

# IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES IN *ESCULTURA SOCIAL*: A NEW GENERATION OF ART FROM MEXICO CITY

Exhibition curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, San Antonio, Texas; from July 31, 2008 to October 26, 2008.

Reviewed by:

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The exhibition, *Escultura Social*, presents twenty contemporary artists who disinherit their work from traditional approaches and nationalizing curatorial agendas.<sup>1</sup> *Escultura Social* artists engage in social critique by employing a variety of media. María Alós, Carlos Amorales, Gustavo Artigas, Miguel Calderón, *Los Super Elegantes*, Yoshua Okón, Damián Ortega, and Fernando Ortega all present time-based projects. Working in two dimensions, *Nuevos Ricos* juxtaposes film stills with newspaper photographs; Pablo Helguera presents a photographic journal of his Panamerican travels; Dr. Lakra tattoos found posters and objects with eclectic graffiti; and Julieta Aranda, Stefan Brüggemann, Gabriel Kuri, and Mario García Torres explore semantic territory in text-based work.<sup>2</sup> And working in three dimensions, Fernando Carbajal, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, and Pedro Reyes stretch the elastic boundaries of sculpture and installation.

Through the transformation of conventional materials and the use of new media, the artists discontinue the post-Revolutionary social realist project of *muralismo*—the enigmatic and idiosyncratic painting of Mexican modernism, in particular, from mid-century Rufino Tamayo to Francisco Toledo of the present—and 1980s *neomexicanismo*—the critical movement to revisit national identity. As noted by curator, Julie Rodrigues Widholm of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), the *Escultura Social* artists engage in a, "rigorous new vocabulary that embraces untraditional sculptural materials, as well as video, photography, installation, and performance."<sup>3</sup> Severing a relationship to *mexicanidad*, or the semiotics of Mexican identity, *Escultura Social* reflects the tenets of transnationalism and postcolonialism in a global contemporary art context as it deconstructs

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identity, reconsiders community dynamics, and explores new conceptual approaches.

### **Transcending Identity Politics**

*Escultura Social* brings together artists born from the mid-1960s to the mid 1970s, who share two common threads—a connection to Mexico City and a distinct approach to artistic expression that is not preoccupied with the portrayal of a traditional Mexican identity.<sup>4</sup> For example, the group, *Los Super Elegantes* displays two music videos, reflecting a transcontinental MTV generation that was raised in the internet age.<sup>5</sup> In *Sixteen* (2004) and *Nothing Really Matters* (2006), the artists mix pop music videos with *telenovela* (Spanish language soap opera) conventions. By ironically employing a variety of popular media, the artists claim they are, “pulling identity politics off the map and traveling with freedom passports.”<sup>6</sup> In lieu of making Mexican or Latino art, the artists reach a global audience through the realm of video and the medium provided by modern computer technology, which greatly expands the real time–space limitations of the traditional museum setting. Instead of reaching a limited audience during the abbreviated period that an exhibit is on public display, the artists are able to impart both art and message without temporal or physical impediments. For example, their work can be found at any time of the day or night on internet sites, such as Youtube. Consequently, their influence as artists is enhanced, not to mention the prospect for financial remuneration.

Likewise, in *Useless Wonder* (2006), a double-screen video displays an apocalyptic vision on one side while on the reverse, a black and white map of the world deconstructs like a jigsaw puzzle. The images used are from the liquid archive, a digital database of drawings that is, “based on photographs of digital vector drawings synthesized into ambiguous forms that combine silhouettes with traces.”<sup>7</sup> In this stark landscape, Carlos Amoraless juxtaposes an ominous, raven-headed woman, skull-faced monkeys, and a creature that is half-wolf and half-woman with eerie, jarring music. This combination is perhaps intended to provoke fear and hope in the viewer simultaneously. These fused creatures are identifiable by their parts, but the narrative into which they are placed is purposefully confusing.<sup>8</sup> The artist employs an unsequenced narrative for two reasons. It stretches the limitations of what video production can convey and compels the viewer to discern order from the chaos that Amoraless created. By discerning that order, the viewer attains

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a more profound understanding of the artistic subject and, therefore, of reality. This invitation enhances Amorales' message of hope.

While set in Mexico, *Los guerreros* (*The Warriors*, 2007), made in collaboration with Amorales and *Nuevos Ricos*, pertains not to national identity, but examines instead an urban gang subculture that thrives on both sides of the Rio Grande. The work consists of twenty digital prints, each with two images, and an archival newspaper image depicting non-fictional gang scenes. *Los guerreros* demonstrates how fantasy evolves into reality while it makes visible the insidious influence on urban Mexican youth of popular culture imported from the United States.<sup>9</sup>

For *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (SPU, 2006), Pablo Helguera traveled by van from Alaska to Argentina, making twenty-seven stops along the way (Plate 8). He dialogued with the audiences he encountered on his travels throughout the Americas about the meaning of the term "American" in a globalized world. As a "trans-nationalist," who was born in Mexico and now lives in New York, Helguera suggests that his project represents a "Bolivarian" notion of American identity, a reference to Simón Bolívar who led several South American countries to independence during the nineteenth century. Helguera argues that this notion of identity supersedes his personal identification with Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

*Escultura Social* elicits questions relating to motives, target audiences, and equality in terms of cultural exchanges. As the first group exhibition of Mexican artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the exhibition represents an artistic parallel of free trade in the post-North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) age.<sup>11</sup> Through this historic precedent, issues of art market politics emerge; the exhibition is marketed to a broader audience while maintaining Mexico City as its geo-political unifier. Mexican art historian, Cuauhtémoc Medina, of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City, states that a paradox has developed with works in the global art system. While art institutions represent Mexican artists or art from Mexico, they produce an inversion in terms. According to Medina, "De-localizing this work has the possible consequence of re-nationalizing it."<sup>12</sup> Exhibition curator, Widholm attempts to avoid "re-nationalizing" the artists in *Escultura Social*, focusing less on a geographic categorization and more on linking works that deal

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with a shared social perspective in order to group men and women who represent a new generation of artists.<sup>13</sup> Difficulties emerge in breaking the bonds and boundaries of nationalism, thus challenging the curator to organize an exhibit that transcends national identity.—Rebecca Gomez

### **Community as a Site of Creative Expression**

The concept of community surfaces throughout *Escultura Social*. The artists explore the complex dynamics of representation of the marginalized. The artists are at times in a privileged position as outsiders of the represented communities. Through their incorporation of the subjects' personal lives, the artists border on exploiting the subaltern for purposes of creative expression.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the artists' creations are exported for public, and significantly, foreign consumption. While Pablo Helguera engages communities across the Americas to articulate a transnational or Panamerican identity, Yoshua Okón deconstructs the insider/outsider positionality in popular media. By using an altered basketball rim and video, Gustavo Artigas brings attention to the often stigmatized, stereotyped, young men of color from the inner city who work collectively towards a positive goal.

Emerging from a socio-cultural project of establishing a Panamerican intercontinental and multilingual community through verbal exchanges, Helguera creates a constructed society by superimposing his notion of Panamerican identity onto established yet isolated communities across the Americas. His project deviates from a creative and innovative practice and moves into problematic territory since he does not readily address the means to move beyond communication towards concrete action. To a certain degree, the project evokes anthropology's colonialist tendencies, in which an outsider enters a locale to glean useful artifacts and observations from a given society and reports the findings to a foreign audience. Helguera envisions his project as raising questions about Panamerican identity, rather than providing a platform for true discourse and articulation of solutions in places racked by extreme poverty, industrial abandonment, civil wars, cultural imperialism, and colonialism. While his motives appear genuine and commendable, the limitations in the work weaken Helguera's constructed Panamerican community with a measure of contrivance.

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Unlike Helguera, Okón approaches his pseudo-ethnographic projects without lofty pretenses and instead uses video to challenge perception and representation through humor. Situated in a darkened room in which the aural component of *Lago Bolsena* (2005) surrounds, even overwhelms, the viewer, a three-channel video projection simultaneously depicts wide, medium, and close-up shots of residents of the Santa Julia neighborhood of Mexico City as they behave in a mock-primitive, exaggerated fashion. While the subjects' style of dress and surroundings are entirely modern, their actions and demeanor call to mind dated *National Geographic* documentaries in which anthropologists studied populations untouched by Western ideals and technology. Throughout the disjointed, disorienting, and deceptively short video, Okón raises questions about whether he merely reinforces a subaltern status by representing the Santa Julia community in such a way for a foreign museum audience, or whether he provides a platform for deconstructing artificial representations of subalterity.

The video shows scenes of neighborhood residents emerging from an open manhole and practicing primitive tribalistic rituals. The video also depicts a gendered binary in which the male and female characters are filmed separately as they engage in gender-specific actions. Wide-angle group shots of male and female characters show them crawling in animal-fashion, grunting, and growling. Because the cameraman is clearly visible, the film also captures the process of constructing artifice. Considering that Okón exhibits *Lago Bolsena* to a foreign audience, the motivations behind the work take on significant implications. Okón not only challenges the designated "Third World" status of Mexico and its people, but he also questions the definition of what constitutes Mexican art. While conceptual forms of art are certainly not new to Mexico—for example, Gabriel Orozco has been creating conceptual art since the 1980s—U.S. audiences of the past twenty to thirty years have generally not been aware of the existence of such art practices in Mexico. *Escultura Social* effectively counters this ignorance and educates audiences about the established trajectory of conceptual art in Mexico.

Taking the concept of community to a different level in *Juego de Pelota Event Project* (2007), Gustavo Artigas demonstrates seamless and simultaneous integration of collaboration, performance, and documentation (Plate 9). In addition to presenting a conceptual nuance in the game of basketball by placing the hoop vertically, the artist provides museum visitors with an

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innovative perspective on the inner city that is not reduced to the mainstream media's one-dimensional portrayal of street life, warped as it is by stereotypes. Through community collaboration, Artigas provides a portrait of a barrio, which despite being beset by poverty and gang violence, refuses to embody a fatalistic attitude, thus transcending marginalization. Commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, the artist collaborated with the Resurrection Basketball League of southwestern Chicago, which serves the predominantly Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen, Little Village, and Back of the Yards. The Resurrection Project's mission of community organizing mirrors Artigas' commitment to forging relationships in order to create new avenues for social change.<sup>15</sup> Artigas' strategy involves collaborating with communities to create fresh and radically different experiences out of familiar contexts, such as sports. In comparison, the approaches of Helguera and Okón underscore the *construction* of community. Helguera's work raises questions of reciprocity—to what degree is power shared between the artist and participants in *The School of Panamerican Unrest*? Does he return to the communities and bestow what he has produced as a result of their interaction and how do the subjects respond to the project? Through sardonic means, Okón leaves the viewer ambivalent about the agency of the participating actors and the outcome of producing and touring internationally a work such as *Lago Bolsena*. Reflecting the tenets of participatory or action research used in anthropology, Artigas conveys a sense of true collaboration to the viewer. In *Juego de Pelota Event Project*, the subjects are the agents of representation and they share the power of documentation with the artist.<sup>16</sup>

– Caitlin Solis

### **Mechanics of *Escultura Social*: Collaboration and Appropriation**

Considering influential and mythic German artist, Joseph Beuys' 1973 artistic credo of Social Sculpture, or Social Architecture, which enlisted everyone as an artist, Widholm attempts to articulate the German avant-garde pedagogy in Latin American terms.<sup>17</sup> But beyond, or in addition to provoking, documenting, or operating through social engagement, the *Escultura Social* artists can be considered a cooperative body united by conceptual ties and interlaced histories. Widholm acknowledges that the exhibited corpus is indebted to artist-driven, collective practices of the 1990s, and views the subsequent grassroots infrastructure as a result of "DIY (do-it-yourself)" approaches to curating, promoting, fundraising,

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and generating criticism.<sup>18</sup> During their formative years, a majority of the *Escultura Social* artists joined collectives and created artist-run exhibition spaces under the conceptual wing of Gabriel Orozco.<sup>19</sup>

Widholm uses the titles, “Nature and Culture,” “Social Engagement and the Function of Art,” and “Transforming Everyday Materials and the Word as Image” to categorize the works of the twenty artists.<sup>20</sup> Scaffolding the theoretical and spatial organization of the exhibition, Beuys is more than referenced—his ideas are appropriated to didactically interpret the conceptual artworks. But the influence of Beuys extends beyond Widholm’s curatorial parallel, which may appear as a forced attempt to fuse a 1970s experimental, social, and democratic agenda with a twenty-first century art exhibit. The influence, surfacing in the conceptual tendencies of *Escultura Social*, is more accurately traced through Gabriel Orozco, who organized and participated in *A Propósito* at the Museo del Ex-Convento del Desierto de los Leones in Cuajimalpa in 1989, an homage to Beuys.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the unauthorized intellectual theft implicit in the term, appropriation functions most subtly in the work of María Alós, whose two videos and opening performance hyperbolize the social norm of welcoming. Alós directed hired greeters to cordially and incessantly maintain public relations by engaging those entering and exiting the exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Alós then completely removed the human interaction after the opening and looped a greeting and a farewell video at the entrance and exit of the gallery, respectively. Verging on invasiveness and oscillating between sincerity and mechanical politeness, her project charts the institutionalization of customs and highlights the ambiguity of museum-patron relations.

Julieta Aranda’s, *Untitled* (2007), also known as, *Coloring Book II* or “please fill in the squares with the indicated color,” appropriates an illusionistic vocabulary (Plate 10). A section of the poststructuralist color chart reads, “Dark as Night, First Light, Rain Drop, Just Barely, Siesta, Mom’s Lipstick, Innuendo, Sweet Nothings.” The desaturated lexicon plays with what Aranda refers to as society’s, “logic of desire.”<sup>23</sup> Aranda proposes that, “by interfering...[it] is possible to complicate the exchanges and interject a measure of productive confusion into the prevalent modes and models of operation.”<sup>24</sup> By decontextualizing the nomenclature, Aranda semantically

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disrupts prescribed meanings to create an anarchic moment in the otherwise didactic and interpretive context of the exhibition.

In Stefan Brüggemann's, *Explanations* (2002), capitalized text in British-inflected English, without a Spanish translation, reads: ALL MY IDEAS ARE IMPORTED, ALL MY PRODUCTS ARE EXPORTED, and (ALL MY EXPLANATIONS ARE RUBBISH). Brüggemann aggressively represents themes of marginalization in three panoramic phrases. Appropriating a dominant voice, font, and scale, Brüggemann's *Explanations* offer mantras for those in the shadow of cultural imperialism. Interestingly, the bilingual, Museo Alameda does not translate any of the English texts into Spanish. Brüggemann's choice of language reflects a decision complicated by the need to address artistic self-determination and cultural agency in the so-called "Third World."—Edward Hayes, Jr.

### **Conclusion**

Unbound by an entrenched relationship to *mexicanidad*, or the semiotics of Mexican identity in art, *Escultura Social* reflects the tenets of transnationalism and postcolonialism in the context of contemporary art. Eliseo Ríos, Interim Executive Director of the Museo Alameda, asserts that these artists move beyond the notion of identity in their art to reflect a global transcultural dialogue.<sup>25</sup> By acknowledging communities as creative bodies capable of overcoming token representation through the conceptual tactics of collaboration and appropriation, the exhibition participates in a larger dialogue, within and outside of the national and geographic nexus of Mexico City. While their work addresses issues concerning, "political culture, urban life, and current political issues," the transnational artists included in *Escultura Social* overcome the trappings of identity and express innovative trends appropriate to the post-millennium contemporary art world.<sup>26</sup>



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### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *Myth Mortals and Immortality: Works from the Museo Soumaya de México*, which ran concurrently with *Escultura Social* at the Museo Alameda, illustrates the tendency towards traditionalism and nationalism when organizing exhibits of Mexican art.

<sup>2</sup> Also, architect Fernando Romero who originally exhibited at the MCA as an *Escultura Social* artist, presents the model of the museum bearing his wife's namesake, Soumaya Slim de Romero, on the Museo Alameda's first floor, marrying the postcolonial to mid-modern collection with the contemporary.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, in association with New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Though there is debate over definitions of generations, the artists of this exhibit all fall under the category of Generation X. The term Generation X came into use for defining this generation, following the publication of Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Los Super Elegantes is comprised of Martiano Lopez-Corzet and Milena Muzquiz, a Los Angeles-based duo.

<sup>6</sup> Widholm, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>8</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Exhibitions: Live Cinema/ Carlos Amoraes: Four Animations, Five Drawings, and a Plague," Philadelphia Museum of Art, available at <http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/313.html?page=1> (accessed November 18, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Nuevos Ricos is a hybrid art venture and record label on which Amoraes collaborated with Julian Lede and Andre Pahl. Widholm, 160.

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<sup>10</sup> Pablo Helguera, “*Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, Artist Talk with Pablo Helguera,” lecture, Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, San Antonio, TX, 10 October 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The agreement was implemented in January of 1991. In Spanish, NAFTA is Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN). The intent of the treaty was to “remove most barriers to trade and investment among the United States, Canada, and Mexico.” The international, Panamerican viewpoints and expressions of these artists (engaging in an artistic “free trade” if you will) parallel their commercial counterpart, codified in NAFTA. That is, they utilize the concept of oneness or interdependency transcending national borders. See Foreign Agricultural Service, United States Department of Agriculture, “North American Free Trade Agreement,” available at <http://www.fas.usda.gov/itp/Policy/nafta/nafta.asp> (accessed May 11, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Mutual Abuse,” in *Mexico City: An Exhibition About Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* (Long Island City, New York: PS1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Widholm, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Gramsci coined the term “subaltern” to describe a cultural-political type of marginalization. See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> The Resurrection Project, available at <http://www.resurrectionproject.org/display.aspx?pointer=3825> (accessed November 18, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Attesting to the collaborative nature of his project, “the participation of kids at risk and the meaning of the inverted hoops gave to the piece a possibility of readings regarding the action of the group inside the American society. ...Everything was discussed in advance with [the participating youth] since the beginning so they had a good idea of the final result. After the show was open they were invited for a special tour of all the works in the show. As part of the activities of the Resurrection Project, the video was shown as part of their open cinema program during the summer. They kept the video copy as part of their archives.” Gustavo Artigas, interview with Caitlin Solis, 18 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Beuys, ‘I Am Searching for Field Character,’ in “Chapter VII: Institutions and Objections,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 929.

<sup>18</sup> Widholm, 10.

<sup>19</sup> In 1993 Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, and Damián Ortega among others created “a space for self-education...and a space for experimentation, since its future destruction permitted all sorts of direct interventions.” See Olivier Debroise, “Temístocles 44,” in *The Age of Discrepancies* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), 404. Amorales, Kuri, and Fernando Ortega later joined them to exhibit under kurimanzutto, a gallery founded by Monica Manzutto, José Kuri and Gabriel Orozco that operates as a network (more so than a space) and represents nearly half of the *Escultura Social* artists. Available at <http://www.kurimanzutto.com> (accessed November 20, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Debroise, 384.

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<sup>21</sup> White Cube Gallery, "Curriculum Vitae of Gabriel Orozco," London, England, 2009, available at <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/orozco/texts/65/> (accessed March 7, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> According to Eliseo Ríos, Interim Executive Director of the Museo Alameda, San Antonio, the performers involved were from Jump Start, a local non-profit performing arts organization in San Antonio, TX. Eliseo Ríos, interview with Rebecca Gomez and Eddie Hayes, 2 December 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Julieta Aranda, "Galerie Michael Janssen Berlin presents Julieta Aranda," 2008. Re-title. com, "International contemporary art listings guide and directory of artists worldwide," available at <http://www.retitle.com/exhibitions/galeriemichaeljanssenberlin.asp> (accessed October 7, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Eliseo Ríos, Interview with Rebecca Gomez and Eddie Hayes, 2 December 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Widholm, 10.