayo, y La Campaña de Alfabetización (1961).

Este último no solo se manifiesta visualmente desde el estrado y la congregación. Aquí las aristas del documento se diversifican: el reportaje de la partida en tren o camiones de los jovencísimos alfabetizadores; el retrato de ellos *in situ*; la foto en primer plano del rostro (formato carnet) del maestro voluntario Conrado Benítez, asesinado al inicio de la Campaña en Las Vegas, lomas del Escambray, por contrarrevolucionarios al servicio de
EEUU, foto que resulta guía y símbolo de brigada y brigadistas, reproducida en banderas y distintivos; el fotorreportaje del entierro de Manuel Ascunce en La Habana, el otro alfabetizador también asesinado en el Escambray en noviembre, y aquellas más consabidas fotos de los maestros uniformados, con sus faroles y lápices gigantes alzados en el colmado episodio de cierre de la Campaña cuando se declara Cuba Territorio Libre de Analfabetismo (Plaza de la Revolución, 22 de diciembre de 1961).

MÁS ALLÁ DEL TESTIMONIO HISTÓRICO... ¿QUÉ LE FALTÓ A LOS 60?

Más allá de la célebre función del fotorreportaje en la primera mitad de la década, si hablamos de podas o sajaduras en el 60 hay que reconocer cierta mutilación estética. El cierre del Club Fotográfico de Cuba en 1962 enfatiza el simbolismo de la obnubilación de los géneros o estilos académicos. Excepto el retrato, que como ya vimos alcanza una nueva dimensión con la figura del líder, el resto de las lecturas estéticas tradicionales quedan devaluadas por el contexto dominante. El paisaje natural, la obra pictorialista, la publicidad mercantil y el desnudo, ensombrecen bajo la intensidad del testimonio histórico.5 Por su parte, el clasicismo del retrato en estudio se contrae, e inclina mayormente a la conservación de la memoria personal o familiar. Aunque infrecuentes resulten, las sesiones en estudio de figuras políticas o milicianos uniformados también forman parte del relato histórico. Como el retrato de busto de miliciana engalanada hecho por el glamuroso Studio Armand, o la toma más natural del comandante Che Guevara sentado en el Studio Naranjo, ambas de 1959 y preservadas en la colección Ramiro Fernández (Nueva York). Función y oficio, la de crear gratos álbumes o recuerdos, sostenidos por estudios (negocios) particulares hasta 1968 cuando la “ofensiva revolucionaria” allana las pequeñas y medianas compañías privadas, como parte del proceso de intervención en la actividad comercial y de servicios (cierre del estudio Blez, Studios Korda).

Al paso de la preferencia por ciertos tipos de imágenes, sobrevienen temas no mostrados. Pensemos con repaso la década. El fotodocumentalismo hizo salto de tigre sobre la vida nocturna de la ciudad capital, los ambientes en los bares con vitrolas (traganíqueles) que aún subsistían, la juventud no obrera o no solo en sus ropajes de ruda faena o en sus trajes de milicianos, los adolecentes de las secundarias públicas urbanas, las fiestas de esa misma juventud que miraba la Habana del 65 con asombro del esplendor de sus calles, vidrieras y noches de carnavales –a pesar de las imposiciones en
sus gustos musicales, recuérdese que los Beatles estaban prohibidos—, los tantos guajiritos/guajiritas que viajaban a La Habana beneficiados por algún programa de estudio emergente para formar trabajadores calificados, como la academia de Corte y Costura para mujeres fundada por Celia Sánchez e instaurada en un palacete ex–burgués del reparto Miramar.

Olvidó las imágenes de las miles de familias que emigraban, por aeropuerto o por las costas abiertas para ello (Camarioca octubre de 1965 y la manipuladora Operación Peter Pan entre diciembre de 1960 y octubre de 1962), o la iconografía de la pequeña burguesía que continuaba en el país, incluso hasta después de 1968. Esta tajada de la historia parece haber quedado solo en las gavetas silentes de sus protagonistas, o en la particular versión de las páginas de Bohemia, decana publicación que desde el mismo 59 cubrió con interés y alguna dosis de holgura el acontecer epocal.

VIAJEROS A CUBA
Los efectos del hecho político y social, y su validación a través de la fotografía, provocaron no solo la pluralización, el manejo popular y la comercialización de una imagen quimérica, legendaria, del cubano. La conformación de un esquema simbólico perfecto atrajo las miradas del universo, de la izquierda y no izquierda. Nos convertimos, además de en postales, almanaques, banderas, sellos, boinas... toda suerte de objeto representacional vernáculo o souvenir patriótico-ideológico (eso sin detenernos en el multireproducido –a posteriori– ícono “Guerrillero Heroico” (1960) de Korda), en pasto fértil para la obra de toda suerte de fotógrafos viajeros modernos. Influyentes unos en la manera de pensar la imagen, someros otros en la congelación de una memoria personal y sugestiva.

Desde el paso de Cartier Bresson (Francia) por La Habana para cubrir reportaje a la revista Life en 1963 hasta la estancia de trece años de Luc Chessex (Suiza) en Cuba (1961–1974), las propensiones y doctrinas fotográficas fluctuaron. El empuje de la influencia se hizo notable. Ya fueran creadores de tránsito fugaz (el colosal René Burri (Suiza) estuvo en el país solo veintitrés días en enero de 1963, asignado por la también revista norteamericana Look) o aquellos más atemperados al inédito escenario tropical.
Todos llevaron su pedacito de Isla, donde no faltó el sujeto común, la calle y por supuesto el líder, motivo éste enfocado y logrado muchas veces de un modo diferente a como lo obtenían los cubanos. Salvando la divergencia en las condicionantes de publicación y manejo de las imágenes para nacionales y extranjeros, la toma de las figuras políticas y su repercusión en el contexto, el retrato del líder y su eco popular, son presentados por los fotógrafos de paso con un sello simplemente diverso. Como aquel que mira desde afuera y consigue atrapar el ambiente natural del implicado, sin compromisos de estructuraciones visuales hieráticas o encomiásticos horizontes. Fotógrafos libres del candor vivencial, y con el indudable recurso de la maestría en el oficio, que hicieron uso de un ejercicio actualizado en las más notables escuelas cosmopolitas.

En general, y en términos de significación y disposición formal, el desplazamiento del centro del encuadre (asimetría con la figura principal), la introducción de un concepto sin afectar la toma “realista fiel” o el instante preciso, la expansión del discurso visual a partir del manejo de la subjetividad en el enfoque, sin restar eficacia y legitimidad al documento, fueron acervos y lecciones obsequiados por fotógrafos viajeros, como Marc Riboud (Francia), René Burri y Chessex. El último suizo enseñó –según su condiscípulo Ramón Martínez Grandal– a mirar el texto implícito en la imagen más allá de una buena composición. A diferencia de otros, su presencia fue pedagógica y arbitrante. Al igual que el pintor Raúl Martínez, Luc instruyó a colegas y aprendices, ofreció información renovada sobre tendencias y nombres, abrió ante los ávidos ojos de fotógrafos sin academias las posibilidades interpretativas y discursivas de la imagen en sí y por sí misma. Se comenzaba entonces a estimar la fotografía como obra autónoma y propositiva. Y los años 70, a pesar de sus relegaciones y grisuras y de sus agudas revisiones, fueron animados testigos de ello.

Un evento importante de estas conexiones con lentes internacionales fue la muestra “Seis fotógrafos extranjeros ven a Cuba. Del Viejo Mundo al Nuevo Mundo” (Galería de La Habana, 1966), donde se reunieron Riboud, Burri, Roger Pic (Francia), Lee Lockwood (EEUU), Paolo Gasparini (Italia) y Chessex. Con texto y apoyo de Alejo Carpentier, la exhibición propuso una manera otra, revisitada, de interpretar la misma realidad. Consiguiendo no solo encauzar diálogo con la mirada local, si no más bien legitimarles un cambio de lectura.
La típica fotografía de prensa, la urgencia del testimonio único y la calle, fueron conjugadas por algunos de estos fotógrafos con la pausa en el detalle y la toma del objeto fotográfico pulido, ese objeto siempre estético y agradecido. Paolo Gasparini fue uno de esos hacedores que reunió en su obra disímiles franjas temáticas, quizás por su condición y permanencia en la Isla.

Gasparini, quien llega a Cuba en marzo de 1961 procedente de Venezuela, se movió desde la fotografía arquitectónica hasta el reportaje de la Zafra, pasando por la labor de corresponsal del periódico Revolución y el encargo como fotógrafo de staff del Consejo Nacional de Cultura. En 1963 expuso 111 fotografías sobre espacios arquitectónicos, básicamente de casas coloniales, barrocas y neoclásicas, habaneras y pueblerinas (“Ambiente cubano”, Galería de La Habana), en 1965 mostró 140 fotografías sobre la vida cotidiana (“Cuba: ver para creer”, también en Galería de La Habana), y entre 1964–1965 asistió de voluntario a los cortes de caña para hacer el reportaje “La Zafra”, abarcando desde la vida en los bateyes hasta el ciclo completo del proceso de producción y transportación final del azúcar. 110 imágenes que fueron montadas en el vestíbulo de la Terminal de Ómnibus de La Habana en junio de 1965.

Otros fotógrafos de tránsito que cruzaron interesantes experiencias, identificados y enzarzados con la realidad nacional, fueron la norteamericana Deena Stryker entre 1963–1964 y el mexicano Rodrigo Moya en el verano de 1964. Imágenes captadas por un lente “otro” pletórico de empatía que no llegaron a exhibirse, al menos en época.7

SEGUNDO MOMENTO... REVOLUCIÓN EN LA IMAGEN
Más allá de viajeros, de incursiones en la mirada subjetiva y en la tipicidad de la foto live, de euforías, plazas y aconteceres abruptos, ¿qué motivó a la visualidad cubana en la segunda mitad del decenio? Interesante resulta ver como ya en 1964 se habla de fotografía como arte,8 sin divorcio crítico con el resto de los géneros erigidos. Se continúan cultivando la “tendencia Cuba” en el documentalismo (por cierto, entre 1964 y 1968 se reconoce una magnífica y refinada etapa en la revista, bajo la dirección del escritor e intelectual Lisandro Otero) y subsisten las estampas de un realismo duro pero happy.
Socialmente son años donde comienzan a afianzarse los cambios proyectados por el Estado, luego de aquellos primeros tiempos de distención y embestidas (los ya mencionados golpes bélicos, atentados, contraguerrillas, y la proclamación por parte de EEUU de un “embargo” económico y comercial a la Isla desde 1960). Es el momento de la puesta en marcha de los programas sociales, los planes constructivos y la prueba de sus sistemas de pre-fabricado, la aplicación de las escuelas en el campo y el apoyo en la juventud, como la creación de la Columna Juvenil del Centenario (1968).

En el campo de las artes visuales se ofrecerá un atractivo giro en la confrontación de la imagen, llegando incluso a sintonizar con el suceder contemporáneo fuera de frontera. Una mayor búsqueda de la expresividad, ahondando en la relación discurso–contenido, y el cuestionamiento de la verdad absoluta en el arte, son factores que determinaron la creación fotográfica, al menos su mejor parte. Se indagará en el concepto abstracto de las formas, las imágenes movidas pasaran a un plano absoluto, total, las figuras se captarán en sus sombras más que en su realismo, se sublimará el alto contraste y los contraluces, las fotografías se intervendrán a posteriori, proliferará la subjetividad en ambientes y retratos, y se jugará con la alteración del sentido original del documento.

A partir de la insurgencia gráfica y la subversión del objeto fotográfico, aparecieron fórmulas dinamizadoras como la muestra “¿FOTO-MENTIRA!” (1966) de Mayito, Chessex y Raúl Martínez, donde se manipuló a conciencia e ironía tanto el negativo como el concepto de autenticidad y función. Son de mencionar los espectáculos expositivos interdisciplinarios, iniciadores del instalacionismo y la vanguardia museográfica, Tren Blindado en Santa Clara y el Centenario del Grito de Yara en La Demajagua, Bayamo, ambas en 1968, así como las megas exhibiciones “Tercer Mundo” en el Pabellón Cuba de La Habana y el pabellón de Cuba en la Expo’67 en Montreal, Canadá. Todas con la presencia del lente y el ingenio de Mayito.

Fotógrafo de versátil y sagaz movimiento en la década que osciló con pericia los cuatro puntos cardinales de la manifestación. Fotógrafo que resume esencia y hacer de estos tiempos. Su cámara apuntó a la pose, la foto “portada” o postal de ocasión, la foto de premio en concurso social-realista soviético, el testimonio automático del fotógrafo militante, el ensayo madurado, la subjetividad, la artisticidad y la imagen abierta con presumidas nociones.
Su obra del 60 comprende el fundacional ensayo “A la plaza con Fidel”, el manejo del expresionismo y la abstracción, las excelentes fotos del ambiente nocturno habanero, el carnaval, el circo, las referidas y precursoras prácticas instalativas, el retrato del día a día, y el encuentro con los discursos visuales foráneos. Todo ello, y más allá de la “épica”, escriben el capítulo de los 60 cubanos.


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NOTES:

1 Abelardo Rodríguez Antes (1930–1991), destacada figura del Club Fotográfico de Cuba y de oficio autodidacta, alcanza en 1956 el Premio de Mejor Fotografía otorgado por el Club Fotográfico de Washington; en 1958 se hace miembro de la Sociedad Fotográfica de América y ese mismo año es el primer cubano en ganar el Premio de Excelencia de la Federación Internacional de Arte Fotográfico.

Baste acotar que desde el 50, mientras se preparaba y transcurría la lucha de liberación nacional a través de la guerrilla, las acciones en ciudad o los grupos de apoyo fuera de Cuba, el alto mando del Ejército Rebelde encontró respaldo en la fotografía documental y su validación de los hechos hacia el mundo. Lo que a partir del triunfo del 59 fue un respaldo abierto y mayor. Entre los ejemplos tenemos las fotografías del Moncada en 1953, la visita de Fidel a Nueva York en 1955 hechas por Osvaldo Salas y la imagen de Fidel tomada por el guerrillero René Rodríguez en 1957 y difundida por Latinoamérica para desmentir la muerte del líder.

El término de “fotografía épica” proviene de la investigadora y fotógrafa cubana María Eugenia Haya Marucha, quien señala la fotografía de los primeros 60 como “imágenes muy bellas” sobre “la vida épica”. Por traslación, se ha extendido su uso como adjetivo caracterizador de la obra más espontánea y famosa de la etapa, y de la Historia. María Eugenia Haya, “Sobre la fotografía cubana”, Revolución y Cultura 93 (Mayo 1980): 41-60.


Apreciando con justicia los entornos y sus claves, para el fotógrafo cubano la representación y publicación de la imagen del líder no funcionaba, por razones obvias, igual que para el reportero visitante. Explícitas son las palabras del prólogo del libro “Le visage de la Révolution. Essai photographique sur les images de Fidel Castro à Cuba” de Luc Chessex: “El estado cubano no difunde una imagen oficial de Fidel Castro. En 1962 Fidel expuso abiertamente el problema del culto a la personalidad y proclamó su voluntad de contrarrestarlo energicamente. Pero el hecho de la proliferación de la imagen de Fidel es un fenómeno que sería absolutamente vano intentar contrarrestar con medidas administrativas. Si el pueblo espontáneamente expone en los lugares más diversos e imprevisibles los retratos de los héroes de su propia epopeya, Camilo, Che, Fidel, es porque se identifica con ellos y encuentra así una manera, la más simple, la más evidente, de significar su unidad y su firmeza frente a la amenaza exterior, su entusiasmo por la construcción paciente de ese “hombre nuevo” del que Fidel es el primer encarnamiento emblemático y provisional.” Michel Contat y Luc Chessex “Le visage de la Révolution. Essai photographique sur les images de Fidel Castro à Cuba”, en Cuba Internacional (Julio 1970): 40-47.

En los fondos de Stryker aún dormita el capítulo Cuba, a pesar de alguna que otra gestión de curadores cubanos por darlos a conocer y revalidarlos en el terreno que los inspiró. Moya finalmente expuso en La Habana, en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, en los meses de junio y julio del 2009.


Internationalism, Brasilidade, and Politics: Waldemar Cordeiro and the Search for a Universal Language

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In 1952 the seven-man Brazilian avant-garde group Grupo Ruptura held their inaugural exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, an institution established just four years earlier during a wave of technological and cultural modernization in Brazil. In keeping with the tradition of all good avant-garde groups, a strident manifesto accompanied the exhibition. Penned by Brazilian painter Waldemar Cordeiro, the manifesto rejected both naturalism and Expressionism in favor of rationally-structured geometric abstraction in painting and sculpture, a style known as concrete art. Where the populist figuration predominant in Brazilian painting during the 1930s and early 1940s could be marshaled for nationalist interests, concrete art was for Cordeiro a cosmopolitan, international style with the potential for universal communication.¹ Soon after this turn from figurative painting to concrete art, Cordeiro turned to conceptual and digital art, a shift that similarly took up broad communication as a goal for advanced art. By the 1970s, in a time marked by increasingly repressive rule under Brazil’s authoritarian military government, Cordeiro’s interest in digital art mounted a different type of challenge to institutional repression of left-wing politics. Across two decades, in the disparate styles of geometric abstraction and digital art, Cordeiro remained committed to clear communication by visual means as a way to promote an egalitarian political vision. However where concrete art used ostensibly universally intelligible forms to communicate as broadly as possible, the communicative potential of digital art resided in its structures, its means of distribution and transmission.

Before delving into the specifics of Cordeiro’s body of work, it is worthwhile to call attention to one possible reason for the relative neglect of concrete art: its claim to universal intelligibility. In retrospective accounts of early twentieth-century avant-gardes, utopian desires for a universal language have often been written off as naïve fantasies of a more innocent time, when it was still possible to conceive of an art form out of reach of cooptation. For many early twenty-first century art historians, it is shock, disruption, or making strange—characteristics of the art of Brecht, Dada, or revolutionary
Russia, for example—that remain relevant in late capitalism and are at times retroactively assumed to be the only valid strategies for earlier avant-gardes as well. Yet to write off earlier generations as naïve not only diminishes the relevance of the historical context in which they acted, it also disregards these avant-garde artists’ own recognition of the limitations and challenges inherent in their desire for universal communication. For example in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin holds film up as the revolutionary medium par excellence, though in hindsight it is all too easy to dwell on the instrumentalization of film towards totalitarian or capitalist ends.² For the dream of universal communication is not so different from a vision of successful propaganda or successful advertising, both of which have intermittently been viewed as antithetical to the project of avant-garde art. However the international intelligibility and cosmopolitanism attributed to concrete art can be seen as a way to avoid regressive nationalist tendencies that emphasized the ties of blood and land as grounds for national cohesion. The conditions that gave rise to concrete art in mid-century Brazil are thus not entirely dissimilar to the interwar period in Europe, when calls for cosmopolitan internationalism squared off against rising militarist nationalisms. Yet there is an added complication in the uncertain relationship of Brazilian artists to foreign models, where young Brazilian artists might take up geometric abstraction as a way to insert themselves into contemporary artistic discourse worldwide, and Brazilian institutions might promote this style as part of a self-avowedly modernizing thrust.

The Grupo Ruptura manifesto is central to a popular foundation myth of Brazilian concrete art, which from its inception was tied to contemporary political discussions over Brazil’s relation to Europe and the United States. In many accounts geometric abstraction emerged in toto on the heels of post-war visits or migration to Brazil by artists and curators of the European avant-gardes, in the manner of Athena springing fully-clothed from the head of Zeus.³ The external impetus for this flowering of concrete art in Brazil has been variously attributed to the 1949 São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) exhibition Do figurativismo ao abstracionismo [From Figuration to Abstraction], a show of primarily European artists curated by Belgian/French art critic Léon Dégand; or the 1951 exhibition of concrete art by Swiss artist Max Bill at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP).⁴ Controversially the former
exhibition included just three Brazilian artists—Cordeiro, Cícero Dias, and Samson Flexor—amongst a roster that included Jean Arp, Alexander Calder, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Joan Miro, and Francis Picabia, among others. The prevailing style in 1940s Brazilian painting was figurative, often accompanied by explicit assertions of aesthetic independence from European models. The teleological thrust of Dégand’s conceptual framework thus excluded many of the most renowned artists in contemporary Brazil and positioned European artists at the forefront of avant-garde tendencies. While the artists exhibited in São Paulo’s newly established museums of art tended to be European, the museums’ structures were modeled on United States institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Both MAM and MASP initially received support from then-president of MoMA Nelson Rockefeller as part of post-war, anti-socialist cultural diplomacy practiced by the United States. But the interest in concrete art on the part of Brazilian artists and business elites cannot be seen as simply following in the footsteps of their counterparts in Europe and the United States.

It was less an emulation of foreign models than an opportunistic, pragmatic approach that drove the founders of MASP and MAM in their alliances with, and splits from, foreign interests. In 1947 Brazilian media magnate Francisco de Assis ‘Chato’ Chateaubriand Bandeiro de Melo founded the MASP with the help of Rockefeller and of Brazilian business elites, whom he convinced to donate money in return for positive press coverage. MAM was established in 1948 by Brazilian industrialist Francisco ‘Cicillio’ Matarazzo Sobrinho, who also spearheaded the foundation of the Bienal de São Paulo in 1951. Despite Rockefeller’s efforts to counteract the influence of European culture in South America—with European Communism of particular concern—for both Chateaubriand and Matarazzo European art would play a major role during the initial years of their institutions’ existence. Furthermore Matarazzo shocked Rockefeller by choosing Dégand, who wrote for the French Communist newspaper Les Lettres Francaises, as the first director of the MAM. The presence of European art did not suggest allegiance to a left-wing agenda for Chateaubriand and Matarazzo, however. Chateaubriand explicitly framed European bourgeois culture as a bulkhead against Communism. In 1947 he stated:
[A]dotei como minha uma técnica de indiscutível eficiência para reeducar a burguesia: anunciar para breve o fim do mundo burguês, que sucumbirá aos ataques soviéticos. Apresento, contudo, a única hipótese de salvação, que é o fortalecimento das células burguesas. Uma das formas de fortalecê-las é doar Renoirs, Cézannes e Grecos ao Museu de Arte. O que significa que enfrentar os bolcheviques pode custar a cada um dos senhores modestos 50 mil dólares.

Concrete art emerged in a postwar Brazil characterized by competing political interests, when various interests attempted to use aesthetics in the service of political ends.

While these institutional and political forces certainly played a role in the rise of concrete art in 1950s Brazil, many artists already were interested in, and knowledgeable about, artistic developments outside of Brazil. The country did not exist in a vacuum previous to Rockefeller’s interest in sending art from the United States to Brazil, or before Brazilian businessmen’s efforts to establish art museums that initially emphasized the cultural history of Europe. There was a long history of artists traveling between cities in Brazil and Europe, from Tarsila do Amaral studying painting in 1920s Paris to Lasar Segall’s contemporaneous immigration to Brazil from Lithuania, by way of Berlin. Cordeiro too was well positioned to act as a conduit in the postwar period as he traveled back and forth between Brazil and Italy from 1946 to 1948.

In contrast to some Brazilian artists who positioned themselves in opposition to Europe, Cordeiro maintained strong ties to European art and political life.
Cordeiro was born in 1925 in Rome, where he studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma [School of Fine Arts, Rome] as a teenager. Soon after his arrival in São Paulo, the newspaper Folha da Manhã [Morning Paper] contracted Cordeiro to write political reports, draw illustrations, and write art criticism, the subject of which soon became his discovery of recent trends in Italian painting during his frequent stays in Rome. During a 1947 trip to Rome, Cordeiro encountered surprising new developments in art, including Forma, a collective of avowedly Marxist abstract artists. Forma’s manifesto read, “We declare ourselves Formalists and Marxists, convinced that the terms Marxism and formalism are not unreconcilable. . . . The necessity of taking Italian art to the level of contemporary European artistic language forces us to take a clear and resolute position against any foolish nationalistic position.” Working in a similar vein, the international Art Club of Rome, formed in 1945 by Polish painter Jozef Jarema and Italian painter Enrico Prampolini, among others, included many of the same artists as Forma. Both Forma and the Art Club of Rome opposed the Communist Party of Italy’s increasingly rigid adherence to the socialist realist aesthetic, and insisted instead that abstraction and socialism were compatible. Cordeiro seized upon this union of abstraction and socialist politics, returning to São Paulo permanently in 1948 as a ‘delegate’ of the international Art Club. At the same time leftist figurative artists in Brazil continued to insist on the importance of figuration. In a speech entitled “Mitos do Modernismo” [“Myths of Modernism”], which was also published as “Realismo e Abstracionismo” [“Realism and Abstraction”] in a 1948 issue of Fundamentos, the cultural journal of the Brazilian Communist Party, Emiliano di Cavalcanti criticized the abstraction favored by the newly opened MAM, and instead favored an accessible, characteristically Brazilian realism. The insistence of these Italian groups that abstraction could not only be reconciled with leftist politics, but was in fact to be preferred over social realism, helped Cordeiro to justify distancing himself from the figurative populism that enjoyed state patronage under Vargas’ recently-ended authoritarian Estado Novo, while remaining committed to left-wing politics.

Cordeiro’s experiences in Italian and Brazilian contexts during the 1940s and 1950s also provided him with several different models for artists’ involvement with the state. The recently-ended Vargas regime’s aesthetic preferences bore striking resemblance in ideology, if not always formally, to those of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who praised Italy’s Novecento group for
“its emphasis on Roman styles and Italianità, its rejection of the recent past, and its embracing of cultural nationalism.” Similarly Vargas had promoted Brasilidade as “an intangible but highly coveted sense of Brazilianness” that combined modernism and tradition. While the transition to a democratic regime, the rise of abstraction, the move away from outmoded forms of nationalism, and the establishment of modern art museums across the country seemed to signify a fresh start during the postwar period, the government was certainly engaged in artistic life in Brazil during the democratic period of 1946-1964. Kubitschek’s massive 1950s architectural project for the new modernist capital of Brasília is only the most visible example. During the early 1960s and under the leftist government of João Goulart, the Ministry of Education and Culture subsidized the Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC). The CPC, which “consist[ed] largely of radical middle-class students who wanted to use popular culture to push Brazilian society in a progressive direction . . . stag[ed] plays in factories and working class neighborhoods, produc[ed] films and records, and participat[ed] in Paulo Freire-style literacy programs.” Did the future for artists and progressives now lie with the leftist state?

As he shifted from paintings to conceptual and digital art, Cordeiro’s leftist politics initially emerged as friction with arts institutions before becoming visible in the structures of his work. Cordeiro’s early abstractions resemble the work of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, but it was Max Bill’s notion of ‘concrete’ art that was formative for Cordeiro’s articulation of abstraction in the Grupo Ruptura manifesto. In the words of Max Bill:

We call ‘Concrete Art’ works of art which are created according to a technique and laws which are entirely appropriate to them, without taking external support from experiential nature or from its transformation, that is to say, without the intervention of a process of abstraction. . . . It is real and intellectual, anaturalist while being close to nature. It tends toward the universal and yet cultivates the unique, it rejects individuality, but for the benefit of the individual.

In Cordeiro’s work this conceptualization became visible in artworks such as the 1952 painting Desenvolvimento ótico da espiral de Arquimedes [Optical Development of the Archimedean Spiral]. Inspired by Cordeiro’s study of
Gestalt aesthetics, this work explored one of the elements of painting—in this case, line—in a systematic way, taking two straight vertical lines as starting points for a thick red spiral and a series of thinner curved lines arranged in a series of concentric and overlapping circles. The Archimedean spiral is characterized by a fixed distance between the successive curves of the spiral, and no imitation of nature determines the bounds of the surrounding circles, whose diameters correspond to three and six times the length of the spiral segment, respectively. During the 1950s, though Cordeiro's work did not challenge the predominance of painting in São Paulo arts institutions, he challenged the politics of those institutions with actions such as withdrawing his work from the second São Paulo Bienal. In the middle of the 1960s, however, in response to his reading of Umberto Eco's and Antonio Gramsci's ideas of communication and participation in society, Cordeiro shifted from abstract painting to a more object-oriented art. In his effort to break down the gap between art and society, Cordeiro's new body of work required audience participation and appropriated features of mass communication.

Cordeiro's leap from canvas to object occurred with a unique, syncretic medium called the *popcreto* [pop-crete], which combined elements of concrete and pop art. Cordeiro's most famous *popcretos* are *Opera Aperta* [*Open Work*] and *Ambigüidade* [*Ambiguity*], both from 1963 (Plate 1a and 1b). *Opera Aperta* takes its name from Eco's seminal collection of essays with the same title, in which Eco describes artworks “characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author and . . . which . . . are ‘open’ to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli.” Eco acknowledges that these qualities can be said to characterize all artworks, but argues that contemporary art has been privileging ‘openness’ in order to bring about a new relationship between the work and the observer, such that the observer enters into an interpretive dialogue with the work. Taking the point quite literally, Cordeiro created *Opera Aperta* and
Ambigüidade by applying small square mirrors in loosely gridded patterns to the surface of painted canvases. Simply put, in seeing fragmented images of themselves and their surroundings, viewers engage in the perceptual games Eco recommends in order to activate semantic plurality. The work is necessarily unique for each viewer. Opera Aperta and Ambigüidade also bear thematic and conceptual resemblance to Cordeiro’s concrete artworks. The solid colors of the backgrounds—deep blue and matte silver, respectively—and the arrangement of geometric shapes in loosely regular configurations do not immediately visually recall Cordeiro’s concrete paintings, but the interest in repetitive permutations is conceptually akin to earlier work. Cordeiro constructed his concrete paintings by applying regular, geometric transformations to an initial form, seemingly arbitrarily chosen from an array of basic shapes. Similarly the images of humans and rooms reflected in the mirrors of Opera Aperta and Ambigüidade are random, arbitrary, unbounded, irregular forms submitted to the standardizing frame of the small square mirror. Cordeiro explained that these works ‘open’ concrete practice to “ampler and more complex relations that have their roots and branches outside of the specific field of art.” Constructed of silver mirrors placed on silver paint, in certain lights Ambigüidade forms a chromatically even plane of silver, though the contrasting textures of smooth mirror and canvas almost immediately challenge this perception. The more regular staggered grid pattern does not simply rationalize the human body or surroundings. Instead—in a prescient foreshadowing of Cordeiro’s digital works—it creates a fragmented image, in which the visual information between the mirrors is lost, or apprehended through implication from context. The irregularly placed mirrors of Opera Aperta fragment the surroundings not into equally-spaced bits of information, but into three columns of mirrored squares that do not attempt to blend into the deep-blue painted background. Scraps of paper once covered the mirrors, and viewers peeled the paper away to reveal the mirrors below. The middle column of mirrors is left covered to convey the work’s incompleteness. While these popcretos formally resemble Cordeiro’s concrete paintings, their incompleteness and ambiguity contrasts with the earlier paintings’ geometric abstraction, which was intended as unambiguous manifestations of clear, rational forms. The popcretos are thus transitional works between the concrete painting and the digital art that would come to characterize Cordeiro’s oeuvre.
Dubbed *popcretos* by the poet Augusto de Campos, these works were exhibited alongside de Campos’ visual poetry in a 1964 exhibition at São Paulo’s Atrium Gallery. Cordeiro himself preferred the term “semantic concrete art” rather than *popcreto*, emphasizing his interest in exploring how meaning is made in art. This project took Cordeiro in two aesthetic directions: toward materiality and toward verbal/visual communication. The goal of both directions was for his artworks to exist as a means of communication within broader society. To emphasize the materiality of the media of communication, Cordeiro incorporated found objects into artworks and altered the built environment through his work as a landscape designer. To emphasize aspects of verbal and visual communication, he used text and found images and gave special attention to photographs from mass media sources, often addressing contemporary political issues. This interest in the mass media as a fraught space of communication, through which elites attempted to guide society, was especially pertinent to the period preceding the 1964 military coup in Brazil.

As journalism became increasingly implicated in governmental control of information during the 1960s, the relationship of text and image became a primary focus of Cordeiro’s art. During the early 1960s, high-ranking employees of nationwide press organizations, such as Assis Chateaubriand's *Diarios Associados* [Associated Daily Press], participated in the *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais* [Institute of Research and Social Studies] (IPES), which aimed to “mobiliz[e] democratic public sentiment against the leftists that surrounded now-president João Goulart.” The IPES developed out of a group of Brazilian businessmen who originally gathered to discuss the “communist menace,” among other problems facing Brazil. The IPES formally established itself as a research institute in 1961, when the resignation of president Jânio da Silva Quadros put the even more left-wing Vice President João Goulart in power. In the wake of Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s 1959 overthrow of Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship in Cuba, the military, landowners, and multinational corporations in Brazil became increasingly paranoid about the threat of leftist revolution. The U.S. government took this fear seriously and attempted to combat Communism, both overtly, by offering debt-ridden Brazil foreign aid through the State Department, and covertly, by means of CIA funding to IPES. In early 1962 IPES leaders traveled to Washington, D.C. and met with Teodoro Moscoso, then-director of President John F. Kennedy’s newly-established Alliance for
Progress, “a long-term crusade to combat Communism and shore up Latin America’s fledgling democracies through trade and economic assistance.”

Barely one month later, “on Sunday, March 25, 1962, IPES distributed a special supplement to major Brazilian newspapers: entitled *Cartilha Para O Progresso* [Primer for Progress] the insert’s subtitle was ‘How to Make a Revolution without Blood.’” IPES wanted a revolution against the leftist government that would preempt the socialist revolution they feared. Though the IPES was ultimately less revolutionary than reformist, this involvement in mass communication demonstrates the behind-the-scenes machinations of anti-leftist factions both in Brazil and abroad.

During this period mass communication was marked by a slippage between what was stated and what was understood, between what was declared and what was intended. Cordeiro’s 1964 work *Jornal*, a newspaper page constructed of mismatched strips from other newspapers, quite literally portrays the reading between the lines necessitated by the context (Figure 5). Enough of the strips are taken from the same newspaper page that one expects to be able to construct a narrative from parts, but only snatches of clarity are possible. A sufficient part of the structure remains to reveal that the physical construction of a newspaper page is standardized: a newspaper title and publication information stand at the top, above any news, and a descriptive headline falls below, followed by an enormous, eye-catching phrase and photographs. The fact that the page is instantly recognizable

**FIGURE 5.** Waldemar Cordeiro, *Jornal*, 1964,
Newspaper collage on paper, 65 x 22.5 cm.
Image courtesy of Ana Livia Cordeiro.
for what it is, despite its cobbled-together character, draws attention to the tactics the press uses to draw attention. Yet Cordeiro chose suggestively conflicting articles from two contrasting newspapers, juxtaposing an article from a newspaper read by bourgeois audiences that praised the government with an article on taxes from a newspaper more popular among the working classes.

Another work inspired by Eco’s notions of openness and responsiveness to viewer’s presence is Texto Aberto [Open Text] of 1966, in which the element of the letter itself is questioned (Plate 2). A selection of capital letters are printed in black on three white slats set on a wooden backboard, with approximately a third of each letter falling on the top, middle and bottom slat. The stationary middle slat is surrounded by moving segments of letters that create new imaginary glyphs as they move horizontally in the grooves of the wooden backing. The very intelligibility of each individual letter is called into question, but the notion of the letter itself remains intact. Viewers manipulating the letter segments can imagine and create new letters within the rational, orderly permutations Cordeiro set out for them. And in Auto-retrato Probabilístico [Probabalistic Self-portrait], this play with pattern and order is enlarged from the level of the letter to that of the word, but Cordeiro fractured the image in two ways. The words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are printed on square sheets of acrylic, with each word occupying a square one-sixteenth the size of the acrylic sheet. Arranged in random order, the words are placed in front of segments of an enlarged photograph of Cordeiro’s face split into sixteen equal squares on three parallel sheets of acrylic. The face is thus split into sixteen equal squares on three parallel sheets of acrylic so that the face is split both from side to side and onto planes at different distances from the viewer. Like readers of a newspaper text—or, increasingly, spectators of a television report—the artist presents viewers with fragmented and ordered information. The words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ force viewers to acknowledge their complicity in constructing the image. What will be left out, and who chooses the omissions? Are the questions as simple as yes or no? Cordeiro presents his own visage in part to insert the artist as a visible creator analogous to the news media’s typically invisible creators; this position also calls forth questions about the role of the artist.

“We are with Gramsci,” Cordeiro insisted, “that culture only begins to exist historically when it creates a unity of thought among ‘ordinary’ people and
artists and intellectuals. Indeed, only in that symbiosis with ‘ordinary’ people does art become purged of its intellectualistic elements and subjective nature to become life.”\(^{28}\) Regarding the role of intellectuals vis-à-vis society and the state, a question that runs throughout the political turmoil of twentieth-century Brazil, Gramsci offers a devastating analysis:

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\text{The intellectuals have the function of organizing the social hegemony of a group and that group's domination of the state; in other words, they have the function of organizing the consent that comes from the prestige attached to the function in the world of production and the apparatus of coercion for those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively or for those moments of crisis of command and leadership when spontaneous consent undergoes a crisis.}^{29}\]

It was no longer enough for artists to approach society from a privileged stance. For Cordeiro the hermeticism of concrete art had grown untenable, particularly given contemporary political events that drew an increasingly broad swathe of people into their orbit.

In 1968 the military government of Brazil “responded to civil protest and incipient armed resistance with a decree known as the Fifth Institutional Act (A1-5), which outlawed political opposition, purged and temporarily closed congress, suspended habeas corpus, established blanket censorship over the press, and effectively ended the protest movement.”\(^{30}\) Just three years later a secret presidential act extended these powers to the Ministry of Justice, and it was no longer necessary to obtain explicit presidential permission for acts of censorship.\(^{31}\) In this context of communication systems stymied by an authoritarian regime, art historian Alexander Alberro claims that an “interest in the discursive potential of systems of distribution pervades Brazilian strands of conceptual art in the 1960s.”\(^{32}\) Cordeiro’s digital artwork should be seen in dialogue with such conceptual works as Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles’ Inserções em circuitos ideológicos \([Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project]\) (1970). By covertly spreading politically provocative messages via recycled Coca-Cola bottles, Alberro claims that Meireles’ project “function[ed] to communicate a revolutionary, anti-imperialist message to a potentially enormous public at a time when the dictatorial regime was
vigilantly monitoring all the conventional channels of communication.”

Like Cordeiro’s digital art projects, Meireles’ *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* reached a large audience using common techniques of mass distribution—in Meireles’ case the distribution of products, rather than the immaterial television or newspaper images that Cordeiro references. However Cordeiro’s interest in mass media or mass communication was not simply due to its ability to reach wide numbers of people, though he saw one of the failings of ‘old’ art as its inability to do so. Nor was it simply a way to evade government censorship, though that seems to be an implicit goal of this work. For Cordeiro digital art offered the potential to build a new type of interpersonal communication.

As a pioneer digital artist Cordeiro wrote a second manifesto twenty years after his first, in which he rejected the ideas of his youth. At a digital arts conference in 1973 Cordeiro claimed that Constructive art—and here, twenty years after the fact, he seems to mean concrete art—“belong[ed] to the past . . . to the Paleocybernetic Period” before computer art. In his 1971 text “Arteônica: Electronic Art” Cordeiro identified two problems of communication for contemporary art. The first was physical inaccessibility. He argued, “Traditional artworks are physical objects to be displayed in physically determined places, and they assume the physical displacement of the viewers,” a difficult task in a city like São Paulo, and “even less viable for international culture.” Cordeiro criticized artists, presumably including himself, who misunderstood the limitations of this physicality and attempted to escape it by creating works in the urban micro-landscape or the regional macro-landscape. For Cordeiro earthworks and interventions into the urban fabric merely enlarged the scale of the traditional art objects and failed to change its very nature. The second problem of contemporary art was its conceptual inaccessibility, “a form of isolation, not a physical but a semantic one, inasmuch as the consumption of the artwork requires previous knowledge of exclusive repertoires.” In “Arteônica” Cordeiro promoted digital communication for three primary reasons: its ability to travel long distances without alteration, presenting information in the same (mass media) language across space and time; its radical intangibility, as “the work of art is not an object, not a thing, but a proposal to man”; and its potential to incorporate feedback. And while Cordeiro did not explicitly conceptualize digital networks such as the internet, his approach to questions of mass communication anticipates issues of networking.
Derivadas de uma Imagem [Derivatives of an Image] of 1969 was Cordeiro's first image-based digital artwork, which he created with the assistance of physicist Giorgio Moscati (Figure 6a-c). Using a Valentine's Day advertisement as the source image, the collaborators enlarged the image and manually assigned each of its 10,978 points a number from 0 to 6, depending upon where that point lay on a gray scale from white to black. The resulting digital image was transformed by the simple mathematical function of taking a derivative; that is, at places in the original image where there are abrupt changes in intensity, e.g. from 0 (white) to 6 (black), there appears on the first derivative a dark output (black). At places where the intensity is constant in the original image, there is no output (white), and a gradual change in shade in the original image produces an intermediate intensity (gray) in the first derivative. Moscati pointed out that this process converts a shaded image to a contour image, types of images apprehended very differently. He explained:

[Y]ou’ve got a blank picture, then you draw a line building the contours of a figure...and you immediately recognize the person.
But if you compare a shaded image to a contour image, they are completely different....When you learn how to read, and you read all those symbols,...you apparently acquire this ability of interpreting this language symbolism.[sic]

In this example digital imagery offers an exact contrast with earlier forms of concrete art. The forms of the altered digital image are precisely not universally intelligible, but must be read within a system. However perception of the digital image is not restricted to those with a ‘previous knowledge of exclusive repertoires,’ that is, a knowledge of the history of art. Instead the intelligibility of digital images lies in their structures; digital images can be shaded images or images reduced to contour, images whose intelligibility appeals to perceptual processes inherent to the human mind, rather that an extensive knowledge of art historical motifs and styles. Furthermore it is the structures of transmission and distribution that make digital art intelligible to a wide audience. By taking up the structures of mass media and mass media’s subject matter as well, such as the St. Valentine’s Day advertisement, Cordeiro aspired to a form of communication available to all.
In Moscati’s description of the conceptual puzzles with which he and Cordeiro struggled, Gramsci again emerges as a key theorist. Gramsci stated, “Mass formation has standardized individuals both in terms of technical ability and psychologically, giving rise to the same phenomena as in all other standardized masses: competition among individuals that creates unemployment, the need for professional organizations, etc.”

While Cordeiro’s vision of universal digital communication may seem to fall into this trap, language constantly changes in Cordeiro’s experimental and interactive scenario. Cordeiro’s digital artwork presages an image mathematically determined by pixels, an image that will ostensibly never distort or be misunderstood during its peregrinations. This utopian vision of immutable clarity is further characterized by the importance of feedback. Cordeiro anticipates a future of digital works whose forms are altered by successive viewers, through dialogues between viewers and artists. Within Cordeiro’s understanding the artist was still responsible for formulating this language, and he or she would do so by incorporating feedback from viewers. Cordeiro explained:

When the number of viewers increases, the cultural situation becomes more diversified and the feedback becomes more complex. As the understanding of general conditions grounds all creative effort, the creative act requires more complex methods and more efficient media. It is in this direction that art will find again the conditions to realize its historical role.
It is probable that were he to have lived to see digital networks, Cordeiro's essay would have been more explicit about a breakdown of the categories of artist and viewer. Certainly he would have recognized the potential of participatory networks to avoid strict state control. Just as theories of concrete art depended upon the supposed consistent logic of geometric shapes and mathematical permutations, the computer artworks necessarily possessed the logic of transformations applied evenly and consistently. The wild card was, of course, the input, an issue that would have loomed large for Cordeiro as technology advanced and became able to handle more varied input.

When Cordeiro died in 1973, he was in the middle of his first color digital artwork. Entitled Pirambu, it depicted a house on stilts in Forteleza, a city on the northeast coast of Brazil that Cordeiro visited as part of an urban planning trip. This final work was also explicitly political, dealing with the contemporaneous destruction of low-cost wooden housing in favor of large apartment complexes that would simultaneously provide running water but also cause an increased level of environmental destruction. As in his concrete paintings, popcretos, and digital artworks, Cordeiro worked to juxtapose the human and the technical, to combine randomness and order within logical transformations potentially understandable to all. He also worked to undermine facile readings of common cultural artifacts and to question nationalist rhetoric surrounding aesthetic decisions. An artist can be sponsored or controlled by politicians, or by the public. An artist can also raise questions and respond to issues raised in the political sphere. Or an artist can ostensibly follow only the internal logic of his or her work. For Cordeiro, and other Brazilian artists of the twentieth century, these possibilities and questions were never far from sight.

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NOTES:
1 For Cordeiro, concrete art was a "linguagem que pode exprimir o individual, o coletivo, o nacional, e o universal a um só tempo" [language that can express the individual, the collective, the national, and the universal at one and the same time]. Quoted in Aracy Amaral, “Waldemar Cordeiro,” in Textos do Trópico de Capricórnio: artigos e ensaios


7 Guilbaut, 136-137.

8 Fernando Morais, Chatô, o rei do Brasil (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1994), 483. Translation by the author.


11 Gino Moliterno, Encyclopedia of Contemporary Italian Culture (New York: Routledge, 2000), 344. The Forma group was also sometimes known as Forma 1.


HEMISPHERE


20 Vaz Nunes, 88.


27 The newspaper insert “quoted the preamble of the Alliance [for Progress]’s charter in its entirety, and promised benefits for the poor. . . . But IPES seemed unable to suggest any immediate, specific action that required the participation or involvement of individual volunteers. . . . The ‘Revolution without Blood’ also promised to be one without sweat, tears, or nationalism.” Leacock, 73.


33 Alberro, xxvin8.


Cordeiro, “Arteônica”: 33.

Ibid.: 33.

Ibid.: 34.

Previously in 1968 Cordeiro and Moscati collaborated on Beabá [ABCs], in which a computer invented six-letter words by randomly alternating vowels and consonants. Costa, 73.


Gramsci, 201.

Cordeiro, “Arteônica”: 34.

Personal communication with Analivia Cordeiro, daughter of Waldemar Cordeiro (22 July 2010).
¿DE QUIÉN SON ESTAS MEMORIAS?:

Los rubios, Memory, and History

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In April 2010 news media reported that Argentine courts had convicted and sentenced the last dictator to hold power during the country’s 1976-1983 military junta, which is known today for its gross human rights abuses. Immediately following the dictatorship’s fall, Argentine filmmakers began addressing the recent past and as time passed, a new generation of filmmakers began to break from the methods of these earlier filmmakers. Within this El nuevo cine argentino [New Argentine Cinema] (NAC) filmmakers, such as Albertina Carri, have attempted to find thoughtful approaches to presenting their personal and national history and memory. Using a non-traditional documentary style in her 2003 film Los rubios [The Blonds], Carri highlights the fallibility of memory and “official” narratives of history and what such fallibility means for children of la guerra sucia [the Dirty War], such as herself.

In 1955 Argentina’s military overthrew Juan Domingo Perón, in office since 1946.1 Perón went into exile, his party was banned, and the military remained in power for almost twenty years. Then, in March of 1973, the country elected Peronist Hector Campora as president, but he resigned only six months later. Perón, who had returned to Argentina earlier in the year, became president that September; he ruled for less than a year, because he died in 1974. Perón’s wife, Isabel Martínez, served as his successor and her time in office was marked by unrest and increasing repression. On March 24, 1976 the military, led by General Jorge Videla, again seized power. Seven years of dictatorship followed, during which the government waged a war of fear on the populace in what is now known as the Dirty War. As Susana Kaiser explained, “The systematic abduction, torture, and killing of [alleged] activists, as well as the kidnapping of babies born in the torture chambers, characterized the reign of terror imposed by the military juntas.”2 Weakened by several factors, including the Falklands/Malvinas War, the dictatorship finally fell in 1983 with the election of Raúl Alfonsín. Under Alfonsín the Comisión Nacional para la Desaparición de Personas [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons] (CONADEP) investigated the desaparecidos, or disappeared people, released its findings as Nunca más [Never Again], and brought charges against some of the dictatorship’s
military officials. However Alfonsín’s government also approved laws that provided the military with impunity. In 1986 Ley de Punto Final [Full Stop Law], Law No. 23492, went into effect, which allowed a statute of limitations for military personnel. And in 1987 Ley de Obediencia Debida [Law of Due Obedience], Law No. 23521, acquitted military officials “on the basis that they were obeying orders.” Therefore many of those responsible were not held accountable for their roles in the dictatorship’s violence and repression and returned to “normal” life.

Under the dictatorship filmmaking in Argentina declined due to reasons including state censorship and lack of funding. The situation differed from other arts that, while limited by permissible topics, did not require sums of money as large as those often spent to create a film. David William Foster notes that due to the exaggerated decline of filmmaking, the artform “gathered momentum in Argentina after the return to democracy constituted a newly defined cultural component…. In this sense, film production was more closely coterminous with the process of redemocratization than were other cultural manifestations, lending it a greater symbolic aura.” Argentine films made during the redemocratization of the 1980s that dealt with the dictatorship tend to contain several common characteristics. One such characteristic, or cultural code, as Fernando Reati notes, is the equation of reason with violence and passion with the victims of that violence. Filmmakers also repeatedly used the motifs of a blindfold, hood, or similar “blinding” accessory in costuming and small, enclosed spaces to “refer to [both] the historical reality of the secret detention camps where dissidents were tortured and killed, [and] also, in a broader sense, to oppression in contemporary life.” Less tangible but still a common theme was the use of allegory to provide a second meaning to the surface story; to some extent filmmakers and other artists used this form to provide deeper meanings for their works during the dictatorship.

Examples of films made during redemocratization include María Luísa Bemberg’s Camila (1984) and Luis Puenzo’s La historia oficial (1985). Camila is a lavish costume drama based on the true nineteenth-century story of Camila O’Gorman, the daughter of wealthy supporters of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who was the Buenos Aires province Governor from 1829-1832 and 1835-1852. During his second time in office, Rosas demanded absolute power and it was not uncommon for opponents to be imprisoned, exiled, or
killed. In 1852 Rosas was overthrown and went into exile in Southampton, England. Camila fell in love, ran away with, and became pregnant by her confessor priest, Ladislao Guitérrez, who was also from a well-connected family. The couple ultimately was found, imprisoned, and executed by the military; Rosas political opponents used the affair to propel their campaign against his government. Although set in the 1800s and utilizing the melodramatic genre, *Camila* is easily read as a commentary and critique of Argentina’s more recent past through the film’s themes and motifs. Broadly Camila and Ladislao are brutally punished for defying the authorities in a way poignantly reminiscent of the treatment of the disappeared, especially that of expectant mothers. Furthermore the passionate Camila becomes the victim of both a calculating government, in the guise of both Church and State, and a coldly rational father. Camila’s father supported the repressive state leader from a position in the upper class that was secure under that leader. Camila’s father represents those who were bettered by and worked with the junta. The lovers are led to their death in the film’s last scene, and Camila is blindfolded for the second time. Here she wears a black blindfold in contrast to a white one worn earlier when she first meets Ladislao during a game of blind man’s bluff. Also in the last scenes the military soldiers confine the couple to small spaces—holding cells and, ultimately, the coffin—again in direct reference to the 1976-1983 dictatorship’s detention centers.

These literal spaces are not the film’s only enclosures, for Camila’s pre-Ladislao lifestyle also confines her. She attempts to escape, or at least rebel against, that confinement several times. For example she frequents a bookshop where the seller provides her with banned reading materials. Through the character of the bookseller, Bemberg creates another link between the film’s nineteenth-century era and the recent dictatorship. During the night faceless men on horseback ride through the streets as they shout, “Long live the Federation!” The bookseller’s head is found the next morning spiked on a gate outside of the church. It would not be difficult for an Argentine audience to recognize these motifs and to connect “Rosas’s *mazorca* (cut-throat) gangs of state terror...[with] the anonymous killers in the dirty war, in their unmarked Ford Falcons.” Bemberg commented that *Camila* was received so well in Argentina because it gave audiences a chance to explore both the “roots of repression in Argentine history” and their own recent past.
John King notes that both *Camila* and *La historia oficial* “allowed the Argentine audience a form of collective catharsis, enabling them to experience, in public, emotions that had remained private during the years of the dictatorship.” *La historia oficial* depicts the dictatorship’s last days during March 1983. Over the course of the film Alicia, an upper-class history teacher, awakens to the reality of what is happening around her and to her family’s involvement and complicity with the dictatorship. Alicia has lived comfortably through the terror. Her husband Roberto, a businessman who supported the military junta and was thus rewarded, worked hard to provide Alicia with a lush lifestyle. Like Camila’s father in *Camila*, Roberto represents those who benefited from the repressive leadership. By the film’s end Alicia is no longer naïve of her family’s benefits from the junta’s actions. Roberto, who always knew the inhumanity of the junta’s practices, scrambles to save himself as the professionals above him begin to pass the guilt onto others in order to save themselves. As the junta’s power wanes, those in exile begin to return, including Alicia’s school friend Ana who fled following her abduction and subsequent release. One night, amongst other “girl talk,” Ana confides in Alicia and tells her about the torture, rape and fear that she experienced when she was abducted; again this experience involved being hooded. For the audience Ana represents both those who were taken and returned alive as well as the almost 30,000 who were taken and did not return. Ana’s story becomes one of the forces that sets Alicia on a road of inquiry, a road that converges at her own daughter, Gaby.

Early in the film viewers learn that Alicia could not have a child. One day Roberto brought Gaby home with little explanation of the child’s origins. Through her investigations Alicia realizes, almost certainly, that Gaby is a child of the disappeared. While at the hospital in an attempt to gather more information, Alicia meets Sara, whose daughter and son-in-law were among the disappeared. The women meet later in a café and Sara shows Alicia a picture of her daughter; the resemblance to Gaby is unmistakable. When Alicia confronts Roberto about Gaby, Roberto quickly and viciously snaps. He resorts to physical abuse in order to force answers from Alicia, an action which links him even closer to the cruel junta that he supported. *La historia oficial* closes on a shot of Gaby sitting in a rocking chair at her grandparents’ home and waiting for Alicia and Roberto. She sings “*En el país de Nomeacuerdo*” [“In the Land of I-Don’t-Remember”], a song by children’s singer Maria Elena Walsh, who was censored during the 1976-
1983 dictatorship. It is unclear what will happen to Gaby and, in this regard, she represents Argentina’s uncertain future after the Dirty War. Gaby also symbolizes the children of the disappeared. Stephen Hart argues that an early scene of Gaby’s birthday party strengthens the link between the fictional character of Gaby and the real-life children she represents. The children, especially Gaby, become upset when a magician sticks a rabbit with a pin when performing a trick. Hart explains, “This is a displaced image of the torture of [Gaby’s] parents, which exists, as it were, in her subconscious; later this idea is reinforced when the boys break into her bedroom, playing war games.”

If Gaby, a fictional child of the disappeared, has an uncertain future, so too do the children whom she represents. As Roberto’s brother Enrique points out during a family gathering, it is the children, both those of the disappeared and those who were “simply” children at the time, that will have to pay for both the dictatorship’s actions and the financial gain of its supporters. He asks Roberto, “Do you know who lost it [the war], brother? Entire generations of kids, kids like mine! Against them you won... They’re going to pay those dollars that were stolen from them.” Enrique’s description “kids, kids like mine” underlines that Roberto’s “kid,” Gaby, is not like his own children. And while Enrique directly addresses monetary payment, it may easily be said that the children also have had to pay psychologically, through attempting to cope with the past.

These attempts to cope and remember permeate the experience of those who were children during the dictatorship. In her work with Argentine society’s “gray zone”—youths who were either very young during the dictatorship or born just after democracy’s return—Susana Kaiser employs the notion of postmemory to address the experiences of these approximately fifteen to twenty-two year olds. Postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsh, refers to “second-generation memory characterized by displacement and belatedness.” Gathered from a previous generation, these memories are “instilled from the recollection of others. The stories they were told by parents, teachers, and the communication media—broadly defined to include television, film, songs, or demonstrations—are the elements with which young people have reconstructed their representations of this past.”
Through a series of interviews and group discussions, Kaiser studied how those of the “gray zone” coped and continue to cope with Argentina’s past. She explored a variety of topics, such as the way “media...transmit[ed] and reconstruct[ed] the events of the dictatorship,” and she included film in her discussion. Respondents mentioned the film *La historia oficial*, which they generally felt illustrated ignorance, on the general public’s part, of what happened during the *proceso*, or *el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* [National Process of Reorganization]. This process was the goal of the dictatorship and was used as a name for the dictatorship itself. From their comments Kaiser notes:

This film could reinforce the belief in society’s ignorance and serve to calm any remorse for not having done anything, therefore discouraging the questioning of past roles. In other words, it can be a tool for a collective self-deception process, or a reconstruction of the past to defend a positive self-image of an uninformed and innocent society: we did not know, therefore we have no responsibility.

Another film that respondents discussed at greater length was Héctor Olivera’s *La noche de los lápices* [*The Night of the Pencils*] (1986). While, like Bemberg and Puenzo, Olivera worked during redemocratization, his film more vividly and directly depicts the terror surrounding the abduction of a group of high school political activists on September 16, 1976. Within Kaiser’s study group “many...indicated that they had learned about the dictatorship through this film (as 74.7 percent of 500 college students answered to a survey poll conducted at the University of Buenos Aires).” The participants’ responses suggest that *La noche de los lápices* was better received than *La historia oficial* due to its subject matter and presentation. However, from Kaiser’s analysis, it would appear that both played a role in the creation of this group’s concept of the past, or postmemory.

Kaiser did not ask interviewees only about media. She also asked participants about those directly represented by *La historia oficial’s* Gaby, the children of the disappeared. She examined organizations founded on behalf of these children including *Hijos y Hijas por la Identidad y Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* [Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence] (*HIJOS*). This organization includes children of the
disappeared, children of those who went into exile, and those of murdered political activists. Members of HIJOS created their own response to the impunity and circumstances arising from “Full Stop” and “Due Obedience.” Like other similar groups, such as Madres de Plaza de Mayo [Mothers of the May Plaza] and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo [Grandmothers of the May Plaza], HIJOS has been both highly visual and highly vocal in their activities. As part of their activities to fight impunity and bring awareness about former torturers, HIJOS instituted a form of protest known as escraches. Kaiser explains:

Escraches [was] a communication strategy based on public exposure and humiliation, whose goal was to eliminate or limit the societal space that represores [repressors] have gained. They [are] a metaphysical repossession of the streets by freeing them from these criminals presence....For HIJOS, “escrachar” is “to reveal, to make public the face of a person that wants to go unnoticed.”

These escraches include large marches and gatherings that enter neighborhoods in which the represores, a “generic term for previously state-licensed torturers, assassins, and their accomplices” during the Dirty War, live. The activist marchers sing, chant slogans, carry banners, and pass out fliers that alert the community to the presence of a person-in-question, what they did during the dictatorship, and other such information. Members of the group “then ‘mark’ the torturers’ homes by painting slogans on sidewalks and walls. Red paint—symbolizing blood—is usually thrown at the building.” Members of HIJOS advertise the escraches via paper advertisements, fliers, and on the organization’s website. Through such activities, HIJOS constantly keeps the 30,000 disappeared in the public’s eye. Or, in other words, “HIJOS has asked society: Now that you know, what are you going to do?” HIJOS also worked to shape the community’s memory regarding both the disappeared and the Dirty War in general. One of Kaiser’s interviewees “linked [the] escraches with their role as prods to social memory.... In her words: ‘It has to do with memory, so people know.”

HIJOS, as well as Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, are not the only forces that challenge the government’s “official” version of history and memory. Events during the 1990s and early 2000s have done
so as well. International courts took steps to prosecute those protected by Argentina’s amnesty laws. For example during the 1990s, Spain responded to the disappearance of Spanish citizens in Argentina during the junta by prosecuting those responsible. And France condemned, in absentia, Naval officer Alfredo Astiz for the disappearance of two French nuns, who disappeared while working in Buenos Aires in the late 1970s.21 The Argentine court brought charges against members of the junta in connection with the disappeared children in 1998; this aspect of the junta’s activities was not covered under the impunity laws. Finally in August 2003, the Argentine Congress, under President Néstor Kirchner, annulled both “Due Obedience” and “Full Stop” impunity laws that the Supreme Court subsequently nullified in November 2005, opening the way for future trials.

During this period of the 1990s and early 2000s, Enrique’s prediction in La historia official—that the children would pay for Roberto’s and other members of society’s profit from the dictatorship—came true. The rickety economic structure engineered by General Jorge Videla and the other junta leaders was already shaky when democracy returned. Recession, strikes, International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, and slipping credit ratings over the next twenty years, led to the 2001 freezing of Argentine’s personal savings accounts and to the 2002 suspension of banking and international trade. The nation defaulted on IMF and World Bank loans that same year, the largest default on a loan in world history.22

It should not, however, be automatically assumed that these economic difficulties spelled death, or even a dramatic decrease, for the nation’s film community. Starting in the mid-1990s, filmmakers began to produce works that were labeled El nuevo cine argentino [New Argentine Cinema] (NAC), Las películas argentinas jovenes de éxito [Young Argentine Film Successes], and El nuevo cine independiente argentino [New Independent Argentine Cinema].23 A variety of reasons lead to the high production numbers despite the nation’s economic problems. One of these is the large increase in film schools and formal training opportunities within Buenos Aires and several other Argentine cities. Other factors include “the availability of new digital technology...which facilitate independent production; the new Cinema Law which practically completely subsidises [sic] national production; [and] the acceptance and respect created in international markets, particularly France and Spain, which has enabled a good number of coproductions.”24
Background and funding are not the only differences between these new filmmakers and those working during and immediately after the dictatorship. Unlike those earlier filmmakers, younger filmmakers depict smaller stories of those who usually are marginalized rather than tackling the grand narratives or histories. Although more recent filmmakers do not present stories in the same way as their predecessors, Tamara Falicov notes, “This is not to say that these younger filmmakers are not grappling with social issues that affect the Argentine public. The difference is that their stories are told from a different standpoint, and they are not openly polemic or ideological.”

Guillermo De Carli also notes that unlike some earlier films, these New Argentine Cinema NAC films leave the viewer with an open ending. Rather pessimistically he states that in NAC films, “We get tales of melancholy, obvious violence, alienated looks at a society broken and destroyed. The capacity of the ‘well told story’ to transcend the telling of the tale doesn’t work: there is no revelation, no images of movement, no visions of the future. There is what there is.” These newer films also differ from earlier ones technically as well as narratively. As previously noted, a greater amount of digital equipment is available to NAC filmmakers. They also “do not conform to the same classic styles of camera angles and cuts that earlier directors used, and they typically do not make genre films.”

One example of NAC filmmaking is Albertina Carri’s documentary Los rubios (2003), which combines the themes of history, memory, and the disappeared. The film includes a number of NAC characteristics. Most particularly it focuses on a smaller, more personal story, albeit one firmly placed within a larger national context. Through the film Carri documents her personal search for her parents, Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso, who were abducted, tortured, and disappeared in 1977; the filmmaker was three at the time of her parents’ abduction. However much more occurs in the film than this description initially implies.

Within Los rubios three narrative strands twist and blend together. The first is that mentioned above, Carri’s search for information about her parents. During this thread Carri appears as herself while the actress Analía Couceryo also portrays Carri. Although Couceryo generally resembles Carri, viewers are left in no doubt that she is an actress. Within the film’s opening five minutes Couceryo introduces herself as an actress playing a role as she states,
“My name is Analía Couceryo. I am an actress in this film. I play the part of Albertina Carri.” The second narrative thread contains both Couceryo and Carri and is a documentary about the making of the first narrative strand. For example both Carri and her crew are onscreen when the filmmaker receives notice that the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales [National Institute for Cinema and Audiovisual Arts] (INCAA) has denied her funding application. Carri is shown behind the camera filming the crew members reading the letter and, as they talk, Carri chimes in both on and off screen. These two narrative strands blur, especially in Carri’s few appearances within the first narrative, such as when Couceryo travels to the Center of Forensic Anthropology. The Center compiles genetic information used to “identify the corpses found in clandestine common graves, as well as those children who were taken” and given to other families.28 After the technician pricks Couceryo’s finger, Carri asks, “Aren’t you going to stick me?” The director addses the technician because within the narrative strand of Carri searching for her parents, Couceryo’s DNA cannot yield the desired information. The technician then pricks Carri’s finger. A third narrative strand, employed less frequently and visually devoid of humans, uses toy figurines. While this third narrative provides commentary on the other two, it also emphasizes “the film’s theme of loss and trauma, as viewed through the eyes of a child.”29 For example in one sequence of this third strand, a couple drives a car down a dark road. A faceless UFO comes down and takes the car and the couple away; small blond figures are left behind to represent Carri and her two sisters.

Through the combination of these threads, as well as other self-reflexive and self-referential methods, viewers can not identify comfortably with Carri. For these reasons scholars Joanna Page and Gabriela Nouzeilles classify Los rubios as a “performative documentary,” which does not “actively promote identification and a straightforward response to the film’s content.”30 Nouzeilles notes that this type of documentary is:

Based on the idea of disavowal that simultaneously signals a desire to make a conventional documentary, and hence to provide an accurate account of a series of factual events, while also indicating the infeasibility of the documentary’s cognitive
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ambitions. Against the notion of transparency, it encourages a performative exchange between subjects, filmmakers and spectators.\textsuperscript{31}

Therefore the viewer, while not physically interacting with Carri or the others, will find it difficult to passively view the film without any mental engagement.

Within each of \textit{Los rubios}' three strands, lies a complex range of interactions between personal and national histories: Carri’s autobiography as well as that of her parents; the role of the disappeared and their children within Argentina’s 1976-1983 dictatorial period; and memory, again Carri’s, her generation’s, and Argentina’s. As Valeria Wagner notes, this film “raises the question of how historical discourse structurally mediates the perception of the everyday, and with it, the perception of oneself, of the past, and of memory.”\textsuperscript{32} Indeed it is difficult to separate history and memory from each other. In her attempt to address this complex relationship, Carri questions the way in which society has remembered the disappeared for the past twenty years. For example the \textit{INCAA} letter in \textit{Los rubios} notes that while the Carris’ story deserves to be told, the current script does not warrant the funds. Onscreen Carri and her crew interpret this reasoning as the \textit{INCAA} wanting the story told in their way. “As a film institute?” asks one of the crew. “No, as a generation,” Carri states. She continues, “They need this film, and I understand that they need it, but it is not my place to do it or I don’t feel like doing it.” This discussion relates to a later statement in the first narrative strand when Couceryo laments, “My parents’ generation, who survived terrible times, demand to be the protagonists of a story that doesn’t belong to them.”

Carri further depicts survivors and the memories that have created the “official” version of her parents through interviews conducted with neighbors, family members, and friends. One of these interviews early in the film depicts a woman who lived near the Carris when they were taken. The woman continuously states that she does not know anything and does not remember the family. Yet she contradictorily confesses that she remembers the children and is certain she was nice to them because she “helped people a lot.” All the while the neighbor clings to the idea of recognizing Carri’s name but not the now grown-up little girl who used to stay with her. In the
second “documentary about a documentary” strand she tells Carri, “If I saw her, I wouldn’t recognize her.” Later another woman recalls soldiers coming to her house. When she realized they were searching for the Carris, she pointed them to the correct residence. Although this means she, essentially, turned the Carris in, she seems to feel rather guiltless for her actions and is happy to appear on camera. Through these and other interviews, Carri gathers a variety of memories that often heroize her parents and, generally, do not really provide her with any tangible information.

While the interviews of these two women appear relatively clear in the film, many of the other interviews function as background noise. As Page notes, “Our access to many of the interviews is limited to scenes in which Analía [Courceryo, the actress portraying Carri], in the foreground, edits film notes on a laptop and replays recordings of interviews on a television screen placed firmly in the background, sometimes even obscured by her own body.” At times viewers cannot even see the screen, or at least not for the majority of the interview, and only hear the interviewee’s voice. In one such example Courceryo writes in a notebook while an unseen man speaks. Only after the camera focuses on the actress for an extended moment does she move and provide viewers a brief glimpse of the speaker. By often foregrounding Courceryo, Carri forces viewers to listen to what the various interviewees say and highlights the contradictions and the valorizing that occurs within their remembrances. While the interviews raise questions about the holes, reliability, and honesty of the shared memories, they also visually symbolize the idea of a second generation, and postmemory. The information Carri receives passes through someone else before reaching her, as she was only a young child at the time of her parents’ disappearance.

During several of the interviews, and when the filmmaker and crew visit the neighborhood in which the Carris lived when her parents were abducted, even the nickname “los rubios” becomes unreliable. Viewers learn that no one in the family had blond hair, and as Carri states, “It was obvious we weren’t from [the neighborhood]…. [I]t must have been like that for my parents.” Therefore while Los rubios “evoke[s] the fictionalizing operations of memory, [it] also recalls the sharp social and political divisions, and the insidious processes of ‘othering,’ in operation at all levels of Argentine society during the dictatorship, from the discourse of the military regime to the self-protecting denunciations of the neighbour [sic] across the road.”

¿DE QUIÉN SON ESTAS MEMORIAS?
In the end, it was this “otherness” that gave the Carris away and made them stand out. This “othering” also “draws attention to the significance of the period during which the family was unidentified, ‘disappeared’ to the authorities and ‘disguised’ for the neighbors.” The phrase *los rubios* worked only from the neighbor’s viewpoint, skewing the remembered version of the family and events in a way that separates the real, abducted Carris from the outsider, or “other” Carris.

*Los rubios* ultimately deals with the absence created by Carri’s parents’ abduction and the inability of memory to address this absence adequately, largely because of the variability of both her memory and those she collects. Carri’s presentation of this absence does not provide closure for either her personal search or for the audience. Unlike other films that may, at least on the surface, provide answers, *Los rubios* does not. Instead the filmmaker “presents absence and loss as irreducible experiences which may not be eased through the process of ‘making a film about it’; nor are they experiences which may be generated through cinematic identification for the benefit of the spectator seeking a cathartic experience.” By not attempting to create a space for catharsis, *Los rubios* works in opposition to both *Camila* and *La historia oficial*, which do, or at least attempt to, provide a space for healing and coming to terms with Argentina’s past.

With Carri’s inspection on both a personal and wider level of how the disappeared are treated and remembered, her practices seem to parallel the activism of other children of the disappeared, such as those in *HIJOS*, especially because, as Joanna Page notes, her film “presents a generation that has been orphaned in more than one sense, given the incomplete work of memory and the all-too-hasty burials that have often characterized Argentina’s relationship with the more sordid events of its history.” However I conclude that this connection with members of *HIJOS* is not entirely the case. While *Los rubios* does not denounce the calls for justice or the actions of such groups, the film suggests a need to move forward. Instead of constantly recalling past actions, Carri questions the role and consequences of these memories. A series of scenes in the film’s closing sequence communicate this desire to move forward. After Carri and the film crew don blond wigs and leave a farmhouse, Couceryo walks away from the camera down a worn dirt road; she occasionally looks back at the camera and the viewer. Then Carri and the crew recreate the same action but they do not look back. It
would appear that, through the course of the film, this group has become a family—not one to replace that of Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso, but a new form of family for the filmmaker. The creation of this new family, consisting of Carri and the film crew, neither negates the absence of Carri’s biological parents, nor does it suggest that she has forgotten or will forget them. Neither she nor Los rubios suggests that the absence left by all 30,000 desaparecidos will, or can be, negated by the various modes of memory—be they memorials, the actions of the children of the disappeared via HIJOS, or through processes such as filmmaking.

Carri’s questions do not attempt to erase her country’s recent history, but rather encourages the questioning of the “official” version of events. It would be foolhardy to disregard Argentina’s turbulent past and the 1976-1983 dictatorship. While Argentine films from the 1980s, such as Camila, La historia oficial, and La noche de los lápices explored the recent past, Carri pushes further and explores memories of that past, such as those of the younger generation’s “gray zone.” She examines the role of the desaparecidos in modern Argentina and the role of people, such as herself, who are the children of the disappeared. Through Los rubios Carri suggests both approaching the past in a different way, as well as turning more toward the future.

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NOTES:
2 Kaiser, Postmemories of Trauma, 3.
3 Ibid., 6. Kaiser goes on to note that the latter of these went against earlier international rulings, “the Nuremberg Trials established that this [Due Obedience] was in violation of international law and refused defenses based on superior orders.”


6 Foster, 11.


9 King, 96.


11 Quoted in Foster, 52.


13 Ibid., 173.

14 Kaiser, *Postmemories of Trauma*, 147.

15 Ibid., 157.

16 Ibid., 157.


18 Ibid., 500.

19 Ibid., 511.

20 Ibid., 506.


26 de Carli, 40. Although at times de Carli seems positive about NAC, he also is pessimistic or disapproving of it, as if he would either prefer clear-cut and non-thought provoking films or a return to an earlier style. While de Carli seems negative about NAC’s view of a broken society, “to [director Carlos] Sorín, his country’s new movie industry is the product of a crisis, of a disintegrated country trying to get a hold of itself with a strong tendency toward realism.” In other words NAC came from the society it depicts and, therefore, depicts a larger problem. María Alejandra Gutiérrez, “Bountiful Rebound of Argentine Cinema,” *Américas* 56, no. 3 (2004): 26.


¿DE QUIÉN SON ESTAS MEMORIAS?


32 Wagner, 155-156.

33 Page, 32.

34 Ibid., 35.

35 Wagner, 175.

36 Page, 34.

37 Ibid., 36.
COCO FUSCO AND GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-Peña’s CAGE PERFORMANCE AND LA POCHA NOSTRA’S MAPA CORPO: Art of the [Portable] Border

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I have been seriously wounded in the multicultural wars of America and so have many of my beloved colleagues. The greatest casualty, though, has been the death of border art...¹

After leaving the binational art collective Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronteriza (BAW/TAF) in 1990, Guillermo Gómez-Peña published these words in the 1991 issue of the journal High Performance. His article “Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art” was controversial at the time, especially considering its tone toward the remaining BAW/TAF members. Gómez-Peña lamented the transformation of border art into “a specialized exercise in grant writing and institutional self-promotion.”² He also criticized border art’s newfound global focus, claiming that “instead of turning the margins into the center, it was bringing the center to the margins.”³ In essence border art as it had been practiced was dead, no longer capable of generating new ideas about borders and international relations. This statement is both uncannily accurate, depicting the end of a programmatic approach to border performance developed during the 1980s, while at the same time misleading. Border art did not die in 1991; at the time it was undergoing deeply rooted changes affecting the very definition of the category. Border artists, including Gómez-Peña, had broadened their outlook in anticipation of major globalizing events.

Gómez-Peña departed the BAW/TAF after the group experienced a series of internal conflicts. Members Emily Hicks and Victor Ochoa later resigned from the collective, leaving Michael Schnorr and Susan Yamagata to recruit a new generation of BAW/TAF artists. Founding members David Avalos, Isaac Artenstein, Sara Jo Berman and Jude Eberhard had left earlier, all citing personal and work-related reasons. Rather than rehashing the internal politics of the BAW/TAF, a task that extends beyond the confines of this study, I mention this conflict because of its relevance to the changing dynamics of border at the start of the 1990s. Without the dissolution of the
original BAW/TAF, it is very possible that border art could have developed along altogether different lines.4

Border art, as defined in the work the BAW/TAF, had been confined to the U.S.-Mexico border region during the 1980s. With site-specific performances, such as End of the Line (1986), the Border Realities series (1985-1989), and Border Sutures (1990), the BAW/TAF came to represent a kind of politically-motivated art based on the physical border and dedicated to addressing the social conditions of the region. In the early 1990s two major events led to the expansion of border art. The 1992 Columbus Quincentennial and the resulting commodification of conquest, coupled with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) two years later, brought intense focus on the contact zone of the border; epistemic shifts contributed to North American-originated border art on a global scale. Rather than retreating to the physicality of the border and reasserting the primacy of the region, artists insisted upon expanding the concept of border, bringing their art and the issues it addressed to the attention of those outside of the art world. This newly expanded border art became portable in the process of addressing not only regional politics and the immigration debate, but with large-scale international conflict, ethnic and cultural difference, and the social changes brought on by late-twentieth century globalization.

Given a powerful impetus by the economics of NAFTA and the politics of Columbus Day, U.S.-Mexico border art and its constituent ideas became portable through a shift in thinking about international borders and their place in the postcolonial world-system. Rather than being grounded in the specifics of regional politics or concerned with enacting incremental change, as were the Chicano Movement and the BAW/TAF, this portable border addressed a broader audience. In doing so, border artists brought themselves to the center of the postcolonial world-system and considered everyone to be a border dweller. By applying Walter D. Mignolo’s concept of “border thinking” as a framework from which to theorize the post-NAFTA developments in border art, I will examine two performance pieces that anticipated the epistemic shift to the portable border by performing it. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco’s 1992 Cage Performance: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit… marks the start of the shift to portability with a performance that consciously elaborates borders between the artists and the audience. In more recent years Gómez-Peña’s group La Pocha Nostra
produced *Mapa Corpo* (2003-2009), a piece exploring the relationship between international conflict and borders, positioning the Iraq war as an exercise in human mapmaking. With the combination of border thinking and border mentality, the border became uprooted from its physical location while maintaining its connection to the reality of the site. In this manner the border is reinforced as a highly charged political intersection, while at the same time made relevant to other border situations around the world.5

According to Mignolo, border thinking—articulating the means by which knowledge moves from the borders of the world to the mainstream—is the solution to the positioning of subject and object. In understanding borders or peripheries, the problem of objectivity arises. The theorist comes to the borderland from the outside, imposing his or her assumptions produced from mainstream Western discourse. As Mignolo insists:

> To describe in “reality” both sides of the border is not the problem. The problem is to do it from its exteriority.... The goal is to erase the distinction between the knower and the known, between a ‘hybrid’ object (the borderland as the known) and a “pure” disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject (the knower), uncontaminated by the border matters he or she describes. To change the terms of the conversation it is necessary to overcome the distinction between subject and object...and between epistemology and hermeneutics.... Border thinking should be the space in which this new logic could be thought out.6

In these terms border thinking is the generation of knowledge from the borderland, rather than exterior to it. While it is possible to discuss border thinking in terms of the center-periphery model—knowledge moving from the periphery to the center or, more commonly, from center to periphery as in the colonial world—it is more productive to think of the system in terms of internal and external borders, as does Mignolo. At the border, who is considered inside and who is outside? Mignolo makes the point that one needs to validate the object—the known, the borderlands—by acknowledging that it too is “knowing.” Through this transposition essentialist categories become hybrid and productive.
It is important to note that Mignolo never refers to a specific border or even international boundaries as he develops his theory. In dealing with border thinking, the emphasis is toward members of previously unrecognized or underrepresented groups—those that push discourse outside the Western canon. This categorization is fundamentally different from the crossing or transgressing of international boundaries. It is my contention that border thinking can be taken further, that this theory can be used to reclassify physical borders and the effects they produce. The term “border” can be used to describe a state of being—border dweller, border milieu, or border mentality—rather than a line dividing nations. By breaking down these terms, the word “border” can thus operate in varying ways and with different levels of significance. It can mean, in the case of the border dweller, a mental state of the permanent outsider, of living between each nation but not belonging to either. It is at this point, within the border dweller or international immigrant, where the physical border joins the mental or metaphorical one, resulting in what I term a “border mentality.”

The term border mentality is particularly relevant to this discussion and leads to the concept of the portable border. Derived from border thinking, border mentality sees the entire world-system as comprised of layers of borders. These borders can range from the conventional—borders between nation-states, religions or ethnic groups—to more nuanced expressions of psychological, social or economic borders. It is therefore impossible to determine who or what is outside versus inside. In fact that very question becomes irrelevant. Rather than simply demarcating boundaries or spaces of difference, borders can serve as ties that unite disparate populations into a single commonality: that of the “border subject.” In this formulation anyone can be a border subject, constantly engaged in the act of obeying, crossing, or transgressing, established lines. In doing so, borders are re-drawn, which leads to a state of continuous change.

When brought to the arts, border mentality is not a mere destabilization of the canon or the act of allowing previously unknown voices to be heard. This concept allows for a much broader rethinking of the history of art. In essence the “borders” of art history are the points at which different geographical, temporal, and cultural spaces meet, resulting in art that takes on a hybrid form. By studying these hybrids, from contemporary border art production

ART OF THE [PORTABLE] BORDER
to other instances of intercultural contact—mudejar architecture in Spain, for example—the idea of borders can be used to rethink more traditional periods of art history. Instead of viewing these periods as discrete entities, as fully-formed wholes, these categories can be seen as hybrids in themselves, comprised of conflicting interests.

When applied to modern and contemporary art, border mentality in turn generates the concept of the portable border. This kind of portability has become a way to bring border art from the physical dividing line to other regions, from border dwellers to populations previously unconnected to the border. What does it mean to view the world as borders, and how is this manifested in the visual? Rather than in dividing the world into discrete periods and cultures, the border dweller visualizes the boundaries within these established categories. Eventually the previous categories dissolve, allowing new connections to be made among previously disparate subjects. By viewing the world as a series of borders, the artist is now able to make a commentary on subjects originally considered beyond the scope of border art.

The concept of the portable border echoes Robert Smithson’s elaboration of “the non-site,” as well as his numerous map projects and lost continents, among others. In 1979 Smithson wrote that “The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it - this The Non-Site.” Although Smithson’s earthworks were shards from quarries, fragments of breakwaters, chunks of scree and other rocks removed from their original location and transported to museums and galleries, the portable border acts along similar lines. The artist creates a work—whether performance, installation, or other media—that is generated from the experience of a border. The work then travels—locally, nationally and internationally—and in doing so, serves as a representation of border thinking or border mentality that is removed from the physical site. Through this process, the border, specifically the representation of the border in the gallery, becomes the non-site.
Regarding the act of rediscovering the original site, Smithson describes:

Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the Non-Site. The “trip” becomes invented, devised, artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site. Once one arrives at the “airfield,” one discovers that it is man-made in the shape of a hexagon, and that I mapped this site in terms of esthetic boundaries rather than political or economic boundaries.8

The relationship between site and non-site is a dialectical one that attempts to resolve the tension between representation and abstraction.9 The non-site is the synthesis of this dialectic, the meeting point between what exists at a given location and what has been removed.

With the non-trip Smithson describes the act of rediscovering the original site. The journey is imaginary because the site becomes mythologized in the act of removing the earth and placing it on display as art. For the artist representing the portable border, the original site is imbued with the mythical qualities of “The Border” and the entire history it represents. Simply invoking the U.S.-Mexico border brings to mind a history of conflict, of lines drawn and redrawn, of early twentieth-century outlaws and present-day drug traffickers. Attempting to bring “The Border” back to the physical boundary line is, as Smithson would describe, a “non-trip.”

With Smithson’s establishment of the concept of the non-site in 1968, though not published until 1979, art could be both portable and site-specific, a combination that had previously been a contradiction in terms. Smithson’s ideas, however, remained applicable primarily to his earthworks, for which he moved fragments away from a single site and into the art world. With the development of the portable border in the early 1990s, site-specificity could now refer to works removed entirely from their physical location that could nonetheless continue to evoke their point of origin. With border art that site is necessarily a border, whether international, mental, cultural or otherwise. The dual concepts of border mentality and the portable border allowed for an opening up of the category of border art beyond its traditional confines. The knowledge generated from the border, as well as the collected history
of its milieu, could flow across boundaries in the practice of portability. The lessons learned from the border can be applied now to the rest of the world.

At the start of the 1990s artists began expanding the concept of the border in anticipation of two significant events. The 1992 Columbus Quincentennial and the 1994 enactment of NAFTA began to stretch the ideas of the border in different directions. In 1992 people throughout the Americas celebrated the five hundred year anniversary of Columbus’ 1492 landing in the New World. For many, however, the Quincentennial served to memorialize centuries of colonization and subjugation by European powers. Amid the sea of commemorative plates, t-shirts and other memorabilia emblazoned with Columbus’ image, activists and revisionist historians attempted to explain the darker side of the “discovery.” Spurred to action by the official celebrations surrounding the Quincentennial, dissenters succeeded in canceling a large number of events, including the replica tour that was to cross the United States.¹⁰

The decimation of the indigenous populations of the Americas, coupled with the centuries-long European exploitation of natural resources, had a lasting effect on the status of Latin America with respect to the Northern powers. The 1992 Quincentennial necessitated a renegotiation of the history of the Americas, one that emphasized the social and economic disparity between the United States and Mexico. The U.S.-Mexico border is, in the words of feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa, “una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”¹¹ She links the border with blood to evoke not only the conquest but also the resulting Spanish dictum of limpieza de sangre [purity of blood].¹² The Quincentennial opened further the debate surrounding colonialism, conquest and its place in Euro-American history. In effect the border serves as the greatest reminder of this disparity, and in turn, of the original violence of conquest. The border stretches back through time and marks off the spaces of difference of the past as well as the physical line of today.

As noted above the same year witnessed the beginning of the NAFTA on December 17, 1992. Signed by U.S. President George H.W. Bush, Mexican President Carlos Salinas, and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, NAFTA officially came into effect on January 1, 1994. The agreement lifted
non-tariff agricultural trade barriers between the United States, Mexico and Canada, with the remaining tariffs phased out over a period of fifteen years. Even prior to its implementation, NAFTA was the source of intense controversy. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) marketed the agreement as a “win-win situation” for America's farmers. The Clinton Administration in 1993 stressed the importance of foreign engagement in general, of which NAFTA was to play a key role. From these stated goals of U.S. foreign policy, it was clear at the time that the trade agreement marked a crucial step on the path toward globalization, and the integration of the North American markets was widely seen as the first step in this direction. On the other hand labor organizers in the United States and Mexico feared a collapse of national economies.

On the day of NAFTA’s enactment the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) took up arms in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas and denounced the agreement’s marginalization of impoverished indigenous farmers. Among their demands were free elections, the resignation of then-President Carlos Salinas and the cessation of violence against Indians. The Zapatistas timed their uprising to capitalize on and undermine the international attention garnered by NAFTA. The Mexican government sent federal troops to combat the EZLN, which lead to the deaths of an estimated 200 to 300 people, most of them Zapatista. By February international attention and NGO involvement resulted in a ceasefire between the government and the Zapatistas, and on the 21st of that month, EZLN leaders met with government representative Manuel Camacho in the Cathedral of San Cristobal to negotiate territorial concessions.

During the buildup to NAFTA border art, especially the medium of performance, addressed the anticipated economic and social changes. Although the plan to enact NAFTA was public knowledge in 1992, the economic and social impact of the changes was not evident to the general public. Artists such as Gómez-Peña, Schnorr, and Fusco were in a position to analyze these proposed changes and anticipate their consequences through border performances. Artists working with the border increasingly employed notions of portability and globalism in relation to the border and previously regional concerns, knowing that NAFTA marked a significant movement toward internationalism in the Western Hemisphere. As with the Columbus Quincentennial, the concept of border drastically expanded,
but this time spatially to other regions removed from any international boundary. After NAFTA the Mexican state directed art promotion toward inserting younger, more experimental artists into the international art market; forging collaborations with American foundations and the Mexican private sector; and promoting a more contemporary image of Mexican culture.18

I would argue that the shift from site-specificity to the portable border was not complete until the definition of border changed accordingly. In the context of the Columbus Quincentennial the artistic responses to controversial status of the border were central to the artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. The two collaborated on a 1992 performance that embodied this shift from site-specificity to portability. Created in response to the oncoming Quincentennial events, and intensely aware of the more integrated future promised by NAFTA, Cage Performance: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit... both “ported” the border and explored its expansion. The performance consisted of Gómez-Peña and Fusco dressed in Western stereotypes of “native” clothing and placed on display in various museums. Fusco “played scientific specimen and exotic curio with her face painted” and wore a grass skirt, wig, sunglasses and tennis shoes, while a bare-chested Gómez-Peña wore a mask, sunglasses and black boots as he carried a briefcase with a snake inside.19 Each performance lasted three days, with Gómez-Peña and Fusco living in a golden cage in full view of the museum-going public. This arrangement resulted in the conflation of the public with the private, the space of social interaction with the tropes of domestic life.

The piece traveled extensively to museums on three continents and in seven different cities, and the title was amended each time to reflect the location. As perhaps the most striking aspect of the performance, the artists displayed themselves as the couple in the cage in a strictly ethnographic manner. In some cases they did not market the piece as performance art, but as an exhibition of living history. The audience was occasionally under the impression that the people in the cage actually were undiscovered Amerindians, much like the human exhibitions at the World’s Fairs of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In other cases the viewers assumed the couple to be descendants of native Amerindians performing as a tribute to their ancestors.
Fusco thoroughly documented the specifics of *Cage Performance* in her 1994 essay “The Other History of Intercultural Performance.” As she describes:

We called our homeland Guatinau, and ourselves Guatinauis. We performed our “traditional tasks,” which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer....For a small fee, I would dance (to rap music) and Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language) and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors.20

Fusco and Gómez-Peña emphasized the uncanny nature of the encounter. Visitors were not informed ahead of time of what to expect, and the result was an audience caught off-guard. The couple in the cage became a template for visitors, shocked by a return to the practice of exhibiting humans, to express their fears and anxieties of “the other.” In some cases this expression turned from mere discomfort into acts of violence.21 In her essay on the Cage Performance, Fusco described bystanders committing acts of aggression from shouting obscenities at the performers to a Buenos Aires viewer throwing acid on Gómez-Peña.22 The question of violence is an interesting one to discuss. It is not unprecedented for artworks to incite violence, whether a result of extreme anger or passion. For example paintings by Pablo Picasso, Barnet Newman and Kazimir Malevich have been attacked in Amsterdam.23 However, in the case of Cage Performance, I emphasize that the violence is directed against people rather than objects. The attacks were not only provoked by the nature of performance art, but also because many audience members remained unaware that the display was art. In this case the violent incidents revealed a deep-rooted fear of the “other” and all that he or she represents. In London, for example, an undercurrent of anti-immigrant sentiment would have fueled the incident, adding another dimension to the piece. The “undiscovered Amerindians” substituted for the African, South Asian, and other immigrants who populate much of London.

By emphasizing the label “undiscovered,” the title implied that these are the people who somehow escaped Columbus, Cortes, Pizarro and other conquistadors. On the eve of the Quincentennial to celebrate the so-called “discovery” of America, the idea of remaining undiscovered functions as an act of defiance. The verb “visit” significantly implies active participation of
the subjects in the exhibition. It is as if these undiscovered Amerindians chose to go on this particular tour in order to visit a number of countries and museums around the globe. The activity of the verb “visit” stands in stark contrast to the visuals of the piece with the two people caged—literally placed behind bars for the viewing pleasure and supposed safety of the audience. The bars thus kept the performers from fully interacting with, or visiting, the spaces to which they traveled.

According to Fusco the artists aimed to generate a “reverse ethnography” by focusing on the reactions of the audience rather than the study of the supposed Amerindian people.\textsuperscript{24} I argue that this reverse ethnography writes the existing borders between audience and performer into discourse. The border I describe serves as more than just the boundary between the action on the stage and those passively viewing it; rather this border urges the interaction between the two groups and encourages transgression and crossing. The performance here is not simply a set piece to be viewed passively, but contains the potential to become a conversation between the artists and the audience. In doing so the audience determined the specifics of the performance, as well as the interpretation. When the viewers were unaware of the artistic nature of this spectacle, the piece took on an entirely different dimension than when it was prominently displayed as an artwork (at the Whitney Museum, for instance). For \textit{Cage Performance} border crossing is not physical; the golden cage separates the audience from the performers. Here audience members cross the border through acts of communication and identification with the supposedly indigenous subjects and also through the “otherness” within each viewer. As has been theorized by Edward Saïd, Timothy Mitchell and countless other scholars, the encounter with the “other” exposes and reveals more about the dominant culture than about the one on display.\textsuperscript{25} This idea held true in the case of the \textit{Cage Performance}. Public interaction with the “undiscovered Amerindians” lowered viewers’ inhibitions, revealing the strange, the alien, and the other within themselves. While not initially recognizable as border art, I argue \textit{Cage Performance} served as the first physical embodiment of the portable border, and this artwork would be followed by the further globalization of border art.

After \textit{Cage Performance} Gómez-Peña collaborated with other artists and eventually formed a troupe called La Pocha Nostra. The name plays on the Sicilian Mafia’s “La Cosa Nostra,” with the word “Pocha,” a slang term for
artificial whiteness. Pocha can mean “bleached,” indicating an intentional whiteness expressed by an attitude—a “Pocho” is either clueless about Latino culture and social norms or purports to exist above them. The name La Pocha Nostra refers to both definitions and indicates an ownership of this condition from both sides. Other permanent members of the troupe included Roberto Sifuentes, Gómez-Peña’s longtime collaborator, artist/actress Violeta Luna, and dancer/artist Michéle Ceballos. The rest of La Pocha Nostra’s roster constantly changes as an influx of international artists joins the troupe for specific performances. The group’s goal has been to “provide a base [and forum] for a loose network of rebel artists from various disciplines, generations and ethnic backgrounds.”26 With the changing landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border and its relevance to other border situations around the globe, La Pocha Nostra began to take border art further. Art became a means to comment on broad ranging issues such as neocolonialism, international migration and the state of the immigrant/refugee, and the dynamics of integrated global economies. Border art, as a result, moved away from the specifics of the U.S.-Mexico border, where it would resonate with those exposed to the situation, and toward a more universal kind of symbolism.

Similarly to Cage Performance, La Pocha Nostra’s 2003 performance of *Mapa Corpo* [Body Map] may initially seem distant from the border and the category of “border art.” The piece communicates a complex take on U.S. foreign policy and twenty-first century colonialism. Rather than focusing primarily on the boundaries between nations, *Mapa Corpo* brings attention to the transgression of these same boundaries. In the various iterations of this piece from 2003 through 2009, the artists explored an idea of “border” made possible only by the increasing portability of border art. I would argue that *Mapa Corpo* is the twenty-first century culmination of the portable border and its evolution into a global, multi-ethnic and pan-regional border. With this performance Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra use the knowledge and strategies generated from U.S.-Mexico border art to make an effective socio-political statement about the nature of international borders.

For *Mapa Corpo* Gómez-Peña dressed as a shaman and spoke incantations in an imaginary language over a nude woman. Female members of La Pocha Nostra played the nude woman on a rotating basis, and occasionally the troupe hired an actress to perform this role when troupe members were
An acupuncturist worked on the woman's body and pressed needles adorned with national flags into her flesh. The flags represented the coalition of nations taking part in the Iraq invasion as the puncture locations corresponded to traditional sites for acupuncture treatment. The proportion of flags of a specific country was directly related to its participation in the war, with the United States representing the largest number of flags. After the acupuncturist completed his work, the audience was then invited to "decolonize" the body by removing the flags, one at a time. Simultaneously artist Roberto Sifuentes posed as an injured soldier as a grieving woman held him in a *pietà* pose. Gómez-Peña described the piece as "a response to the invasion of Iraq... [utilizing] political acupuncture as a metaphor," with the nude body as territory, forty needles with varying flags of the occupational forces, the operation by an acupuncturist, and the audience then invited to extract the flags from the body map.  

This concept of political acupuncture deserves further inspection into what the action signifies. A troupe member, or occasionally a curator, played the acupuncturist and colonized the body through flags. In comparing colonization with acupuncture, *Mapa Corpo* interrogates the nature of both. The acupuncturist, intending to heal, takes on a darker role. Rather than alleviating pain or other ailments, he *inflicts* pain by piercing the woman's skin. This dual pain of both infliction and alleviation is inherent to acupuncture, while in the performance, the action implies and underscores the U.S. government's explanation of the war; namely, that in order to heal or resolve territorial conflict, it is necessary to inflict pain or destruction. Acupuncture here serves as a metaphor for the collateral damage expected from conflict, damage that is suffered by the conquered territory rather than the colonizer. Under the guise of intervening in international conflicts or aiding repressed groups, the present-day colonizer substitutes one regime for another and nothing is gained in the process.

The piece was intentionally dark, capturing the post-9/11 mood in the United States and abroad. At the start of the Iraq war, *Mapa Corpo* foreshadowed the violence to come, even as forecasts for the invasion projected instant victory. The use of a female body is itself a statement. Land or nation is feminized, as in constructions of the "motherland." The metaphor can be taken further to emphasize the toll that war has on the civilian population, especially in twenty-first century conflicts when the battle lines are not clearly drawn.
Rather than a soldier on the table, or even simply a male figure, the nude woman evokes vulnerability in the face of war. Women are also frequently the reason or justification of war. From Helen of Troy to the nameless “repressed women” of fundamentalist Islamic regimes, the feminine has literally constituted the territory for which war has been fought.

When La Pocha Nostra initially developed *Mapa Corpo* in 2003, the Iraq war was in its infancy, with strong support for the invasion in the United States and coalition nations. As a result the U.S. art establishment largely passed on the piece when it was proposed. It is important to note that this is Gómez-Peña’s personal characterization of the situation, an outlet for his frustration during the early part of the Iraq war. This is not to say that the sentiment was not shared by other artists and cultural elites. From 2003 to 2005, La Pocha Nostra performed *Mapa Corpo* in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, Europe and Canada. Gómez-Peña, angered by the apparent rejection of the piece in the United States, expressed his frustration in an essay entitled “Disclaimer.” Later published in a 2006 issue of *The Drama Review*, Gómez-Peña emotionally ranted at the art establishment in the United States. He lamented:

>The air has become extremely rarefied. The continuous defunding of the arts, paired with institutionalized neoconservatism and the imposed culture of panic, prohibition, and high security permeating every corner of society—including our arts organizations—has created an incendiary environment for the production of critical culture, and generated a growing unemployed (or rather “under-employed”) class: the “radical” experimental artist.

Despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, *Mapa Corpo* was extremely popular outside of the United States; *Mapa Corpo* embodied the concept of the portable border as the piece traveled internationally and inter-continentally over the three-year period.

According to Gómez-Peña the social and political situation in the United States eventually led to *Mapa Corpo’s* acceptance. By 2005 the political climate in the United States had changed drastically and support for the war had waned. The socio-political shift, coupled with *Mapa Corpo’s* success in
Europe, led to requests for performances at U.S. art institutions. By the end of 2005 Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra had begun to perform the piece at museums and galleries around the United States. The performance became a literal border crosser, moving around the globe and finally returning to the United States, where—and for which—it had originally been conceived.

The 2005 version of the piece included a second station. As Gómez-Peña describes, it contained:

> [T]he international immigrant, which was a brown man, nude, whose body would be prepared by either a witch or a curator. And the preparation ritual entailed washing him, shaving him...engaging in a kind of exorcism. ...In the last part of the show, we would invite the audience to re-colonize his body with statements, with literature, with the poetics of hope, we would give them pencils, crayons and lipstick to write on his body and turn him into a kind of book of border poetry.

The artists added this part of the performance in response to the earlier controversy and to add another dimension to the piece. The audience acts upon the nude man as they had previously acted upon the nude female body. The “international immigrant” is first stripped, and then “exorcised” of the past and of previous relationships. This action is meant to relate to the undocumented immigrant experience, particularly from Mexico into the United States, when the illegal border-crosser loses his or her history and identity in the desert crossing. Finally he emerges only to be re-colonized through his labor by the country he has fought so hard to enter. Undocumented workers in homes, fields, factories and slaughterhouses across the United States constitute not just an underclass; one could speak in terms of invisible labor, and even the rhetoric of the caste system is not out of place in this context. In the case of Mapa Corpo (2005), the artists portrayed the immigrant body as generically as possible, with no specific markers to identify his nationality. In the end the physical reality of his brown-skinned body signifies his ethnicity, and the connection with the U.S.-Mexico border experience remains clear.

I argue that, given these associations, both versions of Mapa Corpo present a twenty-first century embodiment of the border art concept adapted for
a global age. This development functions as an extension of the portable border, connected as it was by the artist to the United States’ act of border crossing in Iraq. Gómez-Peña’s *Mapa Corpo* performance dramatized border thinking as it metaphorically clarified how the United States crossed several boundaries: the physical line separating Iraq from the rest of the world, the line between diplomacy and conflict, and the line dividing the United States from its strongest allies. *Mapa Corpo* restaged the Iraq war as a border conflict that links military aggression to the trauma of colonization —the instigation for Latin American “border thinking.”

Additionally how does the concept of mapping, invoked by the title “body map,” function in this portable and globalized border art? In *Mapa Corpo* the woman herself—or the man in later performances—serves as a living map, breathing and even changing from performance to performance. The frequently employed concept of woman-as-map invokes a centuries-long history of human territoruality and border control. Although initially equated with religious worldviews, by the fifteenth century, maps had become inextricably linked with empire. Originally the very act of mapping a newly “discovered” territory was ground enough for claiming it as one’s own. According to cartographic historian J. B. Harley, maps “redescribe the world in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences and priorities.” The surveyor “whether consciously or otherwise, replicates not just the ‘environment’ in some abstract sense but equally the territorial imperatives of a particular political system.”

The gender of La Pocha Nostra’s “body map” is also significant when troupe members Violeta Luna and Lorena Rivero de Beer played the nude woman on a rotating basis; both were chosen for their androgynous features. The few outside models contracted to perform occasionally were voluptuous women. In these cases the focus of the piece shifted, as the “body map” charted a sexual topography rather than a colonial geography. According to Gómez-Peña, “The thoughts behind the image, the territories—national territories—maps, have been feminized for centuries…. So we were basically utilizing a kind of expedient metaphor.” While it may have been “expedient,” Gómez-Peña, Luna, Sifuentes and the rest of La Pocha Nostra engaged with the feminization of the map beyond simply utilizing a metaphor. Rather than the traditional metaphor of female map and motherland, *Mapa Corpo* brought together cartographic history, Chinese traditional medicine and
U.S. colonial actions. The colonization of the body evokes sexual violence while avoiding the depiction of conflict. The acupuncturist, representative of coalition forces, not only colonizes the woman’s body, but these actions meet no opposition. Colonial powers, in the world of *Mapa Corpo*, encounter no resistance, but simply flesh that yields to the touch of a needle.

In developing this performance, members of La Pocha Nostra considered the sexual politics of the nude female and intended for the resulting image to shock viewers. The audience bears witness to her assumed vulnerability, and, as they are invited to “decolonize” her, they do so out of empathy. On the other hand the 2005 version of the piece also allowed the audience to act upon the nude male figure. Rather than removing flags from his body and decolonizing, the audience was invited to recolonize by writing on his skin. The nude man becomes a map for the public’s thoughts, fears and hopes in the language of the body map. Had the genders of the figures been reversed, the message could have been vastly different.

Additionally Gómez-Peña utilizes the trope of the shaman to represent borders. Initially a denizen of the physical U.S.-Mexico border, the shaman or brujo figure had evolved to embody the multi-ethnic portable border. Originally the word “shaman” comes from the Tungus language of central Siberia. Incorporating “sa,” the Tungus word for “knowledge,” *sa-man* indicated an extremely knowledgeable person.33 Shamanism, or aspects thereof, is found in religions around the world, including tribes of Central and South America. Among indigenous Colombians the role of the shaman was the “curing of disease, obtaining of game animals, and fish from their supernatural masters, the presiding over the rituals in the individual life cycle, and defensive or aggressive action against personal enemies.”34 The ritual and defensive aspects of the shaman pervades Gómez-Peña’s performance in *Mapa Corpo* as he presides over the acupuncture ceremony.

*Mapa Corpo’s* shaman speaks in multiple languages, including several imaginary tongues. Gómez-Peña, as the shaman, acts as the ringmaster of the event as he connects the audience, the performers, and the nebulous “other.” He is at once frightening, clothed as a witch doctor, yet firmly in control as he directs the action and supposedly communes with the divine. Gómez-Peña’s shaman looks back to an earlier performance, one that had
come to define border art. In 1989’s *Border Brujo* [Border Magician] Gómez-Peña created an archetypal figure that came to represent international border-crossers. The artist’s *brujo* assumes many forms including those of a *Pachuco*, Native American, broadcast journalist and a drunken, sombrero-clad Mexican. Vacillating between inhabiting stereotypes and producing a more subtle ironic commentary, Gómez-Peña’s 1989 performance physically embodied what would later become U.S.-Mexico border thinking.

Giving human form to the border region is work of a distinctly anthropological nature. Gómez-Peña often calls his work “reverse anthropology,” a term similar to Mignolo’s “border thinking,” in which the artist assumes a central position while forcing the dominant culture to the margins.³⁵ Gómez-Peña’s categorizing of border characters has been explored and echoed by others, and social anthropologists have categorized border-crossers and dwellers into a variety of types. In his 1994 book *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* Oscar Martínez presented a taxonomy of many distinct categories, from the relocated Anglo retiree to the transient migrant Mexican.³⁶ In Martínez’ study, however, the border types fall along specific lines according to their subjects’ degree of hybridity. For Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra the reality of the border is far more fluid and the categories constantly shift; thus, creating a standard taxonomy proves to be impossible.

The shaman and his incorporation of an entire encyclopedia of border hybrids has been transported from 1989 to 2003, from *Border Brujo* to *Mapa Corpo*. Intervening between the audience and the performance tableau, he represents layers of accumulated border knowledge. In *Mapa Corpo* the shaman stands as a connection between the more literal border art of the late-1980s and early-1990s and the portable border in the post-NAFTA period. The shaman is recognizable as a hybrid figure, a cross between a witch doctor, magician, and psychic visionary. He exists on the borders between life and death, illness and health, the living world and the world of spirits. In fact, according to Marcel Mauss, the shaman or witch doctor acts almost entirely through speech, as he “inhales or sucks disease in….consequently any magical action practiced through the voice belongs to this form of magic.”³⁷ Gómez-Peña’s chants take this role and connect the realm of the mystical with the reality of the Iraq invasion. In this manner he
brings the hybrid culture of the border region into prominence on the world stage. This hybridity and fluidity link the U.S.-Mexico border and the Iraq war together in a single border milieu.

Subsequent versions of *Mapa Corpo* incorporated yet another perspective—that of twenty-first century Latin America. For a performance at the 2009 Havana Biennial Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra changed the meaning of the body map again, retitling the piece *Mapa Corpo III*. The piece itself became a border shifter—changing the concept from the Iraq war and U.S. foreign policy to a new map of discord within Latin America and the general lawlessness of the region. Gómez-Peña explained:

> But since the rules of the game have shifted...the tone of the piece has changed, and also the nature of the piece has changed. So now the flags are no longer the flags of the forces of occupation in Iraq, but now the flags of the Latin American countries who are facing crime cartels, and it has become a piece about violence in Latin America....By extracting the flags, we are asking the audience to commit to fight the violence in our countries.38

The drug cartels to which Gómez-Peña refers maintained a strong presence in most Mexican border cities since the 1970s, leading to widespread and highly publicized outbreaks of violence on the U.S.-Mexico border through the early twenty-first century. As with the Iraq war, *Mapa Corpo III* portrayed the cartel violence primarily as a conflict of borders and crossings between the U.S. and Mexico and also among the various Latin American nations it affects. The performance makes a relevant commentary on the U.S.-Mexico border that connects it with major global events.

Border artists both anticipated and responded to increasing global integration and broadened the definition of border art. The Columbus Quincentennial and resulting controversy allowed for a revisioning of history and questioned the “discovery” narratives and conquest themes. Border artists explored this dynamic long before the official Quincentennial in 1992, with works that positioned the United States as a continuation of European dominance, standing in for the Spanish empire. BAW/TAF performances such as *End of the Line* (1986) and *Border Pilgrimage* (1987) as well as earlier Chicano works including the Chicano Park Murals, were prominent examples of
this shift in focus away from Spain as colonial power. In turn the specific relationship between the United States and Mexico came to stand for the larger clash of cultures and the economic disparity between the developing world and dominant industrial powers. With its waves of documented and undocumented immigration, the U.S.-Mexico border region came to stand for the dilemma surrounding international migration of all kinds. The 150-year history of the U.S.-Mexico border has produced a template for intercultural integration and an example to be studied.

The performances I have discussed here, *Cage Performance*, *Mapa Corpo*, and to a lesser extent, *Border Brujo*, manifest a vision of the portable border. Portability gives the insights of border art and artists greater latitude and freedom of expression, opening up the concepts of “border” and “border art” far beyond their literal definitions. In doing so artists have brought the lessons of the border and the specified knowledge generated there to places seemingly unrelated to the U.S.-Mexico situation. Ideas regarding the U.S.-Mexico border have been allowed to resonate globally because of their portability.

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NOTES:
2 Ibid., 9. With the mention of grant writing, Gómez-Peña refers to the BAW/TAF’s ability, starting in the late-1980s, to write successful grants. As BAW/TAF member Michael Schnorr said of the period, “We couldn’t write a bad grant.” Michael Schnorr, Personal Interview, 16 April 2009.
3 Ibid. This statement is a specific reaction to efforts by the Museum of Contemporary Art to attract international artists to San Diego-Tijuana. The phenomenon of center moving to the periphery would be even more pronounced starting in 1992, with the establishment of the San Diego-Tijuana binational art festival InSite. Widespread global attention would not come to InSite until 1997, six years after Gómez-Peña’s *High Performance* article.
This is not to say that the BAW/TAF was the sole source of art on the U.S.-Mexico border. During the 1970s, the San Diego-Tijuana region had experienced a strong wave of public art connected with the social ideas of the Chicano Movement. Artists such as Salvador “Queso” Torres, Mario Torero, and Guillermo Aranda, among others, designed the Chicano Park murals starting in 1973, while the mural and poster movement flourished in both San Diego and Los Angeles. Independent artists, such as San Diego-based Manuel “Zopilote” Mancillas and Robert Sanchez, were also involved in border art and would go on to work with the BAW/TAF collective.

I have limited my scope mainly to the U.S.-Mexico border because of the dangers of attempting to theorize “the border” as a single entity. The politico-economic specifics of different border regions create a great disparity in the way international dividing lines are experienced. The virtually borderless European Union is at one extreme of the spectrum, while the heavily policed borders in much of Africa (the Kenya-Somalia border, as well as Morocco-Algeria in Northern Africa) and Southeast Asia (the Thai-Malaysia and Thai-Myanmar regions, specifically) fall to the other extreme. Because of the variety of border regions, it is impossible to advance a single “border theory.” Yet some borders have been more fruitfully theorized than others. In fact it is the U.S.-Mexico border region that has stimulated the most intense theorizing of “border art.”


The concept of *limpieza de sangre* led to the development of a very specific kind of painting in New Spain. These *casta* paintings were intended to illustrate the cultural mixtures that arose from different racial combinations. For example Spanish + Indian = Mestizo and Spanish + African = Mulatto. In a way these *casta* paintings explored the cultural mixtures of the border long before the establishment of the physical line.


Mihalis Mentinis, *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What it Means for Radical Politics*
ART OF THE [PORTABLE] BORDER


17 Niels Barmeyer, Developing Zapatista Autonomy: Conflict and NGO Involvement in Rebel Chiapas (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 42-43; and Mentinis, 11-12.

18 Fusco, 64. This statement holds true for all forms of Mexican art, not just art that addresses the international border.


20 Fusco, 39.

21 Ibid., 56.

22 Taylor: 166.


24 Fusco, 57.


27 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Interview with the author, 23 March 2009.

28 Gómez-Peña, interview, 23 March 2009.


30 Gómez-Peña, interview, 23 March 2009.


32 Gómez-Peña, interview, 23 March 2009.


35 Daniel Belgrad, “Performing Lo Chicano,” MELUS Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 2004): 253. This term could be seen as an extension of the “reverse ethnography” described by Coco Fusco in relation to the Cage Performance.

36 Oscar J. Martínez, Border People: Life and Society in the US-Mexico Borderlands (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 67-83. Although Gómez-Peña never specifically cites Martínez in his work, his interest in generating a reverse anthropology indicates that he was most likely aware of this research and others like it.


38 Gómez-Peña, interview, 23 March 2009.
ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: CURVED AND POINTED
Katy Cannon, M.F.A.

Abstraction is elimination of detail and codification of information. We operate by its principles in all our systems of communication and even in our coherent thoughts. Since we must communicate in the world outside ourselves and not mind-to-mind, we have the ability to simplify our perceptions into compact, expressible forms, such as words and symbols. The ability to recognize that “bird” means any, all, or one particular bird, has a more playful side, such as seeing birds in the shapes of clouds or lines of curved wood.

I find it fascinating that the essentials I pick out of a visual experience, and translate through inarticulate wood, can relate some of the feelings of that experience to another. And I find sculpture to be something altogether different from pictures. An artist making images has to create only one side of things—the side we see—and can even create something altogether imaginary. A sculptor, on the other hand, while dealing with his or her imagination, also has to deal with the physical facts of the world. Gravity, size, and relationships of placement demand a functional kind of attention—the same kind we give to everyday objects. But sculpture further demands a special kind of attention—the importance of what it looks from every side.

The only really good way to see sculpture is to do so in person. Like so many things in life—taking a walk, attending a concert—“seeing” sculpture is as reliant on the sensations of the body as much as it is the eyes. Our sense of touch relies very much on weight; and it is only in comparison to our own bodies that we understand physical similarities and differences between ourselves and other things, plants, and animals. This leads me to consider how I experience the world as a part of nature—a being in the world—not outside of it as one looking at a picture.

If this work is about control, then it is also about abandonment—the pursuit of order and the submission to chaos. While I go about construction instinctively, I am tapping into a mode of problem solving unfettered by too much solution. For example, I could have studied boat building, or even just soaked my wood before constructing the Hull, but instead I just kept inching the curves tighter and tighter, finessing the planks into place. I can not remember how many of them snapped.
I want my work to be a struggle, so that what I learn is my own. The order I achieve is my triumph, not over nature but over my own awkwardness and ignorance—it is a true manifestation of my will. The wood’s splintering, splitting, and cracking is the inevitable return of chaos. The Greeks called these two opposing states by the names of two gods, Apollo and Dionysus, and defined beauty as the combination of the two. As aspiration to order against hardship and blithe abandonment to danger represent the beautiful extremes of the human soul, so art demonstrating these conflicting forces offers a yin-yang view of—dare I say it—life itself.

Along the way, someone interpreted my *Bird #2* as a sprouting seed and turned my attention from animals to plants. The three works following that shift in thought have all had plant-forms as their inspiration, and as I neared completion of *Hull*, I began to think of this body of work as “my flowers.” Floral beauty maintains timelessness through its ability to be reinvented through ever-changing time and across cultures. While, of course, the form, color, and scent of a flower are born again and again each spring in much the same way, the meaning of that beauty is open for interpretation. It is precisely this same adaptability that also gives timelessness to art. If we concur that viewers of different times and cultures will come to different opinions about the same work of art, then we must agree that the artist’s intention is of little import to the value of the work. It is, instead, the properties of the work itself that stand out from the background of the world as worthy of attention.

In his book *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* Michael Pollan proposes that in the evolution of flowers, “Beauty had emerged as a survival strategy.” Standing out from the background vegetation, a flower could attract the attention of pollinators and dispersers of seed. As foraging animals, humans naturally noticed flowers and attributed meaning—future food—to the blossoms. But as civilization advanced, “We gazed even farther into the blossom of a flower and found something even more: the crucible of beauty, if not art.” For in a flower we see both creation and decay, the cycle of time sped up and embodied. So perhaps, through evolution, we are hard-wired to appreciate formal regularity as much as we are novelty. For me, the simplicity of abstraction opens avenues of imagination and memory far more powerfully and with much more freedom than anything that requires me to guess at intention or implication.
I often ask myself if I am doing the right thing with my life, spending so much time with art. But, as I think any artist knows, the compulsion to see, to hear, to feel what is in your imagination is as much a part of the world as everything else. As art critic Dave Hickey stated recently, we study art simply because, “We would rather look than not.”

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NOTES:
2 Ibid., 109.
3 Dave Hickey, “The Sisterhood of the Arts,” lecture, 11 February 2010, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
Katy Cannon, Abstract (Tree Roots), 2009; alder and fir tree roots. Approx. 66” x 52” x 136”; varies according to installation. Photograph by Jeff Willis.

Katy Cannon, *Hull*, 2010; alder, redwood, pine and elm. 48” x 60” x 35” (detail). Photograph by Jeff Willis.

Katy Cannon, *Abstract (Bird #1)*, 2009; alder. 114” x 12” x 6” (left) and *Abstract (Bird #2)*, 2009; pine. 108” x 16” x 6” (right). Photograph by Jeff Willis.
PLATE 1. Waldemar Cordeiro. (a) *Opera Aperta* [Open Work], 1963, Aluminum paint and mirror on canvas, 75 x 150 cm; (b) *Ambigüidade* [Ambiguity], 1963, Oil, mirror, and collage on canvas, 75 x 150 cm. Images courtesy of Ana Livia Cordeiro.

PLATE 3. San Carlos of Cabaña Fortress, one of the main venues of the Havana Biennial. Image courtesy of the author and Havana Biennial curatorial committee.


**INTEGRATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE GLOBAL ERA: A Review of the Tenth Havana Biennial (2009)**

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From March 27 to April 30, the 2009 Havana Biennial celebrated the event’s tenth edition and twenty-fifth year anniversary. Upon the 1982 death of the world-renowned Cuban modernist Wifredo Lam, Fidel Castro initiated the founding of a center for research of the arts from the Third World. The Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam [Wifredo Lam Center of Contemporary Art] was founded in Cuba in order to end the country’s peripheral and isolated position in contemporary world culture. In 1984 this institution inaugurated the Havana Biennial under the support of the Fine Arts and Design Division of the Ministry of Culture. Since then the biennial has served as the visual hallmark of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution (January 1959) and has become the hub of the activist avant-garde art of the Third World. After the Revolution Cuban cultural institutions and the Havana Biennial were founded to challenge Western value systems imbedded in colonialist discourses with the cultural solidarity of Latin America, Africa and Asia—geographies with a historical resistance to Western hegemony. In the 1980s Cuban artists could not travel out of Cuba, and art materials were scarce because of the country’s economic hardships and the U.S. blockade. The art history books briefly referred to the Cuban art of this time as an exotic *modus operandi* and a multi-polar art discourse from the Third World was greatly needed. Thus the Havana Biennial was launched to make Cuban art accessible to wider audiences.

The first edition of the Biennial was the largest exhibition of Latin American and Caribbean Art of its time and included some 800 artists from 22 countries in the region. The second edition included Asian and African art in a quest to represent the cultural authority of the neglected groups, communities, nations, and individuals from these continents. Some 2,500 artworks by 700 artists of 60 countries were displayed, making it the greatest art festival of the non-Western world. Since then the exhibition has been celebrated as a triennial event because of Cuba’s financial difficulties, even though it is still called *la Bienal de la Habana* [the Havana Biennial]. In 1989 the third edition eliminated both prizes and a presentation scheme based on geographical areas, transforming the biennial structure into a more open
space in which the artworks were not judged, categorized, and exhibited by the nationality of the artists. This was Havana’s major step in departing from the exhibition models that most international biennials had adopted at the time, which merely replicated the colonial logic of their precursors, such as world fairs and salon exhibitions.

In the last two decades, the number of the contemporary art biennials has grown significantly. There were around ten biennials or triennials in 1989 and there are more than one hundred today; around sixty of them are international mega-events. Biennials were founded to provide means for the local artists to be included in the global art system. The Havana Biennial is one of the very few that has maintained its mission to reach worldwide audiences in alternative contexts. It has also searched to resolve the complex relationship between the local cultural expressions and international languages, especially with issues pertaining to the Eurocentrism of the art world. With that, it aimed to create the space of a horizontal connection South to South, not only seeking legitimacy, but also looking to critically affect the North-South axis of Western art practices. For twenty-five years the Havana Biennial has challenged the commercialization and neo-colonial reductionism manifested in Venice, São Paolo, and Kassel Biennials. Other peripheral biennials, such as those of Istanbul (1989), Sharjah (1991) and Gwangju (1995), lost their focus on challenging the Eurocentric market. Hence, now, the majority of the exhibits have an important mission that transcends promoting local artists and instead aims toward the inclusion of their host city in the new post-1989 economy. Still the Havana Biennial has insisted on the activist and radical seal of its reason d’etre.

Since 1991 Havana has also invited marginalized artists of the First World to expand the network of Third World cultural solidarity. The tenth Havana Biennial officially opened its zones of interaction to the rest of the world. Artists from Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, the United States and Japan were present, but the most weight was still given to the works from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. With the theme “Integration and Resistance in the Global Era” the Biennial sought to critically look at the universalizing dynamics of the so-called “global world” in an attempt to analyze “on one hand, the complexities of a real and active process of integration to the global order and, on the other, the capacity to challenge the homogenizing farce this process presupposes.” Jorge Fernández,
director of Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, summarized the tenth Biennial’s goal as “to establish the relationship between art intervening with the social processes and the processes that search for transformation.”

Occurring during the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, with more than 1,000 works by 300 artists from 54 countries, the Havana Biennial once again became a platform for radical artist brigades, heated leftist debates, and sincere dialogues among engaged artists, intellectuals, and scholars. The exhibition was housed in sixteen official sites as well as an additional 130 collateral exhibitions scattered all around the city and its outskirts (Plate 3). Thus this giant art exhibition enveloped the city, poured onto the streets, and exploded into the plazas.

For example José Emilio Fuentes Fonseca (JEFF)’s herd of life-size metal elephants titled Memoria [Memory] wandered the streets of Havana and stopped at the Capitol Building, the José Martí Anti-imperialist Tribune, the Old Plaza, in the Buena Vista neighborhood, and on the steps of the Havana University. Elephants, symbolizing power, marked their footprints first in the colonial spaces, and later in places that symbolize the engagement in the historical struggle for such power. JEFF chose to convert symbolic sites into playgrounds by allowing children to climb on the elephants and play with them. The metal elephants visibly revealed their fusion lines. Their bodies also contained inflation valves to suggest that power may potentially dissolve (or deflate) due to changing conditions, no matter how giant and stable a power may appear to be. JEFF’s elephants symbolize how the totalitarian power structures that Cuba encountered during colonial times, and later in Revolution, have not been solid and uncontested.

JEFF’s project serves as an allegorical response to Marx and Engels’ statement in The Communist Manifesto, in which they comment on the ambiguity of changing social relations within the emergence of the bourgeois class. Marx and Engels state, “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” Since the dissolution of the Soviet Republics in 1989 and the economic crises that hit Cuba in 1994, Cuba adopted state capitalism. The Cuban government initiated a series of reform measures, such as opening the economy to
foreign investment and establishing free-trade zones. The tourist sector, based on foreign investments, is expected to save the central economy that has depended on sugar exports, while tourism also creates an unbalanced income structure (with tips and other informal wages) and growing social inequalities. Cubans have been experiencing “the everlasting uncertainty and agitation” caused by the radical changes in the modes of production, as explained by Marx and Engels. The Revolution is now being contested with the weakening central/socialist economy and the future is very uncertain for Cubans. JEFF’s elephants, giant and solid, give the impression that they could melt into air if pulled at their fusion lines. Thus the illusion of the elephant’s stability parallels that of Cuba’s current state and economy.

Manuel Mendive, who is known for his joyful performances at the last three Havana Biennials, presented another spontaneous and ritualistic performance that created the most carnivalesque moments of the Biennial. For the opening of his exhibition *El espíritu, la naturaleza, cabeza and corazones* [*Spirit, Nature Heads, and Hearts*] at the Orígenes Gallery in Havana’s Grand Theater, Mendive painted the dancers from Cuba’s Contemporary Dance Ensemble, the National Folkloric Group, and Caribbean Dance Company from eastern Santiago de Cuba province and prepared them for the performance. Huge crowds gathered when a group of dancers, dressed in carnival costumes that Mendive designed along with the experienced designer Ignacio Carmona, started their parade at the Saratoga Hotel and danced through the avenue Prado Promenade to the rhythm of percussion. When they arrived at the Grand Theater, other groups of dancers with painted naked bodies joined them while Maestra Pura Ortiz played baroque music. Here the performers engaged in a dance that mimicked the rituals of transformation, resurrection, and renewal of life. In this representation of carnival rituals Mendive mixed the rituals of Cuban daily life with that of the African spirit world. During a press conference just prior to the event Mendive commented, “I’m Cuban, I’m black, and I’m proud of it. I have a lot of energy and the poetry of my ancestors, with which I can tell the world beautiful things from my country, my identity.”

Mendive’s affirmation of African identity through Afro-Cuban social and religious rituals re-articulates *Afrocubanismo* in Cuba, which developed as a parallel ideology to that of *Cubania* [*Cubanness*], the basis of nationalist movements in Cuba since the late-nineteenth century. *Afrocubanismo* was
established as style of counter-colonial representation in the 1920s and 1930s by the authors Fernando Ortiz, Alejo Carpentier, and Juan Marinello. The Cuban modernist Wifredo Lam figures as the prominent visual artist using this artistic style. In the early-twentieth century Lam marked the colonial difference between Europe and Cuba by introducing content of African origin into modern art. In the contemporary moment Mendive similarly employed Afrocubanismo in his performance to constitute an “other” universal perspective in the ideas pertaining to the neo-colonial Western epistemology that expanded through the world with the processes of globalization.

The Havana Biennial serves not only as a site of political struggle but also as one of a linguistic struggle between the state and Cuban cultural workers. Thus one can say that the subjectivity of local artists and intellectuals is not completely lost within the dominance of the state’s ideological language. The Havana Biennial, on the contrary, offered a space for a dialogical interaction. Tania Bruguera’s Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version) at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam literally worked with the idea of language and speaking. Bruguera, founder of La Cátedra de Arte Conducta [Department of Conduct Art] at Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, created a stage and invited Cubans to talk about “anything” for one minute. She also provided two hundred disposable cameras to the public to document the event. During the speeches two actors, a man and a woman dressed as officials of the Ministry of Interior, tried to put one of two doves on the shoulder of each speaker. This gesture invoked the event that occurred on January 6, 1959, when a white dove landed on Fidel Castro’s right shoulder while he gave his initial speech of the Revolution. At the time the dove provided proof for the followers of Santeria—the Afro-Cuban religion—that the gods supported Castro as he was spiritually “crowned” as the leader of the Cuban people.

Upon taking the stage in Bruguera’s performance, a woman cried hysterically, another screamed, and a young man kept silent for a minute. One participant acted like Castro and said, “This should be banned.” Another was thrown off of the stage because she exceeded the one-minute rule. Approximately thirty speakers criticized the government’s actions against the freedom of speech and the use of internet. In an interview for La Jornada the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto condemned some speakers for being provocateurs. Yet he added,
“This is a healthy criticism since the Revolution, from a position committed to the Revolution, and these often coincide with the critical analysis we are doing to achieve greater efficiency, fighting the same bureaucracy that we ourselves have created.” Since the more open-minded Armando Hart became the Minister of Culture in the early 1980s, the office has acted as a buffer between Castro’s government and the demands of young artists. With this statement Prieto openly referenced Castro’s infamous speech “Words to the Intellectuals” delivered in June 1961, to address the younger generation about the problems of freedom of expression. Castro had said:

\[
\text{The Revolution has to understand that reality, and for instance it has to act in order to give artists and intellectuals that are not genuine revolutionaries, within the Revolution a field to work and to create, and that their creative spirit, although they are not revolutionary writers and artists, has the opportunity and freedom of expression within the Revolution. That means that within the Revolution everything; against the Revolution, nothing.}\]

However, interestingly, this speech is not known for this complete passage but for Castro’s now infamous saying “Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing,” which if quoted alone causes a fatal misunderstanding of Castro’s cultural policies. In the remainder of his speech, Castro outlined plans for a greatly expanded system of artistic education that remains one of the Revolution’s great achievements, as well as plans for a centralized organization of artists and writers.

Soon after Bruguera’s Biennial event, Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance started at the courtyard of Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam. Gómez-Peña, with Roberto Sifuentes, created a baroque theatrical presentation of the colonial condition of the Americas (Plate 4). For the eighty-minute performance Sifuentes, along with a female assistant, performed the 500-year history of colonization of the Americas as commentary about the discovery of the Antilles, the slave trade, the independence wars, and finally on Latino identities in the United States. Rather than providing a visual narrative of historical events, the artists performed the piece as “flash backs” in the psyche of a traumatized person; each historical event was represented
along with intervals of present day events. At the end of the performance the artists invited crowds to write on Sifuentes’ body as he embodied the persona of the colonized peoples of the Americas. I was present at this performance. At this moment Gómez-Peña asked me how the performance should end and called me onto the stage with another woman. As Sifuentes was lying dead, both of us “resurrected” him with a gesture of hope in the new revolutionary epoch of the Americas.

Alexis Lyva Machado [known as Kcho]’s “happening” in this Biennial added to the notion of the exhibition as a “spectacular event.” When closely examined, the happening scratched a bleeding scar of thousands of Cubans, families and children who gathered while Cuban television stations aired the event. Kcho organized his action at one of the largest plazas in Havana in front of the Convent of San Francisco de Assisi. He burned a boat with the help of Halo de Cai Guo-Qiang, who carefully mounted hundreds of fireworks on a wire that raised the boat off the ground. The artists also covered the wooden skeleton of the boat with fireworks. With thousands of locals and the Biennial visitors clapping, screaming, and yelling, the artists raised the boat four stories above the ground, exploded, and burned it. This loud and exuberant gesture was meant to suggest a re-thinking of the “balseros [boats] period” in 1994 when thousands of Cubans fled to the United States, including an entire generation of artists who were born and raised during the Revolution. The event also publicly celebrated Kcho’s career; he enjoyed fame in Europe in the 1990s and came back to Cuba during the balseros period. He is quite a well-known figure by the Cuban public, not only because of his celebrity status as he earns ten-thousand-Cubans’ salary by selling one small piece of art, but he also has proven himself to be an activist by organizing the Martha Machado Brigades. This project involved young artists, musicians, actors, and dancers who traveled to rural Cuba after the devastating effects of recent hurricanes to help improve the living conditions and well-being of the people. Additionally Kcho organized a branch of this project at the La Cabaña ditch to provide an open space for Biennial artists to live, interact, and create together, adding another layer of energy and interaction to the Havana Biennial.

On the second floor of the convent of San Francisco de Assisi, the collective exhibition Bisagra: muestra multiple de arte, de re-accion, situaciones
plasticas y otras reverberaciones [Hinge: multiple exhibitions of art, re-action, plastic situations and other reverberations] invited viewers to contemplate the aesthetics of street activism. Curated by Patricia Mendoza, Bisagra erased the borders between art and street politics. The images of 2006 Oaxaca resistance mixed with the traditional images of strong cultural roots, such as those of Zapata. The photographs of the Oaxaca uprising hung side-by-side with printed images of Zapatista women on batik material as audiovisual testimonies of Qaxacans played in the space. For this project the rebels of the 2006 uprising, when people occupied governmental buildings for almost three months and fought against the federal army, transformed street activism into what they called “audiovisual activism” and “editorial poetics.” Furthermore the exhibition made strong references to the global solidarity of the many heterogeneous activities, known under the Anti-Globalization Movement, which makes use of conventional networks as well as those of digital communication.

While the Eurocentric biennial system raises private profits instead of creating public consent, some young and emerging artists in the Third World are not passively sitting and waiting for their turn to come; they engage in complex, heterogenic, anti-capitalist and anti-establishment art practices. The Havana Biennials have included such artists in their struggle to challenge the neo-liberal world order. Thus many artists in the 2009 Biennial chose to interpret the theme of the Biennial not in the “universal” frame of the concept of globalization, widely circulated by the Western academic thought and showcased by the means of international art world events and biennials. Instead the artists approached the topic from their own local understanding of the phenomenon. Carolina Caycedo, from Puerto Rico, is one of the boldest of these artists. She displayed ten red machetes on high white pedestals in the historical fortress San Carlos of Cabaña—Che Guvera’s military headquarters after the triumph of the Revolution (Plate 5). Caycendo’s title In Case of Emergency introduced a satirical tone to the sharp edge of the machetes. The texts inscribed on the blades’ surfaces were as sharp as the blades’ edges. Each machete contained the name of revolutionary movements, organizations, parties, and legal and illegal popular fronts of one or two Latin American or Caribbean nations. Machetes symbolize the defense of the land in Latin America’s indigenous struggles. In this artwork indigenous struggles for political representation and social equality were imagined as collective, historical, and continuous.
El maíz es nuestra vida [Corn is Our Life], a traveling exhibition created by the Mexican collective MAMAZ and curated by Marietta Bernstorff, also examined the subject of indigenous resistance to globalization through unusual representations of corn—the main nutrition of indigenous peoples since antiquity. Twenty women artists produced daily objects made of corn stalks and presented them with their family pictures. In the social imaginary of the indigenous movements in Mexico corn symbolizes resistance to the uneven economic developments caused by the globalization processes that have led to the impoverishment of millions of rural indigenous communities in the Americas. For example, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, a project of neo-liberal globalization, enforces the reversal of the land reform in Mexico, which means the ejido [common land] of the indigenous communities is given to rich hacendistas [big ranch owners]. This not only condemns the indigenous peoples into extreme poverty, but it destroys the conditions of communal social life that depend on collective decision-making processes. By creating art objects with corn, the artists in this exhibition critically drew attention to daily life and such issues.

Chilean artist Máximo Corvalán’s provoking work in the El Morro Fortress Free Trade Ensambladura [Free Trade Assembly] also demanded strong reactions. Corvalán mounted a dozen mixed-media cadavers on the floor; neon light wove in and out of the bodies (Plate 6). When the neon lights were lit in the dark, the bodies became invisible as the neon lights illuminated the words “open” and “welcome.” The viewer first saw them through a looking-glass filled with sand from the Chilean desert. After the initial shock of the representation of the dehydrated bodies, the viewer was invited into the room to walk around them. In The Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels noted, “[The bourgeoisie] has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – free trade.” In this era of global neoliberalism, the open market economy welcomes the flow of capital into the new and old financial centers, but not the flow of impoverished immigrants. Every day the media reports the number of dead border-crossers in the Chilean desert, Chihuahua, or the Mediterranean. The public watches the spectacle with empty eyes while governments discuss what to do with the bodies among themselves. Corvalán’s cadavers demanded attention be directed toward the Chilean victims of free trade as well as to the victims of other “illegal” border crossings, such as the Mexican immigrants dying
on the U.S.-Mexican border, or African and Asian immigrants and refugees drowning in Mediterranean Sea trying to land in Europe.

Since its second edition in 1989 the Havana Biennial has included symposia and theoretical events to be a magnet for leftist intellectuals. In this edition’s Evento Teorico [Theoretical Events] many radical scholars, activists, and artists discussed the relationship of globalization and art—a very popular subject at the forums of international art biennials for the last couple of years. However while star curators have discussed this subject at the mainstream biennials in spaces closed to the public, the Tenth Havana Biennial’s Evento Teorico provided an active intellectual platform of panels, presentations, and discussions open to the public. During a full week of heated debates with tremendous intellectual energy, the Biennial organizers and debate participants treated the contextual theme “Integration and Resistance in the Era of Globalization” as a dialectical approach to analyze the differentiating matrixes of a phenomenon that has often been discussed from a polarized perspective in the works of academics. The Evento Teorico took place at the Fine Arts Museum of Cuban Art. During the events young officers of the Ministry of Interior conducted daily group visits to the museum with the guidance of their senior officer. Topics discussed included: “Political Activism and the Art of Resistance,” “The Art System Cultural Industry and Globalization” and “The Art of Difference and Contemporary Art.” Prominent scholars invited to the event included: Nelly Richard (Chile), Nicholas Bourriaud (France), Richard Martell (Canada), and Isadora Reguera (Spain), whose theoretical aspirations of art’s condition in the globalized world grounded the debate. José Luis Brea (Spain), Raúl Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet (Cuba-Mexico), Joaquín Barriendos (Spain), Gita Hashemi (Iran-Canada) and additional renowned radical artists talked about their alternative art practices that aim to create a collective visual astuteness while also defining the new critique in the era of “cultural capitalism.”

At the closing event Nelson Herrera Ysla, curator and founder of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam and the Havana Biennial, explained that no one knows if the Eleventh Havana Biennial will take place. The continuation of the event remains ambiguous because of Cuba’s state of constant flux in trying to adapt to the changing circumstances in the world while, at the same time, maintaining Revolutionary ideals. However there is
a pressing necessity of a new imperative and even a new model for art events called “biennials” that were founded to celebrate the globalization of the art market. The collateral shows and collective projects of the Tenth Havana Biennial pointed out the limitations of the Biennial’s official structure of exhibitions. The curators, participating artists, collectives, and institutions that have produced the Havana Biennial for twenty-five years are well aware of its short-comings in its attempts to confront Eurocentric contemporary art. Havana generates and accumulates unprecedented intellectual and artistic energies and has potential to create an alternative model in the world of global art that has become another instrument of neo-liberalist principles. From the perspective of the Cuban government the Tenth Havana Biennial was another success story in continuing Cuban involvement and importance in the international cultural arena. For Cuban artists it served as a gateway that opened opportunities in the international market. For the Cuban public the Havana Biennial once again transformed the city into giant carnival with exhibitions, workshops, happenings, plays, performances, concerts, films and dance programs all around the city. With the rigorous help and sincere solidarity of the international artists, scholars, intellectuals, and cultural organizations, I believe that the Havana Biennial will continue to further a Third World space as it functions within the Euro-centric biennial system, while also challenging the neo-liberal logic of that system.

TIJEN TUNALI is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico. Her dissertation is titled “Carnivals of Images, Festivals of Representation: On Contemporary Art and the Neo-Liberal World Order” and she works with Dr. David Craven, Dr. Holly Barnet Sanchez and Dr. Linda Hall.

NOTES:
2 All the biennials except that of Venice and São Paolo were created after the new world economy of 1980. Those that are not at the centers (not just geographically but also politically) of the art world are called “peripheral biennials.”
HEMISPHERE

4 Author’s notes of Jorge Fernández’s opening talk at the Evento Teórico during the 10th Havana Biennial, 31 March 2009. Translated from Spanish to English at the event by the author.


9 In the Cuban collective consciousness, boats signify the “escape” from the revolutionary regime as well as the “discovery” and colonization of the Americas, with the Indies as the threshold of this supposed discovery.

10 Quotes taken from the booklet posted on the entrance wall of the exhibition site.

11 Marx and Engels, 18.
THE ROLE OF ALAIN BADIOU’S INAESTHETICS IN VISUAL CULTURE: 
AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIAN JOHNSTON, PH.D.

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Adrian Johnston is currently a Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico. He received his B.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Philosophy and his Ph.D. at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in Philosophy. Dr. Johnston’s scholarship focuses on Marxist theory and Psychoanalysis. In 2009 Northwestern Press released his book Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change. His other monographs include Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity (2008) and Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive (2005), both also by Northwestern Press.

I interviewed Dr. Johnston to ask him about the French Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou and his theories on the visual arts in relation to politics and history. We began our discussion with Badiou’s approach to visual culture and his trans-historical method, in which he perceives art as being simultaneously a contextual phenomenon, as well as containing universal Truths that occur.

**HE:** How do you think Badiou as a Marxist approaches art in regards to the idea of the Event, which he introduced to the field of philosophy?

**AJ:** It is essential for him. He set the framework for his system in 1988 when he published his Magnus Opus, the book *Being and Event,* and in a short popularized version in 1989. In these works he talks about how philosophy is conditioned by four conditions in which Truths arise. It is then philosophy’s task to make these conditions cross-resonate with one other. One of his provocations is to declare himself a Platonist in twentieth-century continental philosophy, which is a context dominated by anti-Platonism. Following in the footsteps of Plato, he talks about art, science, politics, and love as the four domains of generic Truth production. In these fields truths are produced. It is philosophy’s task to open itself to what is being produced in these areas and make these things connect with each other.
There have been a number of criticisms that have been put forward in response to this. Some scholars have suggested that there could be more than just these four conditions. These critics ask why Badiou claims, in what seems to be a very dogmatic fashion, that there are these four, and only these four, conditions. Not only does Badiou insist that philosophy is not in the business of producing truths, but rather all the grist for its mill has to be furnished from outside of it in these extra-philosophical domains. He does at moments insist upon the autonomy of each of these conditions with respect to each other.

In his work from 1988 on, which is really the Badiou we still know today, he insists that art and politics in relationship to one another are separate freestanding domains unto themselves. He acknowledges that art can put itself in the service of politics. When we look at the explosion of artistic activity that surrounded the Russian Revolution of 1917, we can see art conceiving of itself as operating in a way that definitely involves a certain political commitment, or set of implications. Badiou wants to say that they should not be confused with one another even if there can be some cross-resonances that can be recognized between art and politics.

What he wants to avoid at all costs is something that in his first manifesto for philosophy he calls the danger of suturing things to each other. He claims that a lot of the twentieth-century rhetoric about the death of philosophy— it having reached its end—is due to the fact that different sorts of twentieth-century philosophers performed a suture between philosophy and one of its four conditions. He talks about German philosopher Martin Heidegger trying to reduce philosophy into art, in terms of his later preoccupations with poetic thinking, as really the only way to do fundamental ontology after the end of metaphysics. He talks about Anglo-American analytic philosophy as genuinely trying to collapse philosophy into science, be it mathematics, logic, or biology. He speaks of his own earlier work, prior to *Being and Event* as having involved suturing philosophy to politics.

He was a French-Maoist of a certain stripe, and his previous major philosophical work before *Being and Event* was a book he published in 1982 entitled *Theory of the Subject*, which consisted of a series of Jacques Lacan-style seminars he gave in the late 1970s. There he insists in a Marxist mode that philosophy ultimately reduces down to politics. Politics is a condition
or discipline, even for the most abstract and theoretical thinking. He then, in a self-critical gesture, identifies Marxism, including his own earlier Maoism, as having fallen prey to this suturing of philosophy to politics. But he also wants to avoid inter-condition sutures, in terms of suturing art to politics or vice versa. He is always careful to stipulate that although art can put itself into relationship with politics, it should maintain a sense of its own specificity and autonomy as a particular procedure, or a way of operating with sensible materials. Although it can convey the force of certain political ideas, it adds something specific to that that is not to be found in politics proper.

**HE:** So art and politics can influence each other, and they can still be identified as individual elements.

**AJ:** Yes. There is something there that you won’t find in the field of politics as its own specific domain that is over and above the political, despite that certain sorts of art can be intimately related to politics in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion. Badiou’s key treatment of art on its own terms is the 1998 *Handbook of Inaesthetics* that appeared as a part of a trilogy in which he discussed art, politics, and then general issues in ontology. The other two volumes were *Metapolitics* and *Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*.

To define his concept of “Metapolitics,” we can draw a nice parallel between art and politics and Badiou’s treatments of them; he wants to distinguish between what he calls his Metapolitics versus what is traditionally called “political philosophy.” He argues that by and large political philosophy in the western philosophical tradition designates a conception of philosophy where the philosophers formulate what the politician should put into practice. Philosopher kings come up with the idea of what justice is, what the good life collectively substantiated looks like, and they tell the political practitioners that it is their task to apply this, to realize it as best as one can given practical material constraints. Badiou’s definition of political philosophy is a model where philosophy puts itself in this position of formulating the truths about politics, which are then imposed in a top down fashion on practitioners of politics.

By contrast he feels that philosophy is not in the business of manufacturing its own truths that are then exported elsewhere, but rather only receives
them by importing them from these conditions externally, what Badiou calls his reflections on politics, which is Metapolitics. This philosophical thinking lets itself be dictated to by what transpires on the ground of political practice outside of philosophy, like German philosopher Hegel’s owl of Minerva. Metapolitical reflection, as philosophy in relation to politics, only spreads its wings at dusk after the events of the day are done. That is when the metapolitical reflector can ponder the implications of what has happened politically outside of philosophy and do things with that, but in this more passive, receptive position. Badiou established the same contrast between what he calls philosophy of art and what he describes as his inaesthetics.

**HE:** Could you define what inaesthetics is for Badiou?

**Aj:** With traditional philosophy of art, like with traditional political philosophy, standard aesthetics would involve philosophers determining what beauty is, what good form amounts to, and then would measure or judge artistic works by how close they approximate these conceptions that the philosophers have formulated. Badiou wants to reverse this and says what really would be proper is for the philosopher as a practitioner of inaesthetics to receive what there is to be received. Badiou has certain preconceptions of what great art really is in terms of an evental order of magnitude that represents a rupture with previous ways of working with those mediums. Those moments for him are the key ones that the philosopher as the inaesthetician focuses on and considers the implication of and puts into relationship with other truths from other domains.

One could see a bit of this in his relationship to poetry. His taste is rather classical in terms of his French background. Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé are two of his favorite poets. Badiou reads post-Cantor transfinite Set Theory as a domain in the area of science he considers crucial for his philosophical project. This shows that he is extracting certain broader notions from it on the basis of combining Set Theory with his Marxist conception of politics and with certain sensibilities that he claims to have gotten from poets like Mallarmé and Rimbaud. Badiou wants to claim that inaesthetics is in a very passive receptive position and waits to be furnished—the truths of art by art itself. Nonetheless it seems difficult for Badiou to avoid beginning his survey of art with certain preconceptions that he has about what art is important and what art is not.
A few months ago a book collection of interviews with him was published, and the interviewer pressed him in talking about music and the music that he identifies as important is quite classical. The most contemporary references that he is willing to indulge in would be Wagner and Shoenberg. The interviewer asked him about developments in rock music and Badiou dismisses it as ear-candy of no true importance. And no matter how innovative it seems, he insists it is just made for the purposes of fun and there is nothing to it more serious than that. The only non-classical mode of music that he dignifies with the status of being worthy of true philosophical attention is jazz. Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno was notoriously conservative and turned his nose up at jazz. Badiou is slightly more open than Adorno and believes that jazz is worthwhile, but does not go beyond that. There is a conservatism that is evident in some of the ways that he talks about certain genres of art.

**HE:** He seems to favor the Russian Minimalist painter Kazimir Malevich. Would that be representative of his approach to inaesthetics?

**AJ:** Badiou’s relationship to Minimalism, and the visual arts especially, reveals something about his overall philosophical orientation—one of the things that makes him stand out as an anomaly in relation to his French philosophical background. And one has to consider that he came of age with a cohort that included Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. Badiou is very atypical in a number of respects and one is his avouched Platonism. Much of continental philosophy in the twentieth century is dominated by the imperative that Nietzsche spells out, that the task is to overturn Platonism. And in the Marxist tradition Plato can be seen as the arch idealist anti-materialist who has to be dealt with accordingly. Much continental philosophy is very anti-platonic and Badiou claims to be a Platonist. Right now he is giving his third and final year of a seminar on Plato at the École Normale Supérieure. He is working on a creative and inventive retranslation of Plato’s *Republic* in French, and is changing some of the scenery and putting it in a contemporary setting. He is also trying to put together a film on the life of Plato and he has joked that he would like to have Brad Pitt play Plato. More and more this has become something he emphasizes about his work, his fidelity to Plato.
In regard to art Badiou emphasizes the Platonic notion of the participation of the forms or ideas in the visible realm of this imminent material reality. He wants to salvage of Plato the philosopher who is not the textbook metaphysical realist; who posits this transcendent otherworldly heaven of the forms or ideas that stand over and above entirely separate from this world that we inhabit, one that we are in contact with through our senses. Let us take the standard Platonic example when talking about art—beauty. Typically it seems that what Plato is saying is that you have the form of beauty with a capital “B” and this is something that at best can be discerned by the mind’s eye. One can have a concept of it but not a percept of it. You don’t directly perceive beauty in and of itself as the pure form or idea that you catch a glimpse of as it shines through in particular beautiful things. That would entail that beauty with a capital “B” is separate and distinct from any particular beautiful thing. But Badiou wants to claim that although one should not just perform the anti-Platonic gesture of treating beauty in a nominalist fashion—that there are only particular beautiful things—there is no beauty as such. Instead beauty only exists as it is incarnated in terms of particular sensible things.

Badiou still preserves the notion that there is something to it as an idea, not just as purely sensible. And given this Platonism, one reason why he favors Minimalism, when it comes to visual art especially, is that you have an attempt to use sensible materials to reduce what is sensible down to its bare bones; something conceptual shines through with the greatest transparency when presented in this paired down very bare skeletal fashion—that idea of art as entirely bound up with the sensible but in such a way that it is worked with sensible material that forces one to go beyond pure sensibility. That particular kind of Platonic participation of the non-sensible and the sensible leads Badiou to favor more Minimalist approaches especially when it comes to visual art.

**HE:** Would that indicate that he is concerned with the viewer’s experience of the work? For example in expressionistic art it is the action that is the art, and the object is the evidence of it.

**AJ:** Yes, like with Pollock. It is violent movement that then leaves this mark or record. Badiou does not talk much about either the viewer or audience that stands before the work. Nor does he talk about the artistic producer—
the biographical individuals who are responsible for generating these works. For instance when Badiou talks about the subject of art, his general theory of subjectivity is rather idiosyncratic. For him the subject of art is an ensemble of works. So you would have a subject of art in terms of the collection of works that constitute the corpus of Cubism, Impressionism, and etc. The subject of art dies off when a certain artistic sequence has been saturated and has basically produced all the innovation it can produce and it becomes a cliché of itself, repeating its old forms. Badiou claims he is working on the third volume of the *Being and Event* sequence, entitled the *Immanence of Truths*. It is in this volume that he says he wants to offer a rich phenomenologically satisfying account of how we human beings are affected by confrontations with events and truths, including when you are sitting in an auditorium listening to a Wagner opera, or you are at a museum in front of a Malevich painting and pondering it. Badiou wants to talk about what is involved in that experience in a way in which we are incorporated into the truths that are there and, at least in a transitory fashion, we experience a certain becoming with a post-evental truth and its embodiment of certain subjects.

**HE:** Badiou has given the Chauvet cave paintings as an example of a certain truth, and he offers Picasso as a break from that truth.

**AJ:** And this is very traditionally Platonic. In *Logics and Worlds* he discusses an aesthetic form that has to do with horses and compares Picasso’s horses with those in the cave paintings. I address this in an undergraduate seminar I am teaching now. In his structuralist orientation anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss talks about how one can identify these mythemes, which are the lowest common denominators that link together a whole series of different versions of a single myth. He can then string together everything from the Oedipus story as a certain myth. There is the Sophoclean version in Athens, circa 400 BCE, and then there is the Freudian version in Vienna in the early twentieth century. It is not that the first version is the true version and then all of the others are derivative or secondary. Lévi-Strauss wants to say that the true version is basically the invariant aspect that gets reiterated again and again, despite all of the permutations. It appears in various guises across the whole span of different variants that are produced over the course of diachronical time.
And I think that even though in this connection in *Logics and Worlds* Badiou makes no direct reference to Lévi-Strauss, there is similarity in this approach. You have the artistic rendition of a horse on a cave wall that was produced by an anonymous painter, or group of painters, many centuries ago. Then we have much more recently this rendition from Picasso, and Badiou wants to say that there is a lowest common denominator; although it is not transcendent, it is not as though there is this form of the artistically rendered horse which stands over and above all of these incarnations running from the cave paintings to Picasso. Nonetheless imminent to that series of variations on the artistic approach to the acquiescence, there are these various renditions of it and something that binds them together. One could identify these things as attempts to approach the same form, or the same essence.

**HE:** Badiou is concerned with putting the formal before the political in regard to the aesthetic, and it is about the joining of the two. How is this particularly a twentieth-century concern?

**AJ:** One of the read threads throughout the span of *Logics and Worlds* is a sustained Plato-inspired polemic against a very dominant twentieth century tendency to always historicize, as exemplified by Frederic Jameson’s injunction “Always historicize!” (Jameson is very well known for his Marxist work particularly with regard to aesthetic issues, especially literature.) Badiou feels that to some extent this must be resisted. He thinks this has become an instinctive reaction, and whenever we are confronted with a form we want to describe it as peculiar to a given context that emerges out of a specific backdrop. Its validity and status is bound up with its place in time. To speak of these diagonal lines, which cut across vast swaths of history from the cave paintings up through to Picasso, is viewed as a heresy for a sensibility that is so attune to and so careful to always speak of history as a matter of particularization. There is a resistance to any kind of positing of anything universal, anything trans-temporal, anything that smacks of the old eternals that philosophy seems so preoccupied with. Badiou wants to plead on behalf of these things.

In politics he still speaks nowadays of what he first referred to in a short text on ideology—from 1976 that has yet to be translated—what he calls
“communist invariance.” This would be history as the practice of true politics in his sense, a kind of radical emancipator and generally leftist sort of politics. There are certain lowest common denominators, from Spartacus and the slave revolt in the Ancient World, through the struggle of Chinese peasants under Mao’s direction, and everything in between. This is also related to a cause dear to Badiou’s heart, the struggles of the undocumented workers in France, les sans papiers, of North African origin for recognition. Badiou says that these different movements, despite of all of their differences, and even though of course there is much that is contextually specific about each of these struggles, that one will find the same sorts of basic core concepts or causes motivating and justifying the rightness of these revolts. And he consistently does this with art and politics.

This is one of the many ways in which he and Slavoj Žižek form a united front. Badiou jokes in Logics of Worlds that they form a politburo, one in which it is a question of who will be the first to extract from the other an appropriate self critique before having him executed. There is a certain kinship between them, in part because both of them have drawn our attention to some of the drawbacks involved with pan-historicism, similar to Fredric Jameson, or an always historicizing kind of approach. There are babies we have thrown out with the bath water in terms of becoming more critical of very traditional philosophical ways of approaching these matters.

**HE:** How would this approach relate to his ideas about democratic materialism?

**AJ:** He trots out this famous distinction in the early moments of the introduction to Logics and Worlds. He contrasts democratic materialism on the one hand, and then on the other, what he calls the materialist dialectic. With the materialist dialectic, one can see him reactivating aspects that were a part of his earlier works. He was a former student of Louis Althusser’s, along with Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière and a number of these figures who are now quite well known in France and also the United States. Althusser talks about the materialist dialectic in his collection of essays For Marx. One of Badiou’s earliest philosophical publications was a review of Althusser’s For Marx and Reading Capital, published by Badiou in 1967. There is a recuperation of some of those ideas early in Logics and Worlds. One of Badiou’s best readers, who translated 1982’s Theory of the Subject,
traces how in that Marxist approach to dialectics in that work, even though it seems to go underground, Badiou taps back into that earlier phase of his work in *Logics and Worlds*.

When Badiou talks about democratic materialism, we have to have recourse to the Marxist idea that starts with Engels, that the history of philosophy can be seen as split into two camps—idealisversus materialism—and that this is the fundamental fault line of tension that organizes the history of philosophy, even though it is not usually read in this fashion. Engels articulated this in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. And Lenin takes this up in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

At the start of *Logics and Worlds* Badiou is pointing out that within materialism is a mirroring of this sort of a split. But it is different than just a straightforward conflict between materialism and idealism. There are two very different senses of materialism that are really pitted against each other. This is where he sees a fundamental fault line of ideological tension, or a struggle at least, in the Western world especially. One can pick out certain philosophers he has in view that fit the bill. But one can also look at popular quotidian sensibilities in our societies that reflect this.

He defines democratic materialism as the notion that there are only bodies and languages. You have incarnate individuals whose bodies are particular entities. Then these beings are fully ensconced within the linguistic life-worlds of particular communities. All that is left then is a relativism of different people with different language games, and what perspectives you have is relative to which of these worlds you inhabit. Badiou wants to claim that there is another kind of materialism, which adds a qualification to the axiom, or the core tenant, of democratic materialism. In addition to the bodies and languages, the materialist dialectic states that there are truths that cannot be reduced to particular people, who are ensconced in particular social or cultural linguistic context, and to cut across these otherwise divided spheres that seem to present us with nothing but a fragmented multitude of partial perspectives. At the same time these truths are not transcending. Again they are not like Plato’s metaphysical realism, in which pure forms or ideas exist in a timeless state of unchanging heaven of purely conceptual intelligible axis that we can only get a sideways glimpse of in this world. But rather his
idea is that you have produced certain things out of particular times and places that can survive an indefinite number of de-contextualizations and re-contextualizations.

Mathematics provides him with an easy and obvious set of examples. For instance for any given mathematical truth we can clearly identify the given time and place in which it arose. We can look back at ancient Greece for the genesis of the fundamental ingredients of arithmetic and geometry brought about by particular individuals living in that specific life-world. We can point to Kurt Gödel in the twentieth century, with his famous incompleteness theorem. But for Badiou those mathematical truths are true and they have a historical genesis, they arise in a particular time and place; certain people with certain languages forge them and they cannot be reduced to that contextual point of origin. They thereafter achieve independence relative to their site of genesis. And he wants to claim that this is something that is affirmed by materialist dialectics that democratic materialism denies. Democratic materialism compulsively historicizes and contextualizes, and denies that there is anything, which really does genuinely have that kind of trans-contextual, autonomous, and irreducible truth status to itself. And that is the fundamental thing he is after in Logics of Worlds.

**HE:** That seems similar to Althusser's idea of relative autonomy.

**AJ:** Absolutely. To bring it into context with art, part of what is involved in an artistic work that has a truth to it is that it is not in principle closed to anyone. It is not as though only if you are from that community, you are that kind of person with that sort of linguistic, cultural, social, etc. background can it speak to you. But for Badiou any truth, whether it is artistic, amorous, political or scientific, has something in it that is at least potentially, if not actually, universal. It addresses anyone and everyone without discriminating amongst its addressees based upon their background or based upon particular characteristics or differences that mark them. There is that insistence on the universality of artistic truths as with all truths.

Also it would not be to deny that given works of art emerge from particular times and places; specific people embedded in a particular cultural horizon fashion these works. If they really are artists worthy of being paid attention to philosophically in his view, they manage to produce something in a
sensible medium that can survive being exported out of that particular context in which that artistic product was first produced, despite being something ensconced in a particular life-world. And that for him is very essential. He strongly opposed any kind of cultural relativist approach to artistic analysis. He acknowledged form as a twentieth-century concern, and even though there are certain concerns that emerge in a particular time and place, that does not mean that if we look back at formal features, or become preoccupied with the pre-twentieth century that it should just be denounced as anachronisms. He would hesitate to endorse that sort of caveat to qualifications.

**HE:** How have Badiou’s theories of inaesthetics been received?

**AJ:** Outside of philosophy, the people who I have the most contact with in the wider academic world that know of his work tend to be in language and literature departments. In terms of aesthetics as literary theory it does seem as though there is growing interest here. I know that there is a group of graduate students in more theory-oriented comparative literature programs who are doing dissertation work that is influenced by Badiou. I think you are going to see a generation of new scholars who are going to be openly using Badiou to talk about literature, among other fields. And I should mention that Badiou’s earlier publications are not philosophical but literary. He has published some novels, poetry, and has written and produced a number of plays. So he does himself maintain a very direct relationship to art and does speak from a position that is different than a lot of philosophers who speak of art but have not themselves engaged in the actual attempt to practice it. The theater is something Badiou has a special love for and he has written a bit about film, too. I anticipate that literary connection to be seen in his retranslation of Plato’s *Republic.* There is a more literary quality to Plato’s text than many of the canonical works in the Western philosophical tradition. The snippets that Badiou has trotted out thus far from that work indicate that it will have a very dramatic quality to it; it almost will read like the script of a play. So that will be an interesting experiment. Despite him wanting to keep philosophy and art separate from each other, he will really be blending them or be forced to blend them in an interesting way. He is forecasting it to come out this year.
HE: It seems that one could argue that Badiou would agree with labeling theater and the written word as a form of art, or visual culture.

AJ: Badiou would object to equating art with “visual culture.” For Badiou, as for many others, visual art is one kind or variety of art, the latter being a much broader category encompassing, in addition to visual art (such as painting), non-visual forms of artistic creation involving things other than images (for example, language and/or music). So, although he definitely considers drama and literature to be types of art, he almost certainly wouldn’t subsume them under the label “visual culture.”

What’s more, Badiou would take issue with the word “culture” in the context of this discussion here. He associates the concept-term culture with the notion of life-worlds—as assemblages of bodies and languages without universal truths—he links to the democratic materialism stringently criticized in the opening pages of Logics of Worlds. For Badiou art isn’t reducible to culture; hence visual art, as art in the strict Badiouian sense, is to be distinguished from what one might call “visual culture.” If a piece of art worthy of the name bears within itself something (i.e., a truth) that can be exported beyond the culturally localized/situated site of its production, something that is (at least in principle) open to everyone and is able to address an incalculable multitude others situated in an indefinite plurality of different cultural life-worlds, then an authentic instance of art proper is, in fact, a/non-cultural (insofar as it cuts across cultures, being de-contextualized out of the culture in which it was fashioned and re-contextualized in any number of cultures distinct from its culture of origin).

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NOTES:
1 The owl of Minerva is a symbol from Greek and Roman mythology that represents wisdom. The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel used this as an example to argue that philosophers understand history or historical events after they are over.
2 In 1874 the German mathematician Georg Cantor created what is called Set Theory, which was intended to prove mathematically that there are multiple infinities.
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