





Exhausting 2010

Networking Latin America (Art) History

María Iñigo Clavo

Pedro Lasch mural for *1810-1910-2010: Independencia, Revolución, Narcoclingadazo (1810-1910-2010: Independence, Revolution, Narcoclusterfuck)*, (detail), produced with members of *Atis Rezistans* and *Tele Geto* in the Grand Rue neighborhood of Port-Au-Prince, Haiti for the first edition of *Ghetto Biennale* (2009)

1 Valeria Coronel, curator of 'Políticas de la Memoria' (Politics of Memory), revisited the events held in Ecuador to commemorate the country's centennial of 1910, the year in which the model of the nation and social stratification were established (a model that is still in effect today). Using these representations as a point of departure, her proposal involved a revision of the territorial, social and cultural conflicts organised by rural and Indigenous peoples that indisputably influenced the independence movements. Helena Chávez and Sol Henaro presented a project at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City in 2010 entitled 'Espectografías'

The year 2010 marked 200 years of independence from the Spanish Crown for the Latin American countries of Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, Bolivia and Chile. To mark the anniversary, in the realm of cultural production, a number of so-called counter-bicentennials unfolded, seeking to contest the official narratives of the celebrations. Each of these originated from the premise that the celebrations marked the 200th anniversary of the occupation of political power by an elite descended from the European settlers. Political ceremonies and large military and popular parades were organised in Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Bogotá, and these were followed by several days of massive spectacles of choreography, music, fireworks, and re-enactments of the cries of independence during the uprisings that led to the Independence wars. But as many of the counter-collectives denounced at the time, these celebrations failed to take into account the contributions to national histories of social groups that did not fit within the European descendants' male perspective, and especially those marked by a historical genealogy of colonial difference: African descendants, peasants, Indigenous peoples and women. In short, such absences during the festivities evidenced the persistence of colonial structures within national discourses. This critique is not new; it has emerged at different moments throughout the twentieth century in the writings of theorists such as José Carlos Mariátegui, Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel and Mario Pedrosa, who have pointed at the need to rethink national/colonial definitions, and in the Indigenous and African descendant struggles since independence. But it was only in the 1990s that a postcolonial-hegemonic Latin American theory began to institutionalise internationally this critical perspective.

As part of the counter-celebrations in various countries, a number of artists took part in an array of organised events and actions.¹ In what follows I present a portrait of that moment of paradigm change in the

(Spectographies). Jaime Iregui staged his 'Pabellón Bicentenario' (Bicentennial Pavilion) in Bogota, which during its run produced various collective offshoot projects around the city, including monuments commemorating the centennial of 1910 along with other spontaneous actions. 'Prehambulo' (Prehambulus), also in Colombia, focused on one region's national representations. In 2012 Jorge Luis Marzo, Helena Chávez, Jaime Iregui and the Etcétera Group attended the international conference 'Historia sin pasado, contraimágenes de la colonialidad' (History without a Past: Counterimages of Coloniality) that I co-organised with Yayo Aznar at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) in Madrid.

methodologies for researching and curating 'Latin American (Art) History', a shift that would be developed in the decade that followed. In particular, I will focus on some actions and exhibitions that shared four common interests:

- 1) Before focusing on (re)counting a 'true' history, they shared a concern to analyse how official representations of (modern) history had been constructed, how their structures and narrative frames had been designed from the point of view of colonial exclusion and exploitation of the other.
- 2) To show the historical contributions in the processes that led not only to independence but that also came to be part of the ulterior construction of the 'national' by collectivities that had been until then ignored: as mentioned above, namely indigenous peoples, peasants, African descendants and women. The main objective of many of the examples I highlight was not merely to tell the 'silenced stories' but also to recount a history of modernity that had only been partially explained: that is to say, to rename modernity. This means putting aside the post-modern strategy of including minorities that left intact the structure of the narration that frames them; proposing a modernity constructed in collaboration and interdependence, which is impossible without colonies, and so not just as a unidirectional European project.
- 3) To defy classical curatorial strategies in order to question the conventional format of the exhibition and art display, by generating encounters and activities by networks of people, alternative circulation tactics or rumours typical of popular culture strategies.
- 4) To be a reflection on the concept of nation as a modern manifestation, as a continuation of the colonial order. In Latin America, the concept of nation was based on European models of the nineteenth century that arose at a moment when colonisation was still fundamental to modernity. Thus, this national model in Latin America continued a genealogy of colonial power relationships that is still alive.

I will focus on two study cases: first, the exhibition 'Las historias de un Grito. 200 años de ser Colombianos' (The Stories of a Cry: 200 Years of Being Colombian) curated by a team led by Cristina Lleras at the National Museum of Colombia; second, the figure of Haiti that became fundamental in the counter-bicentennial celebration discourses of many collectives, in artworks by Chicano artist Pedro Lash, the manifesto 'We Are All Black', launched by Latin America research group Southern Conceptualisms Network, and its echoes in the work of several artists of those years, for example the Brazilian collective Frente 3 de Fevereiro's interventions in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Rather than a formal movement, all these projects shared affinities based on the need to make evident the latency of coloniality in Latin American official discourses of history and nation, and to activate strategies for overcoming them, both in museums and beyond them.

Meanwhile in Europe: A Modern Future

While in Latin America curators and artists were trying to decolonise modernity, in Europe the main art institutions and several art projects were dis-

playing a nostalgia for modernity. For example, in the catalogue for the exhibition ‘Modernologías’, curator Sabine Breitwieser concluded her introduction with a quote from the paradigmatic text of one of the most important theorists of cultural studies: ‘When was Modernism?’, a lecture delivered by Raymond Williams at the University of Bristol a year before his death. Williams encouraged his audience to go beyond the postmodern fixation with non-history and seek out other traditions that had been marginalised by the hegemonic Western narratives. Only then, he argued, can we attain a true ‘modern future’.² Meanwhile, Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his 2009 book *Epistemologías del Sur* (Epistemologies of the South, 2014) defended that the point was not to negate the values of modernity in which we are still immersed: liberty, equality or solidarity, development or emancipation.³ His idea was to relearn them from a southern viewpoint, from a place of oppression, in order to construct a society based on a different notion of development and liberty.

In the same period several postcolonial theorists, such as Walter D. Mignolo, were circulating around different exhibition projects. Between Germany and Morocco ‘In the Desert of Modernity’ in 2008 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin showed the contribution Moroccan architecture had made to Western modern architecture. In 2009 ‘Modernologías’ was inaugurated by the Museu d’Art Contemporani (MACBA) in Barcelona and ‘Altermodern’ took place at Tate Britain, looking at the migrant condition of artists. In 2010, the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid presented the touring exhibition ‘Principio Potosí’ (Potosí Principle) that showed the link between colonisation and capitalism. In 2011 Tate Liverpool presented the show ‘Afro Modernism’,⁴ and in 2013 the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris inaugurated ‘Modernités Plurielles’.

In 2011 Anselm Franke presented the exhibition ‘Animism: Modernity through the Looking Glass’ at the Generali Foundation in Vienna. In this exhibition the concept of animism, which was taken from indigenous cosmological thought and the work of Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, was used to break down the frontiers between what is human and what is non-human – frontiers and knowledge hierarchies that defined the colonial condition of the Western modern project. Unlike the other aforementioned exhibitions, Franke’s curatorial project was not seeking to retell the modern narrative by showing the achievement of the ex-colonised or its hidden exploitative side, but to show its structure from within. Franke’s term was to have important consequences for art theory, resonances that continue to be explored through Indigenous cosmologies.

‘Modernités plurielles’ and ‘Afro Modern’ presented the idea of parallel modernities crystallising a wave of optimism around the possibility of finding new conditions to overcome postmodernity and towards a new decentralised modernity. In this sense, some of these projects appear to be an effort in search of possibilities for redeeming modernity from its lacks and failures that use the tools of postcolonial theory. So, while in Europe postcolonial theory was making possible an approach to ‘a modern future’ that did not put that future at risk, as we will see, in Latin America an emergent decolonial purpose had the aspiration of interrupting national/modern narration, showing that coloniality was its very condition and proposing new narratives and new uses of heritage and ‘national museums’.

The early years of the 2010s can be characterised as the consolidation of postcolonial theory and the popularisation of concepts that were circu-

2 ‘If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of postmodernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past, but for all our sakes, to a modern future in which community may be imagined again’. Raymond Williams, ‘When was Modernism?’, *New Left Review*, vol 1, no 175, 1989.

3 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Una epistemología del sur: la reinención del conocimiento y la emancipación social*, Clacso, Buenos Aires, 2009

4 Michael Asbury, Livio Sansone and I participated in this event.

- 5 The term ‘coloniality’, introduced by the group modernidad/colonialidad/decolonialidad and institutionalised in the early 2010s, helped to distinguish between a historical period in the past, colonialism and an ‘ideology’ that has survived and still determines our social relationships while having generated forms of knowledge and therefore specific power and difference relationships.
- 6 For Dussel, it is impossible to transcend modernity from within (for example from postmodern discourses) because we must take into account all that the system has left out: the other of the system. It is not about establishing or maintaining dichotomies, however, but about transcending them

lating in these different European events: modernity/coloniality, the decolonial turn, ecology of knowledges, provincialising Europe, internal colonialism, coloniality of knowledge, borderline thinking, and so on.⁵ At this time the Modernity/Coloniality group led by Walter Dignolo popularised Enrique Dussel’s 1970s concept of transmodernity, which aspired to overcome the incompleteness of the narrative of modernity supposedly created by the North and exported to the colonies, defending instead a common project that was to be renarrated.⁶ In this respect we will see some examples of this attempt in Latin America; however, and interestingly, most of the time these projects did not depart from the theoretical hegemonic-postcolonial corpus that raised reluctances as an academic project of the North. In recent years, however, this hegemonic postcolonial theory has expanded into the production of a new theoretical wave that is more locally situated and has less universal aspiration.

Strategies for Forgetting

Cristina Lleras, Chief Curator of Art and History at the National Museum of Colombia from 2004 to 2011, stated that the bicentennial show ‘Las



Museographic displays on the exhibition ‘The Stories of a Cry: 200 Years of being Colombian’, related to the participation of the people (of the common people) in Independence, with the work of Nelson Forj, ‘La historia nuestra caballero!’, 2010



Museographic displays on the exhibition 'The Stories of a Cry: 200 years of being Colombian', the absence of representations of people of African descent active during Independence

through the borders created between all those spaces. Transmodernity, in this regard, is 'the co-realization of that which modernity finds impossible to achieve by itself. In other words, transmodernity is incorporative solidarity, which we have denominated analeptic, between centre/periphery, man/woman, different races, different groups, civilization/nature, Western culture/Third World culture, etc.' Enrique Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity', in John Beverly, Michael Aronna and José Ovidedo, eds, *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, and London, 1995.

7 See Cristina Lleras, 'National Museums, National Narratives, and Identity Politics', in P Hamilton and J Gardner, eds, *The Oxford*

historias de un Grito 200 años de ser Colombianos' (The Stories of a Cry: 200 Years of Being Colombian), hosted by the museum in 2010, did not seek to speak about Colombia's national history of independence or about the facts.⁷ Rather, her purpose was to focus on how that national history had been told by showing the strategies of representation that had been used, demonstrating how the nation's memory had been administered and naming the strategies of forgetting and misrepresentation embedded in national discourses. The particular focus on these issues was part of the museum's strategic development plan for the decade that aimed to create and convey inclusive cultural discourses.⁸

The interesting aspect of 'The Stories of a Cry' is the way in which curatorial strategy evidenced how the museum's own history is implicated in that veiling; the curatorial team responsible for the exhibition used the museum's own collection to unveil the historical legacy of obliterated collectives such as peasants, African Americans, women and indigenous peoples to create a dialogue with the official literature of the nation's heroes. Ernest Renan, one of the earliest thinkers of the nation, warned in 1882 that forgetting was a fundamental part of the construction of national unity and the reason why historians were thought to be a major threat to its formation.⁹ But contemporary artists also had an important role. For instance, Joanna Calle was commissioned to develop portraits of *mulatos* Agustín Agualongo and Pedro Romero, men who at the beginning of the nineteenth century were part of military

Handbook of Public History,
Oxford University Press,
Oxford, 2017

- 8 For instance, 'Wakes and Live Saints amongst Black, Afro-Colombian, Maroon and Islander Communities' (2008). See Cristina Lleras, 'Contesting the Power of Single Narratives. Lessons from the National Museum of Colombia', conference paper for 'Building Identity, the Making of Museums and Identity Politics', Taiwan, 2011
- 9 It is no coincidence that law and history started out as one and the same discipline in the nineteenth century. Separating history as a field of 'scientific knowledge' meant the (supposed) end of the field's complicity with a certain legislative order, for defining history was clearly a way of creating citizens and contributing to the creation of a frame of reference of values. See Stephen Bann, *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990.
- 10 '¡La historia nuestra, caballero!' is a fragment from an introduction to the popular song 'Rebellion' by Cartagena singer Joe Arroyo.
- 11 Vice president of the first Gran Colombian nation (1819–1827) and president of the New Granada Republic (1832–1837).
- 12 Overall, the curatorial project sought to question unitary national representations. Questions were written in big format across the walls of the exhibition rooms: 'Do we all agree?', 'Are heroes as they are portrayed?', 'Is it imperative to die for the fatherland?'. In addition, work stations were created where visitors could create their own independence statements, which they could leave as part of the exhibition. The purpose was to enable viewers to have an active position towards their vision of history, to transform them into active agents in the interpretation of

units comprised of *mestizos*, peasants and Indigenous people but who did not have their portraits in the museum. Another example that aroused strong critique was the 2010 artwork *¡La historia nuestra, caballero!* (The History Gentleman!) by Cartagena artist Nelson Fory, who topped the statues and busts of important figures in Colombian history with Afro-style wigs.¹⁰ For the bicentennial show, Fory placed a wig on a bust of Simón Bolívar and another on Francisco de Paula Santander at the entrance of the exhibition.¹¹ A first quick reading would interpret the intervention as merely carnivalesque mockery, but that is exactly why it is interesting, as the gesture reveals the forgotten histories of the slaves and *mulatos* who also fought for independence and who have not been subject to homages or immortalised in sculptures. Luisa Vélez, for instance, invited visitors to dress up as either Bolívar or as the 'Indian America' using as an inspiration Pedro José de Figueroa's 1816 mythical painting *Bolívar y la India América* (*Bolívar and Indian America*).

In the exhibition, paintings had the status of historical nationalistic political propaganda documents. The curatorial project also included a mix of eighteenth-century representations of national history alongside soap opera films, documents and contemporary art. Even though the classical model demands that art take up the task of illustrating history and having a subordinate relationship to it, these contemporary art pieces renegotiated that passive relationship to become acts of contestation; questioning tools as well as profane devices for desacralising the objects of history, definitively appearing as signs of historical agency and most importantly also creating a caesura in the atemporality of heritage.¹²

These disruptive curatorial strategies appeared alongside a populist publicity campaign. An animated cartoon of Che Guevara with a strong Argentinian accent triggered general polemics and responses. As a consequence, the exhibition unleashed a controversy over the use of the country's national heritage. Two years later, the polemic led to Cristina Lleras's resignation. Beatriz González, the former chief curator of the museum, expressed her opposition to Lleras's curatorial project, defending a museum model based on research and the conservation of objects as opposed to strategies of communication that, in her view, were only proper for an entertainment park and the use of the mass media for the amusement of the masses.¹³ What transpired from this polemic was precisely the resistance to questioning the notion, construction and use of heritage as well as its history, and in turn also the call by González to preserve history and museums as a high-level culture that, therefore, should not be mixed with popular culture.

What can be read between the lines of the exhibition is a history of exclusionary practices carried out by the museum along with a desire to rethink inclusion strategies, since integration within a national discourse does not guarantee that hierarchies within a social group will not arise. Above all, inclusion in public discourse hardly elicits respect of total right to difference. Multiculturalism was a term popularised in the debates of the 1990s that looked at the model of inclusion of states with a diversity of cultures. The main criticisms were that the concept did not take into account the power relationships between cultures and groups in the portrait of coexistence, and that it reduced them to commodities in the capitalism system.

the presented documentation.

- 13 For a sample of the polemics see <http://www.revistaarcadia.com/articulo/la-mision-del-museo-no-permanecer-lleño-gente-sino-preservar-memoria-del-pais/25174>. 'Why not Demand that the State Rewrite the History of the Black Presence in the Country since the Transatlantic Slave Trade?', in C Mosquera and L C Bracéelos, eds, *Afro-reparaciones: Memorias de la esclavitud y justicia reparativa para negros, afrocolombianos y raizales*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia – Facultad de Ciencias Humanas – Centro de Estudios Sociales, Bogotá, 2007.

- 14 Armando Muyolema, 'De la "cuestión indígena" a lo "indígena" como cuestionamiento. Hacia una crítica del latinoamericanismo, el indigenismo y el mestiz(o)aje', in Ileana Rodríguez, ed, *Convergencia de tiempos: Estudios subalternos/contextos latinoamericanos, estado, cultura, subalterno*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2001

15 Ibid

- 16 Lleras, 'Contesting the Power', op cit

The multicultural Anglo-Saxon strategy of inclusion has a precedent in the nationalist strategies of *mestizaje* in early twentieth-century Latin America, strategies which were promoted by *indigenist* ideologues across the continent in a common moment of construction of national state identities. *Mestizaje* was seen as the national identity of Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala and Colombia, with different nuances in each context. Kichwa educator Armando Muyolema has focused on the violence contained in the nine letters that make up the term. Literary or artistic indigenism at the beginning of the twentieth century is, in effect, a producer of arguments, images and representations with the moral consignment of 'establishing the necessary unity of the Latin American being'.¹⁴ Socialism was interested in the forced conversion of Indigenous labour into a proletariat, while capitalism, as multiculturalism did, wanted people to become small owners and future consumers: the mestizo is, before anything, a political subject produced by 'distancing and negation of the indigenus'. Indigenism is a highly influential artistic and literary current that has established an important ideological relation with nationalisation and the homogenisation of Latin American countries; it is, above all, a stream of thought undertaken by 'lettered non-indigenous men who write about indigenous [people]... the notion of the mestizo, by constituting a form of self-perception and self-nomination as a social subject, is displaced from the purely cultural realm to the political'.¹⁵ It is for this reason that in adopting multicultural stances and policies, museums run the risk of becoming accomplices of homogenising strategies. Museums very often fail to create spaces that are in direct contact with the communities that they represent, and therefore one of the dangers of the multicultural model for museums is that they fall short when it comes to the representation of social changes or social debates or racial or sexual preconceptions. As Lleras pointed out: 'While societies fail to face social crises, museums are being called on to disseminate civic values or redeem the nation for its discriminations'.¹⁶

For the curatorial team of 'The Stories of a Cry', communication was key, and not just the marketing campaign (failed or not) but also the entire display of interactive objects. What transpires from the polemic that led to Lleras's resignation is that the museum sought to bet on a policy of social inclusion in approaching popular culture strategies, showing the distance created by the heritage rhetoric and its complicity with coloniality. In my view, the success of the exhibition relied on its recognition of a history that is made up of many interconnected histories, refusing to feed the superfluous rhetoric of 'parallel modernities', isolating narratives and legitimating the separation. In this regard, and in Muyolema's words, the sole aspiration of the Kichwa would be to Kichwaze (*kichwarse*) him/herself and not find their place in and relationship with a grand narrative affected by this process.

1810–1804–1910–2010

In 2009 artists Pedro Lasch (Mexico/USA) and Miguel Rojas-Sotelo (Colombia) created a bicentennial celebration art project named *Independencia, Revolución y Narcochingadazo* (Independence, Revolution and Narcoclusterfuck). In referring to the Narcos, this name generated

continuity between past and present colonialism in consideration of the fact that after the end of the Cold War colonial domination took the form of the war against drug trafficking, especially in Colombia. *Chingadazo* refers to the term *chingar*, which means to fuck or to beat and contains a violent sexual connotation: at the same time, it means a climactic sexual and revolutionary explosion, thus something positive. Thus *Narco-chingadazo* announces a possibility to disobey in the context of the overarching bicentennial festivities.

During its work-in-progress phase in 2009, the project travelled to the first Ghetto Biennale, which was held in Haiti.¹⁷ This ‘biennial of poverty’ was hosted by Atis Rezistans (Artists in Resistance) and organised by André Eugène and Leah Gordon, who invited artists, writers, architects and filmmakers to intervene in the Grand Rue area of Port-au-Prince. The joining of the words ‘ghetto’ and ‘biennale’ implicated the exhibition within an institutional critique framework contesting one of the roles played by biennials as part of urban branding strategies. The exhibition was further grounded in a new artistic internationalism premised on the fact that most Haitian artists lacked the possibility for international travel. In this sense, the Ghetto Biennale responded to Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘Altermodern’ platform where the idea of the migrant artist was inevitably tied to a certain social class at a time when for the majority of the global community displacement meant forced migration and migration that was considered irregular.¹⁸ Moreover, one of the biennial’s straplines, ‘What happens when first world art rubs up against third world art? Does it bleed?’, was inspired by Gloria Alzaldúa, who when discussing Juárez *maquiladoras* stated in 1987: ‘The US–Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds.’ The organisers of the exhibition were conscious of the complex displacement of artistic tourism and the pseudo-ethnographic exoticisation of poverty that an influx of ‘first world artists could generate’. Instead, they decided to bet on the potential for legitimating other art circuits beyond those provided by institutions that deny them entry in the first place.¹⁹

For the Ghetto Biennale, Pedro Lasch intervened in the chronology of the bicentennial celebrations on one of the building’s walls. Taking the sequence 1810–1910–2010 (the year of Mexican independence, the beginning of the revolution, and the bicentenary), Lasch asked Haitian biennial participants to superimpose their date of national independence – 1804 – as though it were a historiographic correction of sorts. This, in turn, made some Latin American intellectuals wonder: ‘What about the Haitian Revolution? Why wasn’t it included in the official celebrations?’ As a matter of fact, the Haitian Revolution was the first revolutionary movement in Latin America, beginning in 1791 and ending in 1804. Haiti was the first country to gain independence from European colonialism. The main reason the Haitian Revolution had been excluded until then was the fact that it was not a struggle led by whites or *criollo* descendants of Europeans, but an African revolution that dared to abolish slavery unilaterally. What the official bicentennial festivities across Latin America were therefore silencing were precisely the racial revindications embedded in the Independence Wars, having thereby whitened history.²⁰

The Haitian Revolution, moreover, was mainly inspired by the French Revolution. When Napoleon sent his troops to Haiti in 1802 to restore slavery, the soldiers were confused when they learned that they had to

17 The first Ghetto Biennale, <http://www.ghetobiennale.org>

18 Leah Gordon, ‘You Can’t Always Curate Your Way Out! Reflections on the Ghetto Biennale’, in Sarah Dornhof, Nanne Buurman, Birgit Hopfener and Barbara Lutz, eds, *Situating Global Art: Topologies – Temporalities – Trajectories*, Transcript Verlag, Berlin, 2018, pp 129–154

19 A second strapline is ‘A Salon des Refusés for the 21st century’.

20 ‘Although the initial military resistance of the aboriginal populations was defeated in a few decades during the sixteenth century, the rebellions of “Indians”, “blacks” and “mestizos”, that is, with their new identities and a new intersubjective and cultural universe, became frequent throughout the eighteenth century and political and cultural resistance became massive and widespread. The wars of emancipation had their origin in these rebellions, although by well-known determinations they ended up under the control and benefit of the rulers.’ Aníbal Quijano, ‘Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina’, *Anuario Mariateguiano*, vol 9, no 9, 1997, translation by the present author.



Pedro Lasch mural for 1810-1910-2010: *Independencia, Revolución, Narcochingadazo* (1810-1910-2010: *Independence, Revolution, Narcoclusterfuck*), produced with members of Atis Rezistans and Tele Geto in the Grand Rue neighborhood of Port-Au-Prince, Haiti for the first edition of Ghetto Biennale (2009)



Pedro Lasch mural for 1810-1910-2010: *Independencia, Revolución, Narcochingadazo* (1810-1910-2010: *Independence, Revolution, Narcoclusterfuck*)



Pedro Lasch mural for 1810-1910-2010: *Independencia, Revolución, Narcochingadazo* (1810-1910-2010: *Independence, Revolution, Narcoclusterfuck*)

- 21 Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or the Cultural logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, vol 225, no 157, 1997, pp 28–29
- 22 Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2009
- 23 Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity', op cit
- 24 Eduardo Gruner, *La oscuridad y las luces. Capitalismo, cultura y revolución*, Edhasa Ensayo, Buenos Aires, 2010
- 25 Article 12: No White person, of whatever nationality, shall set foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor nor, in the future, acquire property here. Article 13: The preceding article shall not have any effect on White women who have been naturalised by the government, nor their present or future children. Included in the present article are the Germans and Poles who have been naturalised by the Government. Article 14: All distinctions of colour will by necessity disappear among the children of one and the same family where the Head Stage is the father; Haitians shall be known from now on by the generic denominations of blacks.
- 26 Article 14 of the Haitian Constitution also served as one of the leitmotifs for the Southern Conceptualisms Network's 'Memorias Disruptivas' (Disruptive Memories) meeting that took place that year in Madrid at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. There was also a failed project (in which I was involved) which would have presented in Bogotá some of the themes seen in the 'Memorias Disruptivas' exhibition in an exhibition entitled 'Estéticas Descoloniales' (Decolonial Aesthetics) with some of the same artists and thinkers.

fight against people singing *La Marseillaise*. The former slaves fought to defend liberty, equality and fraternity not only for white people but for every man and woman in the world. Haitian revolutionary general Toussaint Louverture's plans were to continue to be allied with France but while preserving Haitian autonomy. But Louverture died in a French prison in 1803 and Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed the first Haitian Constitution two years later.

A paradox that emerges is that while grand European national narratives have allowed us to speak about the history of France without mentioning Haiti, it is impossible to talk about the history of Haiti without mentioning France. In this regard, coloniality operates by isolating narratives, as if the colonies were phenomena that were parallel to modernity but not a necessary part of it. Slavoj Žižek talked about the relationship between symptom and exception as often there is a confusion between them.²¹ We could take this idea when thinking about how the Haitian Revolution is not an exception in the Western history of revolutions and the values of progress and civilisation conveyed by 'revolution'. Rather, the Haitian Revolution, and other Latin American independence movements, was a symptom of the rule of modernity along with the Western world order.

Another symptom was G W F Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* written between 1805 and 1806. A few months after an earthquake devastated the island in 2010, Susan Buck-Morss presented her work on Hegel and Haiti in the context of debates about the 'Altermodern' exhibition at Tate Britain. Buck-Morss demonstrated how Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a crucial book of Western philosophy, was inspired by the Haitian Revolution. According to her, Hegel had been informed about both the Haitian and the French Revolutions after reading *Minerva*, a German newspaper.²² The *Phenomenology of the Spirit* contains a well-known passage describing the master–slave dialectic, a struggle to the death for the recognition of power and the subjection of the oppressed, who ends up overcoming the oppressor because the oppressor is debilitated and dependent on the work of the oppressed to survive. Not unsurprisingly, Hegel's master–slave dialectic had not been directly interpreted as a reflection on slavery in the colonies and yet it was a great source of inspiration for Marxism.²³ Buck-Morss's reading became relevant as she evidenced how modernity had been only partially told, drawing a genealogy between racial struggles in Haiti and proletarian movements deriving from Marxism. This is exactly the purpose of this text, I insist: not merely to tell 'silenced stories' but to retell, to rename modernity.

In 2009 the Southern Conceptualisms Network (a research group linked to the Museo Reina Sofía) started an anonymous Internet rumour inspired by the work of Argentine philosopher Eduardo Gruner.²⁴ This campaign quickly disseminated online Article 14 of the first Haitian Constitution of 1805, and it became a popular slogan. Article 14 reads: 'All Haitians shall henceforth be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks'.²⁵ During 2010 this slogan went viral: members of the collective Juan Carlos Romero made posters with the phrase 'Todos somos negros' (We are all Black) and placed them in public spaces throughout Latin America.²⁶ Vigo's Biennale in Spain that year was devoted to the Caribbean and it included a workshop on Article 14. Also 'We are all Black' was one of the main slogans in a section of the official bicentennial



Pedro Romero, 'Somos todos negros', 2010, Buenos Aires; (All Haitians shall henceforth be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks), article 14, of the Haitian Constitution of 1805)

This did not come to fruition for several reasons, but one of the most important was friction arising from the fact that the exhibition's organisers (Walter Mignolo among others) considered that the Southern Conceptualisms Network had its own 'project' that was beyond their idea of a 'decolonial aesthetics'. For us, it was very difficult to create an event to illustrate independence in an apologetic way (or any other mode imposed from outside) rather than to problematise it and think to take it further. This logic was very limited and in my opinion a symptom of how Mignolo understands art as an instrument of illustration for his theories rather than a field in its own right for creating knowledge and problematising it.

parade held in May in Buenos Aires and organised by Grupo de Arte Callejero, who installed electronic LED signs for spreading messages.

To state 'all citizens are black', as Sibylle Fischer writes, was the fruitful outcome of an operation in renaming citizenship: in the statement the categories 'Black' and 'white' are obliterated as is the *castas* system; 'only Blacks' generated a new language which nullified the old regime of slavery based on racism.²⁷ Furthermore, Article 12 of the Haitian Constitution states that no white person, of whatever nationality, shall set foot on the territory with the title of master or proprietor, and in the future they may not acquire property here. If Article 14 made impossible a language of slavery based on race to construct the new citizenship figures in Haiti, one cannot help but wonder how the idea of citizenship arose during the processes of decolonisation, and how these changes were attained after independence given the fact that they did not arise under conditions of an egalitarian society for example, in a context such as that of Brazil.

We possess rights upon our condition as bearers of citizenship within a nation-state. Being 'bearers of rights', however, fails to guarantee equality for all people before the state; on the contrary, states are inherently exclusionary and mark a border with those who are not included.²⁸ This is particularly evident when 'illegal' immigrants or Indigenous peoples bear the



Frente 3 de Fevereiro 'Arquitetura da exclusão', (Architecture of Exclusion), 2010, installation at the Wall of Santa Marta Favela

27 Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2004

28 In the case of nineteenth-century Brazil, that category meant little to the Brazilian populace, which believed that the state was fraudulent and its political leaders were corrupt. This led to the independent organisation of civil society, which also rejected any future association for political ends. Consequently, political inactivity became the norm, a phenomenon which resulted in a weakening of the power of civil society.

29 Darcy Ribeiro, *Los brasileños, Siglo Veintiuno*, Mexico City, 1975, p 110

30 Sousa Santos, 'Poderia o direito ser emancipatório?', op cit

31 Part of the project was the publication of a poster, https://issuu.com/invisiveisproducoes/docs/cartografia_world_brazil_af_05_layo.

status of citizens, which means they have full access to the same rights. But in Latin America the opposite was long ago apparent, as a large part of the population living on the peripheries does not have access to the same legal rights that are possessed by the white upper and upper-middle class. In the 1970s Darcy Ribeiro spoke about 'those sub-people or non-people',²⁹ and in 2009 de Sousa Santos posited the notion of an 'uncivil civil society'.³⁰ These are peoples or territories that remain in a state of legal suspension.

Thinking on this, the Frente 3 de Fevereiro collective in Brazil explored their interest in this condition in 2010. In their project *Arquitetura de la exclusión* (Architecture of Exclusion) they articulated the history of Haiti through a collection of slides. During the Rio de Janeiro carnival they flew a giant balloon on which they had written 'Haití aqui' (Haiti here). This is the title of a famous song by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil whose lyrics talk about racism and exclusion. Passers-by – from privileged areas of the city – played with the balloon while members of the collective asked them whether they believed there was a Haiti in Rio de Janeiro. The third component of the piece was a video documenting the process of painting a hole on the wall separating the Morro de Santa Marta favela from the rich parts of Rio de Janeiro.³¹ In the video artists discussed with inhabitants the so-called 'peace process' carried out by the special military police known as the Peace Units, as part of preparations for the Olympics in 2016 that ruined the city. The aim was to control the violence in the favela that was the consequence of drug trafficking, in which the official authorities were involved. The unit which participated in the 'peacekeeping' process in the Alemão favela had been trained during the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti following the violent political

crisis which led to the removal of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004. Is the Morro de Santa Marta favela a Haiti within Brazil? Sociologist Giuseppe Cocco's proposal during those years on the becoming Brazil of the rest of the world, was precisely to understand the political potential of poverty to positivise the Brazilianisation of the global economy, and those middle places as interrogators and a regenerating force of the neoliberal system: 'The subjects of Becoming-Brazil of the world are the poor, because they produce wealth while they transmute all values.'³²

Networking Latin America (Art) History beyond Counter-bicentennials and Coloniality

The eighties saw the production of numerous historical survey exhibitions of 'Latin American art' whose approach tended to be exoticising and conceptualised as magical and wondrous (*maravilloso*). Afterwards, the interest of the art market in the promotion of the art of the former peripheries contributed to institutionalising a critical wave generated by these macro-exhibitions. This helped legitimise a genre of art that travelled throughout the West based entirely on the nationalisation of art, Argentinian art, Cuban art and Brazilian art being among some of the most celebrated. In contrast to the recent rise of extreme right-wing nationalism in various countries, for institutions in the last few decades national categories have begun to appear redundant and have been replaced by concepts like transnationalism or 'new internationalism'. These changes in part have been driven by the global biennial circuit. In the last few years individual categories of migration, indigeneity, Latino Americanism and diaspora no longer function as elements that define nations and their histories but have instead emerged as forces which have destabilised academic, scientific and epistemological Western certainties.

Amidst the emergence of these new Southern epistemologies, the idea of 'Latin American art' took on a new configuration that was far removed from the urgency of the Cold War in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of being shaped by national art movements, styles and manifestos, it reappeared through the study of political networks, affection and friendship, affinity and struggle. In this regard the research group Southern Conceptualisms Network, which is constituted as a network of people, spoke about contagion in its 'Perder la Forma Humana' (Losing the Human Form) exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in 2012. The practices gathered around this exhibition had in common having been constituted through 'ideological affect' marked by the urgencies of a historical context of repression, a certain energy circulating that made the activity of different groups during the 1980s possible. The old idea of the politically *effective* gave leeway to an *affective* art and a contagion of ideas, emotions and energies.³³ Both terms, 'contagion' and 'affect', were the main conceptual axes of the exhibition.

Moreover, the Meeting Margins project (an exchange between University of the Arts London and the University of Essex) studied the trips and collaborations of European and Latin American intellectuals during the sixties and seventies,³⁴ years that witnessed a proliferation of projects focused on circulatory strategies that manifested, among other things, as artist networks which have connected Eastern Europe, Latin America

32 Giuseppe Cocco, *MundoBraz*, Editora Record, Rio de Janeiro, 2009

33 An analysis of the affective turn will have to be set aside for another time, at which point to do the subject justice (not just as a mere theorisation) one should speak about artworld dynamics and think about the capitalisation of affection, about intimacy and the competitive bodies that exist among us.

34 Another research project was 'Decentralized Modernities', which in 2013–2016 looked at work networks between Latin America and Europe.

and/or Japan since the 1970s. These exchanges were key for the exhibition ‘Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980’ (2015–2016) at MoMA in New York, which was the result of MoMA’s C-MAP research project. Specifically, regarding mail art, it is not by chance that one of the C-MAP researchers at the time, Zanna Gilbert, speaks about *intimate* practices such as sending letters and postcards in contraposition with a macro art system and discourse that ‘attempts to form completely new modes of artistic production and circulation’.³⁵ This is the reason why these intimate practices ‘knock on the door of the Big Monster’, as Ulises Carrión wrote in an artwork. For Gilbert, this monster could be the art system in times of repression and dictatorship, denoting a certain (national) historiography and its way of narrating a ‘history of art’ through modern frames such as manifestos and prominent figures, both critics and artists, and the notion of genius and the triumphs of Western culture. It is notable that all of these projects about networking rarely focused on internal colonialism in Latin America, so they did not look at the postcolonial perspective as a useful tool of analysis. Until very recently it was normal for the idea of coloniality to privilege the view of the United States as coloniser during the Cold War, promoting a certain aesthetic of revolutionary militancy and resistance in art, rather than developing concerns about the continuity of coloniality on the continent and the complicities of nationalism and Western-owned apparatuses of knowledges and politics. It is true that during 2009–2012 the limits of postcolonial theory came to be acknowledged, especially as it was severely criticised in Latin America for its self-referentiality (as another ‘Male citational practice’).³⁶ However the critique of the postcolonial has been embedded in a process of expansion that has converted local strategies and specificities into a source of constant reinvention that has made them more present in the strategies of Latin American art institutions.

Regarding the debate over the potential for reconceptualising the values of the North through the experience of the South, the research network *Península: procesos coloniales y prácticas artísticas y curatoriales*, realised in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2012–2014, took as one of its starting points the idea of ‘Apprehending the South’ and translating problematics and theorisations from Latin America to the contemporary situation in Spain.³⁷ A result of this cross-over emerged from taking up the term ‘internal colonialism’, recovered by Bolivian theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, to rethink the Spanish context and the renovation of colonial relationships that are being reproduced by migration.³⁸ If Latin American internal colonialism is a concept that explains the continuity of colonial relations after independence, in Europe the concept has been used in order to point at the reproduction of colonial relations with recent waves of migration within European countries that generally have the worst labour conditions.

These projects also propose a critique that can be taken further to be part of new concerns explored by artists in the coming years: a critique aimed at nationalism as understood by art history as it is written in Latin America. What are the complicities between art history and the official narratives? Here we may also be able to find the complicity between art history and Museums, and coloniality. All the projects I have analysed here look at popular cultural strategies of communication, including mass media or the Internet or orality and interlocution against an idea of patrimonialisation

35 Zanna Gilbert, ‘Bureaucratic Sabotage Knocking at the Door of the “Big Monster”’, in Sophie Halar and Mara Polvosky, *Sabotage Art: Politics and Iconoclasm in Contemporary Latin America*, IB Tauris, London, 2016, p 72

36 Sarah Ahmed, ‘Making Feminist Points’, blog post, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>

37 *Península* was co-founded by Olga Fernández, Francisco Godoy Vega, Jesús Carrillo and myself in 2012 and up to 2014 and it had around thirty researchers. See ‘A Mapping of Postcolonial Theory and Art in Spain’, in María Inigo Clavo, Editorial. Introduction of the Issue ‘Spanish Francoism and the question of Otherness’, *Art in Translation*, Taylor & Francis, Routledge and University of Edinburgh, 2020.

38 ‘Internal colonialism’ was retrieved by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in the 1990s to speak about the Bolivian context. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores*, Tinta Limón, Buenos Aires, 2010.

and heritage. The act of spreading the message ‘We are all Black’ via the Internet, asking viewers to write their own declaration of independence, as in ‘History of a Cry’, reacting to the icons of nation or intervening in public spaces, inciting interlocutions as did Frente 3 de Fevereiro, goes beyond the bicentennial celebrations, offering a new reading of heritage and ‘art history’. This could be a first step in opening another debate on the blind spots inherent in the politics of *forgetting* embedded in ‘art historiography’ and enclosed in familiar official national frames. These art projects make visible the necessity of participatory work around the management of heritage and the role art may have in its redefinition.

We have already learned that the medium is the message; these changes in exhibition format and collective curatorship and research must surely be dismantling the age-old need to use art to create the discourses of history. I would like to believe the relations between the disciplines of history and art are also reformulating themselves, both in form and content.

ORCID

María Inigo Clavo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7086-1218>

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