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Latin American and Latina/o Art’s Transformative Momentum

MARI CARMEN FAMÍREZ

It is difficult to play the role of clairvoyant when reality ceases to be a distant vision and the signs of what the future might bring are already in plain sight. On September 15, 2017, the worlds of Latin American and Latino art came together in the city of Los Angeles to celebrate a unique event: the much anticipated opening of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (PST: LA/LA). Four years in the making, this mega-event, organized and sponsored by the Getty Foundation, resulted in over 70 exhibitions of Latin American and Latino art in museums, university galleries and community centers across Southern California, from Los Angeles to Palm Springs and from San Diego to Santa Barbara. PST: LA/LA follows and expands the blueprint established by the first Pacific Standard Time exhibition “Art in L.A., 1945-1980” which took place from October 2011 through March 2012, also under the auspices of the Getty Foundation. This second edition involved an unprecedented display of art from California, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South America in formats ranging from full-blown artists’ retrospectives and in-depth art historical period surveys to quirky thematic group shows. Beyond the historical significance of the artists and the sophisticated quality of the displayed works, the democratic reach of the event was palpable, bringing together grassroots organizations, alternative centers and mainstream museums, while in the process blurring racial or class distinctions in a hemispheric celebration of Latin art.

Indeed, for anyone involved in Latin American and Latina/o art—unquestionably two of the most dynamic fields of contemporary art production, study, and collecting today—PST: LA/LA cannot but mark a decisive moment with major implications for their future. By situating Latin American and Latina/o art at the center of artistic contemporaneity, this mega-exhibition marks the consolidation and legitimacy of these fields of action. This fact is evident in the number of shows providing fresh new perspectives on the pioneering role of our artists in areas such as Constructivism, Kinetic Art, Conceptualism, Performance, Video Art and Design. The extent of their contributions override the well-known, by now commonplace, parameters of identity. The scope of these exhibitions extended to include completely unedited topics such as the presence of Japanese artists that constituted the focus of Transpacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City and São Paulo (Japanese American Art Museum). A second unanticipated parallel lies in the influence of artists of Chinese descent in the Caribbean displayed in Circles and Circuits II: Contemporary Chinese Caribbean Art (Chinese American Art Museum). In this case, the Los Angeles “mestizo”

scene must be credited for stimulating (as in any multicultural country that takes pride in itself) a global reflection about two communities of artists that, until now, remain alien to the Official History of Latin American art. Once considered, this type of nexus is one of the assets of the LA/LA transnational connection. To this must be added the number of “first” U.S. retrospectives of artists such as the Brazilians Ana Maria Malolino (LA MOCA) and Valeska Soares (Santa Barbara Museum of Art) as well as national surveys of countries under-represented in the international mainstream such as Guatemala from 33,000 BC: Contemporary Art 1960-Present (MCA Santa Barbara).

With regards to the “visionary reality” that I am referencing, there is another important aspect of PST-LA/LA to consider: While Latin American art has been a hot market commodity for some time, even more important was the Getty's strategy to flip attention to Latina/o art. It is one thing to acknowledge the artists' cultural origins and, a very different one, to consider them from the artistic point of view. The growing ascendency of this art was also on display in the large number of Chicana/o artists and groups—many of them until now significantly under-recognized— that were the focus of major collective or solo initiatives. These included first-time retrospectives of painter Carlos Almaraz (LACMA), photographer Laura Aguilar (Vincent Price Art Museum); Chicano Gilbert “Magu” Luján (University Art Galleries, UC Irvine); the combined retrospective of conceptual artists Patssi Valdez and Judith Hernández (Millard Sheets Art Center), the only women participants of the collectives ASCO and Los Four, respectively. Also worthy of mention are groundbreaking archive-based shows such as Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.—the first exhibition on this topic organized by ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries— and La Raza, the first survey of the role played by photographer’s affiliated with this bilingual newspaper in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Autry Museum of the American West in collaboration with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center). Each one of these exhibitions succeeded not only in bringing to light significant bodies of work but also situating them in the broader art historical framework of post-1945 art. Additionally, the organization of these exhibitions speaks to the forward-looking thrust of the California mega-event that unabashedly affirms the authentic diversity of this complex country while simultaneously recognizing us as potential demographic majority.

Yet, by far the most outstanding accomplishment of this historic transnational and trans-ethnic effort was the

the notion of "alternate worlds" challenges concepts of citizenship, nations and borders that serve as the basis for contemporary society while questioning the status of "aliens" (immigrants). The most striking piece in the exhibition, a corn-shaped wooden spaceship for "intergalactic" global meetings filled with hand-crafted Zapatista icons and symbols, is a collaboration between the artist Rigo 23 and Zapatista artist and artisans in Chiapas, Mexico.

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA has been referred to as LA's contemporary art biennial, yet there are a number of reasons why this innovative project substantially differs from the, by now, exhausted "biennial model." Unlike today's fast-tracked, frequently rambling biennials, this Getty Foundation-led initiative embodied an extremely focused planning effort spanning four years and involving more than 70 different institutions and scores of institutionally-affiliated or independent professionals. This meant that, alongside the programming, there was significant time and effort invested in building professional expertise and transnational North/South networks that would benefit institutions on both sides of the border over (we hope) the long-term. The literary and cinematic legacies of Jorge Luis Borges and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea were also evident in exhibitions such as The Universal History of Infamy (LACMA) and Memories of Underdevelopment (MCA, San Diego), two examples of successful collaborations between institutions and professionals on both sides of the stigmatized border. In the first case, LACMA partnered with 18th Street Arts Center, Los Angeles, and NuhM3 in Guatemala in a program that involved artists' residencies and special commissions. The second project involved an unprecedented collaboration between Jumex, Mexico City, the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALJ), and the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego.

To underscore the point I have tried to make thus far, the overall strong emphasis on research allowed PST:LA/LA to transcend the short-lived nature of biennials. The Getty Foundation invested more than 16 million dollars to ensure that every exhibition project had funding for two full years of curatorial research before the implementation phase began. Among other things, these monies allowed the curatorial teams to travel to specific countries.
or regions in order to consult archives, perform interviews, build networks, and experience the cultural contexts directly. Access to this type of funding is a luxury for most institutions in the U.S. and Latin America, big or small, that find themselves increasingly strapped for time and financial resources to undertake the type of in-depth documentation and field work that these ambitious projects require. The results not only generated powerful exhibitions but, more importantly, an extremely rich and expansive new body of knowledge in the form of catalogues, books, documentary videos, and symposia that add significant depth to our understanding of both well-known and under-recognized artists and movements who, for the most part, have been absent from the prevailing narrative, if not the commonplaces, of Latin American and Latino/a art in the global mainstream.

As was to be expected, the mega-event featured blockbuster shows on new topics anchored on multi-year research projects. Golden Kingdoms—a major international loan exhibition organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—offered fresh new insights into the development of luxury arts between 1000 B.C. to the arrival of the Europeans in the early 16th century. Recent investigations into the historical, cultural, social, and political conditions under which such works were produced and circulated has led to new ways of thinking about materials, luxury, and the visual arts from a global perspective. At the other end of the spectrum, Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985 at the Hammer Art Museum presented over 150 works (mostly videos, photographs and textual documentation) by one hundred Latin American and Latina women, many of whom had never circulated internationally before, in a tour de force exploration of their undeniable contributions to contemporary art.

Research not only informed many of the most outstanding exhibitions of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, but in some cases determined the exhibition’s overall profile. At the J. Paul Getty Museum, for example, an unprecedented collaboration between the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Research Institute and the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, provided the foundation for Making Art Concrete. Pairing the works with videos and other documentation, the show combines art historical and scientific analysis to shed light on the materials and technical strategies used by artists associated with the abstract geometric and concrete art movements in Argentina and Brazil between 1946 and 1963. A close look at the hybrid processes used by these artists—a combination of old materials and techniques (including medieval egg-based tempera) with technological advances in synthetic paints,
binders, and industrial supports—serves to debunk some of the prevailing myths associated with these movements’ presumably relentless and derivative pursuit of original scientific objectivity and rationalism associated with European sources.

This approach also led to the recovery or recreation of major works or, in some cases, entire stages of an artist’s production, allowing for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see in Los Angeles object-, performance-, and video-based works and installations that have not been seen since inception. A truly stellar example of this approach is The Words of Others: León Ferrari and Rhetoric in Times of War, a solo exhibition and restaging at REDCAT of the landmark 1966 play Palabras Ajenas (originally transmitted by BBC London in 1968) by this Argentinean artist known for his attacks on all forms of authoritarianism, from military dictatorships to the Catholic church. This literary collage consists of an imaginary dialogue among one hundred and sixty global celebrities—from biblical God to Bertrand Russell, from Hitler, Mussolini and Mao Tse Tung to Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson—composed of appropriated fragments from contemporary news-wires and historical texts. For its historic re-staging, REDCAT produced a new English version that involved the arduous task of tracking down each of the hundreds of sentences that make up the text to their original language (English), a process that lasted over two years. Thirty actors then took turns reading lines in the one-day performance in front of a mesmerized audience drawn in by the work’s unmitigated denunciation of violence, inequality and racism. Drawing from Ferrari’s extensive archives, the accompanying exhibition successfully positioned the performance in the context of his better-known series of calligraphic drawings, collages, and holographic prints, while in the process unveiling unsuspected thematic and methodological affinities across media. More importantly, however, it left no doubt that Palabras Ajenas was not a dissident’s eccentricity but a truly seminal piece in the context of Ferrari’s heterogeneous production.

At LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) and Pitzer College Art Galleries, Juan Downey: Radiant Nature, a thoroughly researched and brilliantly executed two-part survey of the first ten years of the New York-based Chilean artist’s (1940-1993) production, also recreated a number of his complex inter-disciplinary performance and technology-driven works not seen since the early 1970s. Not yet concerned with the issues of identity or colonialism that would inform his well-known multi-channel video installations such as Video Trans Américas (1973-76), Radiant Nature reveals a young Downey deeply engaged in both dominating and resisting technology. Powered by motors, series like Electronic Sculptures (1967-71) nevertheless relied on the simple actions of viewers to activate them. For his Life Cycle Installations (1970-73), he borrowed principles of cybernetics and technology combining mechanical (cameras, monitors, light systems) and organic elements (plants, insects, soil) to recreate the actual cycle of life in the gallery space. These early series situate him on the same experimental plane as other Systems Art pioneers of the period such as the German Hans Haacke, and the Argentineans David Lamelas and Luis Benedit. The latter was by far the most radical innovator from Latin America in the area of systems-based art.

The emphasis on recreating rarely seen pieces by Latin American artists was also the focus of Video in Latin America organized by the Getty Research Institute and LAXART. For this show, the GRI set out to document video art production in the region, compiling and preserving hundreds of videos produced between 1960 and today. The show at LAXART featured a carefully curated selection of sixty of those works with particular emphasis on the role played by this medium vis-à-vis the impact of authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and globalization in the region. The selection included the first U.S. presentation of the stunning Musa paradisica [Paradisiac Muse, 1996] by the Colombian José Alejandro Restrepo (1959) which dominated the central gallery with dense clusters of real, rotting and stinking bananas that evoke hanging bodies in a spectacle that stimulates both the eye and the senses. Dangling from the bottom of the stems are tiny cathode ray tubes featuring videos of dead bodies of plantation workers murdered while on strike. Small mirrors on the floor reflect these haunting images back to the viewer. Uruguayan Clemente Padín’s video Missing Miss (1993), showing protesters with signs with the faces of people who disappeared during Uruguay’s dark period (1973-85), provided another instance of a work rarely seen outside its immediate context. Padín played the original VHS tape hundreds of times to the point of almost destroying it in an effort to bring back the memory of the disappeared.

A running theme all across PST: LA/LA is the role of social and political activism in defining different modes of artistic production in Latin America and the Latina/o communities, a highly relevant theme for an indifferent country that is only now beginning to awaken to the realities embodied by these communities. While this feature has been a staple of Latin American and Latina/o art all along, the rise of the “Donald Trump” phenomenon and his incendiary mode of populism has certainly transformed the context in which so many of these artists and exhibitions operate. Understanding both the history of this activism and the role it can play today is, perhaps, one of the unanticipated contributions of PST: LA/LA. At a moment when the retórica gubernamental governmental rhetoric is threatening to close down the U.S.-Mexico border with a monumental wall, deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants or ban others from entry into the United States, Latin American and Latina/o artists and curators responded by exploding the notion of borders in their work and celebrating the multifarious dimensions of “American” diversity. The urgency of their positions is not only palpable throughout the multifarious exhibitions that make up PST: LA/LA but also endows the event with a certain gravitas and momentum reserved for truly historic turning points. This unquestionable transformative point has radically changed the esoteric image with which our art has been sold almost by way of a stigma. In this case, the turning point translates into the realization that, far from exotic areas of interest, Latin American and Latina/o art, in their built-in heterogeneity, contradictions, and complexities, are intrinsic to the demographic reality which constitutes the countenance of the United States in the 21st century, despite efforts by powerful hegemonic sectors to mask or downplay their significance.

There is, however, an irony at play in the success of PST: LA/LA. This never-seen-before major display of Latin American and Latina/o art is taking place in the second metropolitan enclave in the United States, Los Angeles, which is approximately 49% of this origin and background. Yet, unlike
Miami or Houston, L.A. is an area with virtually no infrastructure for this art. Very few of L.A.'s or Southern California's major museums have dedicated curatorial positions or programs or actively collect in these areas; and, despite the historic role the region has played in the Chicana/o movement, there is a virtual absence of curators from this community in public or private institutions. This political power vacuum, together with the professional and institutional gap it entails, translates into a non-existent market for our art production as well as the almost virtual absence of local collectors in these rapidly expanding fields. Without doubt, the Getty Foundation was addressing the elephant in the room when they decided to flex their muscle behind this initiative. In the context of the U.S.'s East/West art axis, the contributions of this Californian mega-project, as I have tried to demonstrate, are multiple. In my view, however, the most important one is to bring to light a non-essentialist insight into what is already the hybrid superimposition of features that will constitute the truly authentic plural face of America.

What is really at stake is the first big questioning (at the national level) of New York's artistic hegemony; if not at the market level, at least at the level of awareness about the present and future constitution of the country (both real and problematic) viewed by those groups which embody its demographic majorities in the twenty-first century. This fact leads me to raise the following questions: Will the monumental effort behind PST LA/LA contribute in a decisive way to radically change this glaring gap? Will L.A. give Latin American and Latino art the place they deserve in the city's imaginary? Can the fragile bridges that resulted from this initiative grow into stronger, powerful and much needed North/South networks? Can a highly populated and economically powerful region of the country such as Southern California truly embrace Latino-America against the grain of historical and racial biases?

Given the undeniable strength of this transformative moment in our field of action as well as its objective promise of an enduring legacy, we can only hope that the future will bring equal doses of reflection leading to substantive change.

MARI CARMEN RAMÍREZ
Wortham Curator of Latin American Art and Director, International Center for the Arts of the Americas The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Radical Women
The Body Politic, the Body Exposed

A large portrait of a woman and the photograph of an open mouth attract the attention of drivers and pedestrians to Los Angeles’ Hammer Museum’s windows. The hand-drawn rectangle on the woman’s face seems defiant; in the other photo, the sensuous tongue is most provocative. Inside the museum, I find myself, for the third time in my life, standing before Mexican artist Monica Mayer’s installation entitled The Clothesline. In this version, the lines are strewn across a structure painted shocking pink. The artist invites us to expunge traumas by writing down our experiences with sexual harassment on index cards in order to display them, next to so many others, on the clothesline. This time, I filled out my card.

*Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* is a crucial exhibition because it uncovers the extraordinary—but to a large extent, unknown or obliterated—production of experimental works by Latin American women artists from the sixties to the eighties. The product of extensive research carried out by curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, the show includes works by 120 artists and groups from fifteen different countries, created during a turbulent sociopolitical time in the region. It is an historic exhibition that documents and contrasts art by Latin American women, including Latinas and Chicanas in the United States, who contributed to the development of contemporary art and deserve to join the international art historical narrative from which they have so far mostly remained excluded.

The artworks in this show, which trigger feelings that range from pleasure to rage, offer visitors a powerful experience. There are numerous confrontational pieces that reveal both aesthetic explorations and rebellion against sexual discrimination, social oppression, and political repression, which characterized that time of dictatorships and military governments. The exhibition offers both moments of discovery and re-encounters, as there are new names and previously unseen works, but also pieces by some women who are already prominent in the region’s historiography, such as Marta Minujín, Lygia Clark, Liliana Porter, Cecilia Vicuña, and Ana Mendieta, among others.

In spite of the decades that have passed, many of the works feel currently relevant because we observe them against the background of our current political moment, with its resurgence of nationalisms, struggles over gender issues, and manifold discriminations. It is not, however, an
exhibition of specifically feminist artists because most of the women included did not refer to themselves as such, nor—with the exception of Mexico—live in countries that had organized feminist movements. Rather, they share a Latin American transnational history of sociopolitical impositions and artistic sidestepping against which they reacted through traditional media, such as painting, printmaking and weaving, as well as the more experimental language of performances, installations, photography, and video art.

The artists included also share the “notion of the body politic” that the curators describe as the concept at the core of the exhibition. In the outstanding exhibition catalog, they point out how, between the 1950s and the 1970s, the iconography of the body in Latin American art changed dramatically, a shift they attribute to the women who altered the course of contemporary art. The idea of the body—and its multiple manifestations—provides the unifying thread for the 250 works in this large exhibition, which were organized on the basis of nine themes that help the viewer take in the almost over-abundant amount of visual and intellectual information.

The exhibition begins with a video of the powerful performance They Shouted Black at Me (1978) by the Peruvian poet Victoria Santa Cruz. While she vociferates: “Yes, I am black, and so what?”, extolling her identity, other works in that section of Self-Portraits question the roles society imposes on Latin American women. In her series of photographs entitled Tina America (1976), Brazilian artist Regina Vater transforms herself into different female characters, ranging from innocent student to bohemian woman, from simple housewife to sensual actress. In The Three Marias, Californian muralist Judith Baca forces the visitor to acknowledge him or herself in a mirror placed between two life-size painted portraits of Chicana women. Another Chicana artist, Yolanda López, photographs herself as a symbol of female empowerment against a background typically used for images of Virgin of Guadalupe; while Patssi Valdez creates self-portraits in a cinematographic style that offer a counterpart to the traditional representation of Mexican women in the U.S. Most unusual among the self-portraits is Peruvian artist Teresa Burga’s conceptual and technological installation, based on numeric measurements and the results of medical tests.

The exhibition flows smoothly from the subjectivity of the self-portraits into a section of art linked to nature. One’s eyes are immediately drawn to the outstanding installation titled Epidemic Scapes (1977/1982) by Brazilian artist Vera Chaves Barcelo in which patterns on the skin’s surface trigger geological, botanical, zoomorphic, and sexual associations. It is surrounded by the documentations of numerous performance.

registers its monumental nature, and his painting technique is influenced by the use of the pastel technique.
works, perhaps because this is a medium that allows for the physical interaction of the female body with the landscape and the earth. We see how Ana Mendieta carves her silhouette on the soft ground of a river bank and then lies down in it; the Brazilian Mara Alves incorporates her naked body into the rich vegetation of a jungle; and Silvia Gruner’s Mexico leaves footprints in the sand during futile efforts to hike up a dune. Other works such as O Oco (1967) by Lygia Pape and Passagem (1979) by fellow Brazilian artist Celeida Tostes offer dramatic metaphors of birth.

Issues related to the body connect the different sections of the show. Upon entering the second exhibition space at the Hammer Museum, one is stunned by the direct view towards the installation entitled Bellies (1979-1983) by Peruvian sculptor Johanna Hamman: a set of three pregnant, white, and frayed bellies hanging from butchers’ hooks. One can see it from the previous section entitled Performing the Body, which contains multidisciplinary works that feature performance, dance and theater, in a space dominated by a large format projection of computerized dance videos by Ana Livia Cordero. Nearby, there were small images of unusual artistic performances by Margarita Azurdia of Guatemala and Martha Araújo of Brazil. Beyond them, were electronic tablets on which to view videos and showcases with works on paper, against the background sound of chanted, repetitive prayers.

The exhibition with its numerous displays and huge amounts of works seems overwhelming, but also irresistible. The installation is reminiscent of the design of avant-garde exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s, such as some of Sao Paulo’s first biennials. The large white space was subdivided using “floating” walls to create smaller exhibition areas of variable sizes, in some cases defined by curved partitions that decreased in height to create seating areas for visitors, thus giving this huge exhibition a human scale.

In the section on Mapping the Body, where Hamman’s piece is displayed, the exhibition hones in on what the curators describe as the rediscovery and recontextualization of the body as a subject in art, the “mapping of the body and its social inscriptions.” It includes works from the 1970s by Liliana Porter in which lines drawn on photographs move beyond the work and out onto the wall, questioning our perception of space and reality. There are experimental pieces such as a performance from 1972 by Ana Mendieta who stuck a friend’s beard onto her face as he was cutting it off his face, thereby creating a dual, feminine-masculine self-portrait, foreboding the intense discussions regarding gender versus sex in our time. Other works offer explicit references to biological processes, such as the daring performance entitled March 11 Ritual in honor of Menstruation of 1981, during which Colombian artist María Evelia Marrojo “painted” the floor and walls of the exhibition space with her menstrual blood.

The artworks gathered around the theme of Resistance and Fear tackle the relationship between the body and violence. There we discover that the monotonous prayers emerge from the video Popsicles (1982-84) by Chilean artist Gloria Camiruaga, which shows young women licking red popsicles under which plastic soldiers appear. This video (created during the Pinochet dictatorship) and other works in this section bring forth feelings of shock and pain due to the explicit and courageous ways in which they document shared traumas. We see female figures tied and hung by their feet in pop-style paintings by Sonia Gutiérrez from Colombia; self-portraits by María Malolino who photographed herself with her nose and tongue between the blades of huge scissors; and A mile of crosses on the pavement, a public intervention by transgressive Chilean artist Lotty Rosenfeld.

Other artists opposed the political system through language or the written word in works that managed to avoid censorship. The Power of Words sector includes compelling performance pieces such as Trademark (1975) in which Letícia Parente used thread and needle to embroider the
phrase “Made in Brazil” onto the sole of her foot; and the public intervention by Janet Toro who managed to ask a considerable group of people her two questions (Why are you sad? Why are you smiling?) before she was confronted by the police. Marta Minujín wrapped herself in newspapers and submerged herself in the Río de la Plata until they dissolved; and Marie Orensanz created her legendary work Thinking is a Revolutionary Act (1975). One of the most powerful works is a series of photos entitled Poem (1979) by the Brazilian poet Leonora de Barros: six black and white images in which her tongue interacts with the typographic keys of a typewriter, in an expressive, audacious, and sensual way.

The section of the exhibition entitled Feminism included works by women who specifically referred to themselves as feminists at the time. One of the highlights is the performance Mother for a Day by the artists’ group Pôlo de Gallina, which included Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer. In this piece, they appeared on a television program during which they managed to dress the show’s host with an apron and a fake pregnant belly. Bustamante has other works in the show, such as Penis as a Work Instrument (1982), a mask she made replacing her nose with a penis; as does Mayer, whose Clotheline (first produced in 1978) receives visitors to the exhibition. Another...
notable Mexican feminist, Ana Victoria Jiménez, is present with her Chores Notebook (1978-1981), a series of impersonal photos of someone doing domestic work: we see hands cleaning a toilet, washing clothes, stirring the stew in a pot.

Under the concept of The Social Body, the curators declare that the works affirm that the social is personal and, therefore, politically constituted. These artists relate to the “other,” to marginalized or socially oppressed groups, people they depict with a sense of humanity, not as mere sociological prototypes. This part of the show highlights photo series such as Women under Fire (1980) by Isabel Castro, who documented the sterilizations without consent carried out on Chicanas women in California; Adam’s Apple (1982-90), a sensitive exploration of transvestites’ lives by Chilean artist Paz Errázuriz; the amazing Zapotec people in Women of Iuchitán (1979) by Graciela Iturbide; Humanario (1976) with its photos of psychiatric patients by Alicia d’Amico and Sara Facio from Argentina; and the portraits of the defiant women in the series entitled Servitude (1974-1989) by Panamanian photographer Sandra Eleta.

Radical Women also includes works that refer to the region’s indigenous populations, such as the well-known photographs of the Yanomami people by Brazilian activist Claudia Andujar; and the postcards in which Anna Bella Geiger photographed herself mocking the style of the touristic images of the Bororo people. Surprisingly, although mestizo artists are most certainly present, the exhibition does not include any works created by indigenous artists, nor are there many artists of African descent. There is work to be done by future researchers and curators in order to draw attention to those “other” artists who have been doubly erased from the narrative, based on both gender and ethnicity.

The final section in Radical Women is dedicated to erotic art, and it is not surprising to find that sexuality is another issue the participating artists confront in open and daring ways. From a distance, one can already see Lygia Pape’s video Eat Me (1975) in which sensual lips and an open mouth display objects that the tongue moves in an insinuating way. It contrasts with other works, such as the more conceptual New Erotic Designs for Furniture (1971) by Cecilia Vicuña, or the impeccable and nearly abstract painting entitled Lunar V (ca.1973) by Cuban artist Zilia Sánchez, a composition in which the eroticism is much more subtle, but no less alive.

Radical Women is not just an exhibition of Latin American women artists, but rather it is art by women who were deeply committed not to politics, to their bodies, and to leading a truthful life. Although they did not all consider themselves feminists, the curatorial mission clearly was, because it rescues art created specifically by women from a point of view outside the traditional canon. The curators showed courage in combining such remarkably heterogeneous works by artists from such different places, yet the exhibition reveals that they shared a certain transnational conceptual affinity that we had not yet understood. The photographer Sandra Eleta told me that, upon seeing the exhibition, she realized that she belongs to a spiritual sisterhood, to a united voice that shouted: Who are we? and Who do we dare to be? This exhibition and its well documented catalog have done much to fill the gap in information available about these artists, in addition to proving the unexpected relevance of their works in reference to our own times.

Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985
Hannover Museum, Los Angeles, September-December 2017.
Pinacoteca de Sao Paulo, August-November 2018.

NOTES

MONICA KUPFER
Independent art historian, critic and curator.
RAPHAEL FONSECA

Los Angeles audiences had an opportunity, between August 4, 2017 and January 22, 2018, to visit an Anna Maria Maiolino retrospective at the MOCA in Grand Avenue. The show, titled Pacific Standard Time, was part of a program sponsored by the Getty Foundation. This was the large-scale event’s third edition, and it was held in museums not only in Los Angeles but also throughout southern California. The series of exhibitions had two areas of focus: Latin American artistic production and art created by Latino immigrants in the state. The work of local curators and their international colleagues resulted in seventy exhibitions shining a spotlight on a variety of historical periods and geographic-cultural contexts. Among the curatorships about the period, many included Brazilian artists, periods in the history of Brazilian art, and/or Brazil as a place for dialogs with other Latin American realities. The Maiolino exhibition was organized in this context.

Occupying the galleries in the museum devoted to temporary exhibits, the show grabbed our attention with a stark and striking title: “Anna Maria Maiolino.” Curators Helen Molesworth and Bryan Barcena did not deem it necessary to add a subtitle in order to circumscribe the artist’s oeuvre, as was common in other solo outings seen in the same program. Maiolino’s name—and perhaps an element of self-reflection on the issue of identity on the basis of a proper name—was the starting point for the selection of works. The curators’ option might also be justified by the fact that we are not talking about an unknown name in the context of the international art circuit, but someone with a five-decade career behind her already. One can’t forget, for instance, her celebrated participation in documenta 13, in 2012. Also, not adding a subtitle to the exhibition frees visitors to engage the artist’s images in a much less preconditioned way.

After circulating around the exhibition’s spaces, a second curatorial decision was abundantly clear: the show’s chronological arrangement. Visitors were led along the MOCA’s pristine architecture in a journey into Anna Maria Maiolino’s investigation, from her earliest works to the most recent. This type of rather classical arrangement is not an issue for a retrospective art exhibition, but it is worth noting that any anachronistic connections—which can be very powerful—are left to the viewer’s devices.

Born in Italy to an Italian father and an Ecuadorian mother, Maiolino moved to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1954. In 1960, at the age of 18, she arrived in Brazil. This biographical information is significant in her case because part of her work of the 1960s and 70s, already in Brazil, deals with her family’s transcultural passage and multi-cultural milieu. The period of the earliest formalizations of Maiolino’s art is well represented in the exhibition by a number of woodcuts and objects with a strong pictorial component that can already be labeled “classics” in any overview of the history of contemporary art in Brazil. I’m talking, for example, about Maiolino’s works about digestive processes, with the onomatopoetic titles of Glu glu (1967), Glu glu glu (1967) and Schhhhiiiii (1967).

The relationship between image and word—an insistent concern in Maiolino’s early decades as a visual artist—appears as the marker of a dialogic process of cultural cannibalism after Maiolino’s wide-eyed, astonished arrival in Brazil. What did a foreign woman feel in Rio de Janeiro in the early stages of the military dictatorship? How would she dialog with that political and cultural context by means of images? What did it mean to be an artist and a woman in a context so dominated by male presences?

Maiolino seems to have been inclined towards the creation of works with acidic,
corrosive contents that were nevertheless—unlike what happened with some of her cohorts—never limited to agit-prop exercises. The irritation of the body is always an option for her, as is the use of materials or elements that refer to a domestic environment, as we see, for example, in her use of painted textiles in Gu gluí gluí, or also in the memory of a clothesline with items hung out to dry, as in A espera (The Wait, 1967).

And even beyond that, there is also a meditation about some notions of family and her own place in them. It is not in vain that the woodcut Anna (1967) shows two figures in silhouette, possibly the archetypal father and mother, calling the artist's name in comic-style speech bubbles. Nevertheless, even though they can be quickly apprehended and understood by our gaze, these human figures are never presented in a realistic style; they are masses of matter that assume their anatomical imperfections and scream more than they talk.

Not far from these works, visitors encountered a later series, dated in the 1970s. Maiolino's Mapas mentais (Mental Maps) are small-format works in China ink and Letraset, where the artist divides the plane into small squares, resembling a chessboard. Inside the spaces are written words that create a kind of puzzle for the viewer. There for us to play with are place names, dates, names of people, and words describing sensations (in Portuguese and English, since the works were created during a stay in the United States) in reference to a whirlwind of experiences that the artist, nearing her thirtieth birthday at the time, had accumulated. The dotted lines in those maps, which bring to mind the lines used to guide actions like cutting or tearing, can be connected to some of the procedures used by the artist later on.

Maiolino's Desenhos/objetos (Drawings/Objects) and her Projetos construídos (Built Projects), both from the 1970s, deal precisely with those experiments that seem to come from her map's suggestion of cutting, sewing, and segmentations of planes. Metaphorically, the act of cutting can be a reference to an excision and even to oblivion, just as the use of lines can be a way to signal an attempt to bring back something that was lost. In those works, as well as in the first photographs of the series Fotopoesia, created during the 1970s and '80s, viewers are confronted with images that neither give themselves fully to pure formalism nor make explicit an obvious meaning. Between one pole and the other, Maiolino suggest small visual enigmas by means of her ability to create images that are sufficiently forceful as to not provoke in the viewer a desire for immediate comprehension.

Objects with a significant symbolic charge, like scissors and eggs, accompany the artist in this photographic series, in her experiments with video, and in performances in front of an audience. During the first week of this exhibition's run, Maiolino and her grandson re-staged a new version of Entreidas (Betweenlines), a performance first presented in Brazil in 1981 in which the artist walks with her eyes closed between eggs strewn about the floor. The film In/out antropofagia (1973/74) is pre-
Por um Fio (By a Thread), from the Fotopoemas (Photo poems) series, 1976. Archival inkjet print. 22 1/2 x 31 1/2 in. (57 x 79 cm). Photo: Regina Vater.

Anna, 1967. Woodcut. 18 7/8 x 26 in. (48 x 66 cm). Courtesy of the artist.


sented in the same space as the recording of Entrecidas, not coincidentally. In in/out antropologia, Malolino’s mouth is filmed at times with an egg, at times with lines. At times, there is an alternation between her mouth made up with lipstick and another one, equally made up but framed by beard and moustache hairs. In and out, male and female, eating each other and eating oneself are all fused into a single object in the image sequence, a good example of Malolino’s constant experimentation not only with the medium of film, but also with video.

It doesn’t seem sensible to attempt, in this limited space, an easily contextual exploration for the above fact, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that after the military dictatorship period in Brazil (1964-1985), Malolino’s production turned increasingly away from the plane and become more sculptural and artisanal. She was never interested in art-proper, as we said, and we can see her production in sculpture as a continuation of her desire to explore the materiality of primarily organic forms, such as those eggs. Also, the presence of cuts and segmentations is again noticeable in these investigations.

This tendency is already on display in Malolino’s work in the 1980s, in series of drawings like Aleph (1982) and Piccoli note (1986), and later in the sculptures that comprise Nuevos paisajes (New Landscapes, 1989). Since these were not included in the exhibition, in the sequence of works analyzed here the audience encountered the elements mentioned in
Maioino’s production of the 1990s and later. Visitors were presented with a series of exhibition rooms where artisanal methods, human scales, and notions of repetition, seriality, and weight contrasts appear to be of great importance for the artist.

São olho na horizontal (They Are Eight In The Horizontal, 1993), for example, is a plaster sculpture installed at an angle between the floor and the wall, which rises vertically because of its weight yet expands discreetly on the horizontality of the floor. There is a soft and detachable quality to this work and other sculptures by Maioino that provides a sensation of strangeness in the relationship between their weight and the materials used. On display in the same exhibition area were other works from the same period, all in cement, which provided viewers with an experience that revealed their hollow interior. In Um, nenhum, com mit (One, None, One Hundred Thousand, 1993), the cement resembled baker’s flour, while the series Sombra do outro (Shadow of Another, 1993) and Uns e outros (Ones and Others) transformed the cement blocks into boxes. The next room featured works in plaster dating from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, as well as some paintings in acrylic dripped onto paper.

Those were the last two rooms in the exhibition. Before them, connecting Maioino’s more two-dimensional work with the sculptural elements mentioned, the curators opted (thankfully) for a break in the chronology, in the same section introducing more recent works that resembled what Maioino presented at documenta in Kassel. It was Estão sobre a mesa (They Are On The Table), created for the exhibition of the series Terra modelada (Modeled Earth), which in a way caps Maioino’s journey into those more artisanal investigations. While she began with the coldness and brutalist-like quality of cement, Maioino quickly moved on to working with plaster, and finally, in a more ephemeral and site-specific way, with clay. Visiting these three final rooms reasserts one aspect of Maioino’s production that, in light of the exhibition as a whole, can definitely be said to be dominant in her oeuvre: its emphasis on gestures.

Thus, it seems to make sense to connect Maioino’s manual work in the woodcut Anna, in the exhibition’s first room, with her series in clay, at least in terms of the techniques used and the work’s core concerns. The hand that left its traces in those works is the same that, always at the scale of her own body, sew and tore paper objects, or staged situations with the scissors and the eggs in her photographs, in film and in video.

Due to the constant presence—sometimes explicit, sometimes hidden—of the gesture in Ann Maria Maioino’s career, for someone who is well versed in her work the exhibition might appear lacking in examples of her forays into the video art genre. Because it is perhaps in those experiments—often without any further expectation—in capturing the most banal actions of everyday life, as well as details and gestures, that the issues mentioned above are present. I am thinking, for instance, of works like Construção/jogo (Construction/Game, 1973), + - - (1976), Ad Hoc (1982), and + & - (1999).

It is known that all art exhibitions must respect the limits imposed by the available space, the budget, and the production requirements, but I think that including more works where the fragility and precariousness of form or of register are key would have certainly contributed to break through the sterile environment of the museum and the show’s overly clean tone. That was precisely what fascinated us most in Maioino’s installation at documenta: its ability to appropriate a space that was not initially assigned as an exhibition room. No doubt that the more polished aspect is also part of Maioino’s art, but it was never a one-way street. There are works that prove it, such as her ephemeral action Estado escatológico (Eschatological State, 1978).

At any rate, and these observations aside, the importance of this exhibition is undeniable, not only for a greater understanding of Maioino’s unique poetics, but also to gain a better knowledge of the arts in Brazil in the last fifty years.

And let there be more monographic exhibitions about Brazilian artists active since the 1980s who continue to interrogate the direction of the visual arts in the contemporary era.

Raphael Fonseca
Professor, art historian and curator of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, in Brazil.
in 1959, settling in New York City. There, he studied at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and in the 1960s became part of an artistic and intellectual milieu that included Argentinean artist Alejandro Puente as well as Sol Lewitt, Mark di Suvero, and Andy Warhol. Warhol’s irreverent personality was a forceful influence on Balart, who was, however, already interested in an art disconnected to references in reality. His approach to geometric abstraction developed when he studied under Josef Albers at Princeton, where he had his first contacts with the aesthetic of the Bauhaus school. But it was Balart’s study of the work of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian that defined his engagement with geometric abstract art, which understood pure form as a way to access the realms of the spiritual and the transcendent.

Waldo Balart’s aesthetic proposal inscribes itself in the framework of Concrete art, where the elements of visual expression are engaged from a standpoint of formal asceticism—flat colors and orthogonal grids, for example—in order to prompt their autonomous pictorial valoration. Hewing closely to the tenets of the historical abstract art avant-garde (constructivism, Bauhaus, suprematism, neo-plasticism, among others), Balart sought to develop a language that moved away from the representational and staked his essential elements on visual creation. Nevertheless, his poetics give preeminence to perceptual autonomy, freeing his viewers to connect with the forms rather than directing the contents that are to be derived from the contemplation of his work.

For Balart, light, as the sum and origin of the entire color spectrum, is a key element not only from a formal perspective but also because of its transcendent connotations. His Escultura de luz (Light Sculpture, 1980–2002), featured in this exhibition, gives testament to this. It is an interactive sculpture that recreates the inverse process of the nature of light. Balart arranges three light bulbs in primary colors at the vertices of a metal triangle. As these overlapping lights are projected at the same time on a single wall, a white beam forms. The sculpture is produced as a person or an object come between the light sources and their projection.

Balart’s exploration of abstract forms and color systems drove him to create works in which colors behave like notes in a musical score, suggesting rhythms and melodies by virtue of their composition. The works in the series Proposiciones (Propositions) are based on what for the artist is the “intellectual” nucleus of his entire oeuvre: the “structural code of light.” He refers to it by its Spanish acronym, “CEL.” It is a system of numerical coding based on the eight colors into which white light breaks down and the axiomatic sequence that they originally possess. From this ordering principle Balart derives the combinations that are to give shape to his paintings or sculptures. For him, this organization of the components of light by means of their systematization opens up an infinite series of rigorous creative possibilities. Its artistic dimension is nevertheless inscribed in an activist humanism in which Balart assumes, in his own words, “an ethical commitment to life through aesthetics, where rigor and discipline provide the form while structure and color provide the element of fantasy.”

The belatedness of the recognition gained by Balart’s work is due in part to the silencing imposed for many years upon Cuban artists not living in the island, and in part to the lack of interest in Twentieth Century Cuban abstract art. Today, however, his explorations and his work are better understood and valued in the context of the multifarious proposals of Latin American geometric abstraction.

KATHERINE CHACÓN

LAURA AGUILAR

V incent Price Art Museum

One of the interesting aspects of the program Pacific Standard Time, sponsored by the Getty Foundation and presented in Los Angeles, was the organization of exhibitions centered on what the US academy calls "Latina Art." It consists of art produced by Latin American migrants and their descendants in the United States. These artists have a very limited projection and debate in Brazil—my country of origin—as result of our different geographic situation and colonial history; something that really intrigued me during my visits to those curatorships.

Clearly, one of the most impressive exhibitions was the retrospective by US photographer Laura Aguilar (San Gabriel, CA, 1959) at the Vincent Price Art Museum in East Los Angeles, a very interesting area because of its high Latino population. Being also of Latin American descent, Mexican to be more specific, is the reason that her artistic production is often referred to as “chicana.” Born in the late 1950s, her first experiences with cyanotype and photography occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, in courses and in her early participation in exhibitions. “Show and Tell,” the clever title selected for the exhibition, established a dialog between the mounting of the show and Aguilar’s inquiries. Her photographic production, based nearly exclusively on portraits, pulled our gaze in iconic fashion: the exhibition rooms were populated by images of small dimensions but powerful because of the themes that they covered. We first entered into contact with unfamiliar faces or the artist’s own face, and then try to rationally process them. Even in the works in which text became an important element to explore—and they many of these—the contact established with the human figures photographed in black and white were the priority. In other words, Laura Aguilar is a great photographer of people.

As we walk through the exhibition it is remarkable to note the manner in which the interest in other people gradually turns into an exploration of the artist’s own body. In the 1983 series titled “Xerox Collage,” Aguilar created collages with her own images and other images appropriated. Already in those colorful compositions there are words that point to identity themes: “Lesbian Woman” appears in one, while another montage depicts the image of a young woman that diverts from the stereotyped image of an US family. Isolation rather than normativity are issues that clearly appeared throughout her explorations.

From this initial period of her artistic production, it is noteworthy to mention how often we find photographic portraits in which the subjects pose for the camera with different gestures. Always titled after the first name of the person portrayed, the images focus on individuals who are not part of the LA celebrity culture, but rather people that belong to a constellation of affections close to Aguilar: Sandy, Eddie, and Pam, are some of their names. Because of the places where they were photographed, for the features of their faces, and as result of the associations established by Aguilar between them and certain objects, it becomes clear that most of them are immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

And there are not only “Chicanos,” but also persons from the Chinese, Japanese, and Afro-American communities; all of them people that, like Aguilar, can be predominantly regarded as “the others.”

But Aguilar’s gaze never falls for romanticist or naïve tendencies. Also during the 1980s, she produced a series of works that sharply question the immediate association with an identity that has been marginalized in US culture. The 1987 series "Latina Lesbian" consists of portraits of openly gay women accompanied by texts written with their own hands.
that question the stigmas surrounding their sexualities. Aguilar’s self-portrait included in this series offers precious phrases like: “I am not comfortable with the word lesbian, but as each day goes by I am more and more comfortable with the word LAURA.” The series “How Mexican is Mexican?” (1990) consists of several triptychs in which one of the images is a portrait of Aguilar. Underneath, again with different letters, we read stories of photographed women questioning the notion of the so-called “Mexican American.” To what extent is the term “Chicano” nothing but a label that widens more than closes the gap between differences? What is Mexican about a person born and educated in the United States?

In addition to this series (and others) that explore gay culture in the city, it is interesting to recognize that Aguilar’s gaze during the 1990s also reflected on the meaning of being a female artist. Furthermore, in one of her photographic series she is depicted holding signs with sayings about the meaning of being a poor artist who does not come from a typical aristocratic family of artists. In one of the signs she categorically affirms: “Dear Santa, I want a job with a health plan.” And in a more dramatic one, from the 1993 series titled “Don’t Tell Her Art Can’t Hurt,” Aguilar poses with a gun in a group of images in which she wonders about themes still pending that need to be addressed in her poetic.

Lastly, the exhibition concludes with the incorporation of Aguilar’s photographic experiments involving her nude figure inserted in natural landscapes. Developed during the early 1990s, these images become the central focus of her final production from that decade. In series like “Nature Self-Portrait” (1996) and “Stillness” (1999). Generally black and white images, these photographs were created before the most recent series included in the show titled “Grounded” (2006). Her nude body wanders through different landscapes, between rocks and trees, generating contrasts between her skin and the things that surround it.

Thinking once again about the exploration of non-stereotypical images that free us from definitions about the ideal physique, Aguilar’s body is opportunely presented: obese, curvilinear, and with areas of chiaroscuro. Her skinfolds are harmoniously complemented by the leaves, sand, and even by a few other leaner bodies that surround her in some of the images. That the images appear to be searching for silence and attempting to become one with nature, place her production in a different place from the affirmation and negation of verbalized identities—something generated by social studies—found in her other images.

One leaves the exhibition by Laura Aguilar with the certainty that there is still a dialog to be had between the production of “Chicano” or “Latino art” and art created in Latin America during recent decades. A good start could be to include Aguilar’s work in more group exhibitions, even in some all the way down in the southern hemisphere of the Americas.

Raphael Fonseca

NEW YORK / NY

Gonzalo Fonseca
Noguchi Museum

The retrospective of Gonzalo Fonseca at the Noguchi Museum is revelatory for numerous reasons. One has to do with its contemporaneity underscored in the exhibition’s most recent sculpture titled Self-Portrait (1996) created some 22 years ago. Fonseca’s art has aged well and is imbued with historical assertion that could be attributed to his erudition and artistic demeanor that is visionary, impassioned and totally committed. Born in Montevideo in 1922 and trained as an architect, Fonseca’s prolific output in painting, drawing, and ceramics commenced in the mid-1940s as a member of Joaquin Torres-Garcia’s Workshop. But it was his stone sculpture initially influenced by Constructivism that he transformed into something uniquely his own that situates Fonseca as an important artist of the twentieth century.

Constructivism’s genesis resides with Vladimir Tatlin but codified in 1920 when Russian artists sought to liberate Constructivism from its metaphysical leanings exemplified in Wassily Kandinsky’s expulsion from their collective. In the ensuing development of pure abstraction there developed two trajectories that were philosophically incomparable: the idealist, non-objective art such as Piet Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism that drew from Theosophy and antecedents including Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism, and the materialist, critical Constructivism espoused by revolutionary Soviet artists that was becoming international in its varied developments outside of Russia. Once it crossed the Atlantic to Uruguay and mediated by Torres-Garcia, it was recast anew as Universal Constructivism.

Axé Bahia: The power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis
Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles CA

As part of a program of exhibitions sponsored by the Getty Foundation, Los Angeles’ Fowler Museum organized and hosted the exhibition Axé Bahia: The power of art in an Afro-Brazilian metropolis. Situated within the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) campus, the museum was established in 1963 as a space for collections and exhibitions of non-Western artifacts. Throughout its history, the Fowler, initially positioned as an anthropology and ethnology museum, expanded its curatorial mission and began hosting exhibitions of contemporary visual arts from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, both in solo events and in group shows that brought together works from disparate geographical origins and with diverse status. Axé Bahia: The power of art in an Afro-Brazilian metropolis, then, is in consonance with the Fowler Museum’s recent history.

Curated by Patrick A. Polk (the museum’s curator of Latin American and Caribbean Popular Arts), Roberto Conduru, Sabrina Gledhill, and Randal Johnson, the shows makes its interests explicit from its very title: the relationships between art, Bahia, and the Afro-Brazilian component. Over the last decade, Conduru has reflected about the meaning of “Afro-Brazilian art”, while Gledhill investigates the Afro-Brazilian cultural component specifically in Bahia, and Johnson is a well respected expert in Brazilian culture who has devoted part of his work to the history of negritude in the country. There is, then, a variety of starting points for the four curators, which certainly contributed to the exhibition’s multi-faceted character: literature, art history, anthropology, and film. The fact that, for example, Roberto Conduru is a Brazilian-born scholar while Sabrina Gledhill is a British researcher raised in Puerto Rico who has lived in Bahia for decades, contributes to the overlapping of different points of view that complicate any simplistic categorization into insiders and outsiders; welcome aspects of an exhibition that presents itself as a panoramic of the region.

Upon entering the large space where the exhibition is on view and circulating between its nodes, which suggest dialogues between specific works of art, the title returns to the front of our mind: “Axé Bahia”. The curatorial puts particular emphasis on the religious and sacred aspects of the production of images in Bahia, in a trajectory that goes from the Portuguese invasion in the Sixteenth Century through the multiplicity of possible voices in contemporary art production. The word axé, from the Yoruba language, is associated with ideas of power and energy, not only in Afro-Brazilian religious practices but also in the everyday experiences of their practitioners: those two spheres are not existentially separate. Axé refers both to the sacred energy of the orixás (a personification or deity of the forces of nature in Afro-Brazilian rituals) and also to a set of objects found in a “candomblé terreiro” (a yard where the rituals of the candomblé religion are practiced) that emanate from that force. It can also be used as a greeting or to express good wishes and expectations for the future.

The different kinds of axé are emphasized in different works and aspects of the exhibition just as they are disseminated in everyday life in Bahia. Situated at the entrance to the exhibition space, the dialog between two artists was exemplar in terms of the way in which the curatorship established conversation within the show. On the one hand, the audience was greeted by Divisor, a work by Ayron Heracíllo that was displayed for the first time in 2000. On the other hand, a series of textile items by designer Goya Lopes...
GROUP SHOWS

Grabbed our attention with their colors and lightness. These two artists, both residents of Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, have found two very different ways to handle the Afro-Brazilian element in its spiritual dimension.

Heráclito, a visual artist who has delved into these issues for a long time—nearly three decades—uses materials culled from the rituals of condómbe. Inside an acrylic box, he creates a dividing line made with dendê oil (from a type of palm that grows in Brazil’s northeastern region) that stands out from its water and salt surroundings. The artist is more interested in the mystery of that image that in any quick reading of it: we see the contrast between the yellow hue of the dendê and the transparency of water, as well as the way in which the greasy material solidifies and suggests the partition of a space into two. These elements can be looked at from different angles, be it the history of African slavery in Bahia or the culinary and usual uses of dendê. Meanwhile, Goya Lopes’ textiles deal with representations of negritude, religious iconographies, and the latter’s potential to be made into cards and prints. The relationship between religious-cultural practices and wardrobe and fashion is key for a designer who for decades has also carried forth a solid research in the field. Color is a central element in her pieces, and her way of suggesting narratives based on human figures and symbols transforms her textiles into geometric patterns based on the tension between decoration and the representation of core elements of Afro-Brazilian culture.

Beyond the difference in terms of how they deal with images, the duo of Heráclito and Lopes is interesting inasmuch as it proposes a crossbreeding between agents acting in different dialogic spheres. While Heráclito is a visual artist with a growing presence and recognition in the international circuit (he participated in the most recent Venice Biennale), Goya Lopes also has gained space in the international arena, but in the fields of design and fashion. The way in which the curators not only brought together, in a non-hierarchical manner, individuals with a stable presence in the visual arts world, but also creators from different places, working in different languages. If the intention was to bring to the audience a panoramic of Afro-Brazilian elements in Bahia, there could not have been a better choice of participants in the project.

Another pillar of the exhibition was trans-historic: the potential to make the production of art in Bahia not include encounters between Pierre Verger, Carybé, Mário Cravo Neto, Rubem Valentim, and Mestre Didi and such younger artists as Tiago Sant Ana, Thais Muniz, Alex Igbo, Helen Salomão, and Tuan Carmo. Fortunately, the works chosen for display are also a gambit in favor of younger generations of artists. This not only gives a fresh tone to the show, but also proves that the most historically significant and best-known Bahia figures continue to produce different meanings in the present. It is also worth noting that the exhibition featured artists whose names resonate in the state of Bahia but are yet to achieve recognition in other regions of Brazil, or who at least were unknown to me: J. Cunha, Marco Aurélio Damaceno, and Oscar Dourado have followed interesting paths of inquiry and exploration, and their works deserve to circulate more widely in Brazil.

It was interesting to corroborate, even as the title of the exhibition included the expression “the power of art,” often we were confronted with what does not necessarily share the status of art as such. Posters, engravings, and objects made for their use in ritual are just some examples of the kinds of images featured, set in contrasts precisely with those words that are institutionally established as “visual art.” The decision not to partition “art” on one side and “visual culture” on another was also a successful move on the part of the curators, adding to the ingredients in a great cultural crucible presented in the form of an art exhibition. It is possible that the album covers, book flaps, postcards, and jewelry items included in the exhibition have wider circulation than the artworks with which they share the space, but this datum does not imply a “better/worse” hierarchy between them, only that they have different kinds of access—something that is made clear for visitors as they take in the exhibition and contribute to the sustained exploration of the relationship between Axé and Bahia.

At the end of our visit, we were left with the certainty that investigations into art, visual culture, and the construction of identity based on images of specific regions of...
Brazil are more than welcome. An exhibition like Asé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian metropolis, as well as the third edition of the Bahia Biennial, held in 2014, or the exhibitions based on images of the Amazon basin organized by Paulo Herkenhoff, bring to their audiences the relationship between image and cultural geography in a critical and kaleidoscopic manner. "Bahia", always between quotes, is the land of writers like Jorge Amado and also of visual artists who are yet to achieve even half of Amado's fame. It is a place of encounters, affections, conflicts, and power disputes. It is the birthplace of a future Brazilian nation and one of the cradles of condomblé but also, more recently, a place where religious intolerance is on the rise, as are specific attacks against Afro-Brazilian culture in waves of prejudice and hate. More exhibitions like this are necessary not only outside Brazil but also throughout the country. In that way we contribute to the historical deconstruction of a vision of the Brazilian southeast as the great cultural core of the country, while also learning that any cultural regionalism, any notion of a "Bahia culture" or a "Bahia art" is always a construction, and, as such, an invention.

Raphael Fonseca


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Saber leer el silencio (Knowing How To Read Silence) - LARA Panamá

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Panamá, Panamá City

The essence of a nation is that all of its individual members have a great deal in common and also that they have forgotten many things. — Ernest Renan

The Republic of Panama could be defined, like many others, as a nation of deep contrasts. Its capital is a city of violent juxtapositions, where the horns of cars and the songs of tropical birds fuse into a single chord; a city of harried passages between the rainforest and the megalopolis, between descendants of wealthy Jewish families and the Kuna Indian. Yet, despite the luxurious skyscrapers and shopping malls, a shroud of uncomfortable silences extends over everyday in Panama City; a veil that hides most of its truths, which are nevertheless acutely necessary if one is to understand the complex essence of the country. "A country often pigeonholed by stereotypes," says Gerardo Mosquera, closing with that sentence his introductory essay for LARA Panamá 2017. Latin American Roaming Art [LARA] is an itinerant residency held annually since 2012 in different cities throughout the region. Each edition invites eight artists (three from the...
