



How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?

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How Do We Know What Latin American
Conceptualism Looks Like?
– Miguel A. López

Miguel A. López discusses the processes of historicising Latin American art of the 1960s and 70s, and how current readings of key political events, such as the ‘Tucumán Arde’ episode in 1968, are questioning what has been placed under the geographical and art-historical rubric of ‘Latin American Conceptualism’.

A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first Conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else.¹
– Eduardo Costa

I

On 28 April 1999 the exhibition ‘Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s’ opened at New York’s Queens Museum of Art. Organised by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, consisting of eleven geographically defined sections and curated by a large, international group of art historians and researchers, the exhibition formulated one of the riskiest and most controversial interpretations of so-called Conceptual art at an international level. The show was ambitious. Its structure created a geographical spill-over that called into question the lesser or secondary place to which certain critical productions had been consigned. The framework of analysis was the global set of social and political transformations that have taken place since 1950, and the emergence of new forms of political action that formed the backdrop to a renewed repertoire of visual language. Such a scope allowed the curators to gather aesthetic proposals not defined in the exhibition by a Conceptualist ‘aesthetics of immateriality’, but instead by their capacity for intervention.² This approach, without doubt, shifted the very rules according to which the history of Conceptual art had been written. Those radical changes of the *modes of producing* and *giving value* to art exposed by ‘Global Conceptualism’ reveal complex processes in which political subjectivities oppose the consensual organisation of power and its distribution of places and roles, mobilising singular and collective resistances and dissenting energies.

Ten years on, the shockwaves can still be felt, perhaps even more intensely than at the time. In different ways, ‘Global Conceptualism’ updated some of the debates that had been attempting to raise the issue of subjectivity in social practices from a post-colonial perspective, disputing the geographical and temporal orders of a modern or colonial Occidentalism.³ Hence, it was no surprise that the show became one of the most quoted (and most questioned) referents of the revival of 1960s and 70s critical production that has taken place over the past decade in exhibitions, seminars and publications around the world.

While much has been said about the decentralising virtues of ‘Global Conceptualism’, in retrospect its most significant legacy appears not only to be the broadening of the Conceptual art map (a move that had a bearing on several subsequent curatorial projects), but the way in which the exhibition questioned the identity of a Conceptual

1 Eduardo Costa, quoted in Athena T. Spear (ed.), *Art in the Mind* (exh. cat.), Oberlin, OH: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1970, n.p.

2 The term ‘dematerialisation’, introduced by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in 1968, for a long time was used as the key term to identify Conceptual art in North America and Western Europe. See Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, ‘The Dematerialization of Art’, *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2, February 1968, pp. 31–36 and Lucy R. Lippard (ed.), *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973.

3 In Latin America those discussions happened around the Bienal de La Habana, which, since its creation in 1984, has become an important forum of discussion disengaged from the international art market. Another significant moment at an international scale is the coinciding in 1997 of documenta X, curated by Catherine David, and the second Johannesburg Biennial, curated by Okwui Enwezor.

art with universal aspirations. The curatorial operation of ‘Global Conceptualism’ started from a categorical distinction between ‘Conceptual art’ – understood as a North American and Western European aesthetic development associated with a formalist reduction inherited from abstraction and Minimalism – and ‘Conceptualism’, a term denoting a critical return to an ‘ordering of priorities’ that made visible certain aesthetic processes on a transnational level, allowing for diverse historical, cultural and political narratives to be set in place.⁴ Conceptualism was presented as a phenomenon that took place in a ‘federation of provinces’, with the ‘traditional hegemonic centre [being] one among many’, drawing a multiplicity of points of origin and questioning the privileged position claimed by Western modernity and its politics of representation.⁵ The exhibition seemed to work as a performative apparatus determined to re-politicise, reconfigure and rewrite the memory of those decades. As a result Conceptual art, which from the perspective of the United States and Western Europe had until then been an unavoidable prism for reading other critical productions, appeared fractured.

The shrewdness of the ‘Global Conceptualism’ gesture no doubt managed to effectively dominate the critical framework from which one would contemplate and validate those antagonistic practices. But more importantly, and perhaps without intending to, it allowed for the reconsideration of Conceptualism as the effect of a



discourse (or multiplicity of discourses) that had itself caused breaks and a major questioning of the fabric of certain local memories – albeit in some cases at the expense of reinforcing lineages and typologies. These are complex manoeuvres, and their political implications must be addressed. What do we achieve today by reflecting on Conceptual art’s radical dimension from the perspective of the ways in which it has been historicised? How should we assess the political impact of such histories, and their effect on possible forms of recognition? Furthermore, how might we assess this effect on the production of certain forms of subjectivisation and sociability?⁶

4 Luis Camnitzer points out that ‘while “conceptual art” is an anecdotal little label in the history of universal art, “conceptualism” as a strategy created a rupture in the appreciation of all art and in the behaviour of artists, regardless of their location’. Fernando Davis, ‘Entrevista a Luis Camnitzer: “Global Conceptualism fue algo intestinal e incontrolable, al mismo tiempo que presuntuoso y utópico”’, *Ramona*, no.86, November 2008, p.29. See also Rachel Weiss, ‘Re-writing Conceptual Art’, *Papers d’Art*, no.93, 2007, pp.198–202. Translation the author’s.

5 F. Davis, ‘Entrevista a Luis Camnitzer’, *op. cit.*, p.26.

6 This last question was put forward by theoretician José Luis Brea in his considerations of the political effects of visibility. See J.L. Brea, ‘Los estudios visuales: por una epistemología política de la visibilidad’, in J.L. Brea (ed.), *Los estudios visuales: La epistemología de la visibilidad en la era de la globalización*, Madrid: Akal, 2005, pp.5–14.

The struggle of Latin American historiography to place local episodes within global narratives, in an attempt to counter the dominant geographies of art, has been successful. For some time now, artists such as Hélio Oiticica, León Ferrari, Lygia Clark, Alberto Greco, Luis Camnitzer, Cildo Meireles, Oscar Bony and Artur Barrio, or collective experiences such as ‘Tucumán Arde’ (‘Tucumán Burns’, 1968) and ‘Arte de los medios’ (‘Art of Media’, 1966), have become unavoidable references in virtually all recent accounts that trace the so-called inaugural landmarks of Conceptualism on a transcontinental scale. Today, however, this apparent expansion of discourse seems to demand renewed reflection, as it is no longer a matter of tirelessly continuing to accommodate events in the endless container we believe history to be, but of questioning the ways in which they reappear and the roles they play within it. Such reflection will enable us to examine the anachronisms and discontinuities of historical discourse – its fragments, snippets, shreds – and activate their ability to disrupt once again the logic of the ‘verified facts’.

In the recent essay ‘Cartografías *Queer*’ (2008),⁷ the theorist Beatriz Preciado discusses the formation of historiographic models of the so-called sexual difference from the perspective of a queer epistemological critique that could be very useful for us



Installation views of the Latin American section of ‘Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s’, at Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999. Photograph: Steven Jo. Courtesy Queens Museum of Art

in this task. Considering the political scope of the historical exercise, Preciado avoids the taxonomy of places, situations or individuals and instead proposes, in direct dialogue with Félix Guattari’s ‘schizoanalytic cartographies’, a map that gives an account of the *technologies of representation* and *modes of production* of subjectivities.⁸ This map makes explicit how certain dominant diagrams of representation of sexual minorities come dangerously close to becoming mechanisms of social control and discipline. Can we envision a way of reading and representing that does not result in an illustrative exercise of description, but that instead allows for the perception of variations and displacements that appear as forms of subjectivisation, or even as *machines of political transformation* that disrupt previously established arrangements?

Preciado brings into play two antagonistic historiographic figures: the conventional model of ‘identity cartography’ (or ‘cartography of the lion’, as she terms it), concerned with seeking, defining and classifying the identities of bodies; and a ‘critical cartography’ (‘queer cartography’ or ‘cartography of the bitch’), which sidesteps writing as a

7 Beatriz Preciado, ‘Cartografías *Queer*: El flâneur perverso, la lesbiana topofóbica y la puta multicartográfica, o cómo hacer una cartografía “zorra” con Annie Sprinkle’, in José Miguel Cortés (ed.), *Cartografías disidentes*, Madrid: SEACEX, 2008, n.p.

8 See Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1989.



‘Tucumán Arde’,
1968, second phase
of the campaign: graffiti
in the streets of Rosario

‘Tucumán Arde’, 1968,
third phase of the
campaign: poster calling
for the 1st Bienal
de Arte de Vanguardia.
Both images courtesy
Archivo Graciela
Carnevale

topography of established representations in order instead to ‘sketch out a map of the modes of production of subjectivity’, observing the ‘technologies of representation, information and communication’ as *genuine performative machines*.⁹ These two models are divergent not only in their modes of producing visibility, but also in their ways of battling the technologies that mediate the political construction of knowledge. These issues are pervaded by the relationship between power and knowledge, and even to a greater extent by biopolitical modes of production linked to the codes of representation and the allocation of places in social space.¹⁰ Such crucial issues must be considered at a time when ‘dematerialised’ logic has begun to strike up an effective dialogue with the dynamics of global capitalism on immaterial goods.¹¹

Following (or perhaps perverting) Preciado’s reflections, it may not be difficult to acknowledge that until recently most historiographies of modern and contemporary art have been ‘cartographies of identities’. Among these, ‘Conceptual art’ surfaced as a sanctionable identity, and the historiographic task resembled that of a detective tracking down the still unfound remains of Conceptualism in order to introduce them into the topography of the visible. It strives to offer a genealogy and geography of that which is totally representable – bringing those experiences into historical account, dispelling the mists that surrounded them, and clarifying a place apparently recovered.¹²

But let’s try the opposite exercise too. Let’s imagine a cartography not interested in seeking out the fragments of Conceptual art, one that even doubts the existence of such pieces. Let’s imagine a map that instead aims to explore the label itself, observing its uses and noting how it produces identities in different contexts; a map that, before attempting to function as a technique of representation, tries to expose power relations, ‘the architecture, displacement and spatialisation of power as a technology for the production of subjectivity’.¹³ Here it would no longer be a question of establishing formal resemblances between works, or of dating those that can effectively guide us in recognising the ‘Conceptual’ or ‘Conceptualist’ category (and its regional derivatives such as ‘Argentinean’, ‘Brazilian’ or ‘Latin American’) but, rather, of finding out how those narratives *have determined the materiality and forms of visibility* of what they hoped to describe, how they have negotiated their place within and without the institution and distributed it after having transformed these critical art forms into received knowledge.

Taking that tension between the cartographic models in their identitarian and queer versions as a starting point, I would like to pose a series of questions concerning some of the recent cartographical representations of Conceptual art: first, by revisiting one of the most influential accounts of so-called Latin American Conceptualism and the re-inscription of the ‘ideological’ as a category from which to consider aesthetic trends in the region; and second, by analysing a recent, almost unnoticed Argentinean exhibition that proposed a strategy for reflecting politically on how it is possible to reassess the

9 B. Preciado, ‘Cartografías Queer’, *op. cit.*

10 As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt remind us, these biopolitical modes of production do not only involve the production of tangible goods in a purely economic sense, but ‘affect all spheres of social, economic, cultural and political life, at the same time as they produce them’. A. Negri and M. Hardt, ‘Preface’, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.xi.

11 Boris Groys has clearly expressed some of the effects of this paradox in art: ‘If life is no longer understood as a natural event, as fate, as Fortuna, but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned, then life is automatically politicised, since the technical and artistic decisions with respect to the shaping of the lifespan are always political decisions as well. The art that is made under these new conditions of biopolitics — under the conditions of an artificially fashioned lifespan — cannot help but take this artificiality as its explicit theme. Now, however, time, duration and thus life too cannot be shown directly but only documented. The dominant medium of modern biopolitics is thus bureaucratic and technological documentation, which includes planning, decrees, fact-finding reports, statistical inquiries and project plans. It is no coincidence that art also uses the same medium of documentation when it wants to refer to itself as life.’ Boris Groys, ‘Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation’, *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition* (exh. cat.), 2002, p.109.

12 The issue also involves the critical modes of working around the concepts that sustain these historiographic exercises. It is possible to say, for instance, that to a certain extent ‘Global Conceptualism’ adopted the task of the ethnologist, raking up experiences in different geographies and marking its affinities and Conceptualist identities, and yet, paradoxically, its strategy facilitated the *mise-en-critique* of identity itself. An acritical example of the identity discourse is provided by Álvaro Barrios’s book *Orígenes del arte conceptual en Colombia* (1999), which offers a narrative made up of interviews in which several leading figures of the 1960s and 70s guide the story’s main character (Barrios himself), who appears increasingly convinced of his ability to truly recover the unrecognised Conceptualist element. Álvaro Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual en Colombia (1968–1978)*, Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 1999.

13 B. Preciado, ‘Cartografías Queer’, *op. cit.*

ruptures triggered by 1960s avant-garde movements and the ‘Tucumán Arde’ episode. The show, notably, put forward an approach to the archive that refuses to treat this event as a chapter in the history of art and instead reactivates the anachronistic heterogeneity of meanings borne by the documentary remnants.

III

It was not until the early 1990s that one of the first programmatic essays of Latin American Conceptualism was published, and its ideological reverberations have accompanied many of the considerations on the subject since. Art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez wrote the essay ‘Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America’ (1993) for the catalogue of the exhibition ‘Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century’, curated by Waldo Rasmussen and organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1992.¹⁴ The exhibition, which was first opened to the public in Seville and produced in the context of the celebrations commemorating the fifth centenary of the ‘discovery of America’ – a controversial exhibition on account of its perceived condescending and stereotyping discourse¹⁵ – was one of the culminating stages of the boom of Latin American art that began in the mid-1980s and fostered a depoliticised representation of Latin American culture and history, which was strongly associated with private promotional and funding interests both in the US and Latin America. The political landscape at that time included the re-establishment of democratic governments throughout the subcontinent, the internal crisis of the Left and the introduction of neo-liberal policies following the Washington Consensus.¹⁶ For several of the intellectuals who were symbolically mediating the cultural production between North and South America at the time, such as the Cuban art historian and curator Gerardo Mosquera, the Chilean feminist cultural critic Nelly Richard or Ramírez herself, it was clear that what was at stake were the mechanisms of representation of the American continent at the end of the Cold War, and therefore a totally renewed political economy of signs catalysed by a sequence of exhibitions of Latin American art outside of Latin America – exhibitions that effectively were beginning to draw a new exotic, formalist and neo-colonial framework of interpretation.¹⁷

The very title of the text – ‘Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America’ – announced Ramírez’s focus on disruptive aesthetic forms and their socio-cultural conditions, something that was not in Rasmussen’s exhibition. The essay attempted to provide a unitary legibility to radical experiences that had until then been in large part unrelated (some of which not only had remained indifferent to the nomenclature but even rejected it),¹⁸ and by doing so it gave the label ‘Latin American Conceptualism’ one of its first major concrete manifestations. Ramírez’s intention was to challenge the then common assumption that Latin American Conceptual art was a poor,

14 Mari Carmen Ramírez, ‘Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America’, in Waldo Rasmussen, Fatima Bercht and Elizabeth Ferrer (ed.), *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (exh. cat.), New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993, pp.156–67.

15 The exhibition presented Latin American art production as a tame continuation of modern Western aesthetic movements, avoiding any type of political reflection on the colonial history of the subcontinent. Most critics agreed in characterising it as a blatant attempt to ‘maintain a total control of the ideological and aesthetic premises [...] and of their interpretation’ from categories projected from the outside. Shifra M. Goldman, ‘Artistas latinoamericanos del siglo XX, MoMA’ (trans. Magdalena Holguín), *ArtNexus*, no.10, September–December 1993, pp.84–89.

16 Drawn up in 1989 and promoted by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the US Treasury Department, the Washington Consensus is a list of measures for economic reform that presented itself as the ‘best’ programme to face the crisis and ‘underdevelopment’ of Latin America, among which were liberalisation of trade and investment, deregulation and a general withdrawal of the state from economic matters.

17 Some of these debates, from a Latin American cultural perspective opposed to European and North American dominance, can be found in Gerardo Mosquera (ed.), *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995.

18 Juan Pablo Renzi, a driving force in ‘Tucumán Arde’, was emphatic about this. In a work titled *Panfleto no.3. La nueva moda* (Pamphlet no.3. *The New Fashion*, 1971), which he contributed to the ‘Arte de Sistemas’ exhibition organised by the Museo de Arte Moderno/Centro de Arte y Comunicación in Buenos Aires in 1971, he stated: ‘What is in fashion now is Conceptual art [...] and it turns out that (at least for some critics like Lucy Lippard and Jorge Glusberg) I am one of those responsible for the onset of this phenomenon (together with my colleagues from the ex-groups of revolutionary artists in Rosario and Buenos Aires from ’67 to ’68). This assertion is mistaken. Just as any intention of linking us to that aesthetic speculation is mistaken.’ And he concludes: ‘REGARDING OUR MESSAGES: 1. We are not interested in them being considered aesthetic. 2. We structure them according to their contents. 3. They are always political and are not always transmitted by official channels like this one. 4. We are not interested in them as works but as a means of denouncing exploitation.’

late imitation of Conceptual art ‘from the centre’, and hoped to politicise its readings by means of an argument that assigned positive value to an apparent Latin American *difference*. In opposition to the limited North American and British ‘analytical’ or ‘tautological’ model, the Latin American model was presented as ‘ideological Conceptualism’. Ramírez traced this binary distinction back to 1974, when it was discussed by the Spanish critic Simón Marchán Fiz, but did not go as far as to question it.¹⁹

Ramírez believed the dichotomy revealed the prominence of the ideas of a sadly self-referential Kosuth, heir apparent to the positivist legacy of Modernism. ‘In Kosuth’s model the artwork as conceptual proposition is reduced to a tautological or self-reflexive statement. He insisted that art consists of nothing other than the artist’s idea of it, and that art can claim no meaning outside itself,’²⁰ Ramírez says, echoing – voluntarily or not – some of the criticism that art historian Benjamin Buchloh had put forward fiercely just four years before,²¹ and indirectly playing down the political dimension implicit in the linguistic turn and its break with late-modern formalism. She thereby created an interpretative formula repeated almost to the letter in several of her subsequent essays, opposing, in general terms, a ‘depoliticised’ North American canon with a ‘political’ Latin American Conceptualism that subverts the structure of the former and actively intervenes in social space. The assertion, though somewhat provocative, traces a particularly narrow and dichotomous path of analysis, indebted to essentialist nuances that fail to establish a genuine antagonism.²²

However, our intention here is not to denounce an ‘incorrect’ reading of Conceptualism, to dispute labels or to reduce Ramírez’s discourse to the use of such categories (conversely, her work puts forward noteworthy observations on the political use of communication and the ‘recovery’ of the mass-produced object in these processes). Rather, it instead is to note how that ‘difference’ shaped a specific visibility and morphology, making the distinction part of many of the debates surrounding the interpretations of the situation and, surprisingly or not, part of the ‘central’, dominant narratives, where it functions as a mystifying cliché in a process of categorisation and normalisation. Returning to some of Ramírez’s ideas, the philosopher and art theorist Peter Osborne observes:

‘Ideological content’ is the key term of Latin American Conceptual art. In distinction from the more formal ideational concerns of most US and European Conceptual art (the act/ event, mathematical series, linguistic propositions or the structures of cultural forms), this was an art for which ‘ideology itself became the fundamental “material identity” of the conceptual proposition.’²³

Along similar lines, though without circumscribing the ‘analytical-linguistic’ to North American Conceptualism, Alexander Alberro repeats the argument:

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- 19 The same reference to Marchán Fiz’s ‘ideological Conceptualism’ had already been made one year earlier by the North American critic Jacqueline Barnitz in the catalogue of the exhibition ‘Encounters/ Displacements. Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Cildo Meireles’, curated by Ramírez and Beverly Adams. However, Ramírez’s voice was the one that consolidated and furthered the argument most effectively, making it an indispensable reference for many subsequent interpretations. A decisive factor in this consolidation was the repetition of the line of argument in the catalogue of ‘Global Conceptualism’ and later on in two large-scale international surveys of Latin American art she was also in charge of: ‘Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin lugar 1918–1968’ at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid in 2000; and ‘Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America’ at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2004. Marchán Fiz doesn’t quite completely confine the ‘ideologisation’ to Conceptual art from Latin American nor self-referentiality to European/North American work. See J. Barnitz, ‘Conceptual Art in Latin America: A Natural Alliance’, in M.C. Ramírez and B. Adams (ed.), *Encounters/Displacements: Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Cildo Meireles* (exh. cat.), Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, 1992, pp.35–47; M.C. Ramírez, ‘Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980’, in L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (ed.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (exh. cat.), *op. cit.*, pp.53–71; Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, Madrid: Alberto Corazón Editor, 1974 [1972].
- 20 M.C. Ramírez, ‘Blueprint Circuits’, *op. cit.*, p.156.
- 21 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art, 1962–1969)’, in *l’art conceptuel, une perspective* (exh. cat.), Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989, pp.41–53.
- 22 Historian Jaime Vindel has also noted the contradictions in responding to the centre/periphery relationship through an equally binary opposition: ‘By basing their position on an antagonist with no real voice, these discourses run the risk of making their publicity dependent on the centre/periphery logic against which they declare they stand and to which they are still yielding.’ J. Vindel, ‘A propósito [de la memoria] del arte político: Consideraciones en torno a “Tucumán Arde” como emblema del conceptualismo latinoamericano’, lecture given at the 5th International Conference of Theory and History of the Arts – 13th CAIA Symposium, Buenos Aires, October 2009.
- 23 Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2002, p.37.

[T]he most extreme alternatives to models of analytic Conceptualism in the late 1960s and early 70s are those that developed in the deteriorating political and economic climate of a number of Latin American countries including Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Chile.²⁴

And in a more recent book, formulated as a Conceptualist ‘census’ of Spain with categories such as ‘poetic’, ‘political’ and ‘peripheral’, the historian Pilar Parcerisas revisits Ramírez’s thesis, scorning ‘the premises of the analytical orthodoxy of Conceptual art in English-speaking countries’ by attempting to elaborate on the political character of the ‘periphery’. From a range of perspectives in Latin America, that *difference* has been repeatedly recovered, with variations, in several recent accounts of the 1960s and 70s.²⁶

Rather than objecting to the use of the term or any of its related epithets, what I am attempting to do is underline the need to deploy it as a diagram of power, to assess which meanings and distinctions, and which processes of normalisation and resistance are concealed in such consensual representations. This reconsideration demands a different articulation to the other concepts used by critics and artists when considering their own positions: minor expressions (to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari),²⁷ the gradual erosion of which has contributed to the standardisation of radical experiences in order that they may establish an ‘appropriate’ exchange with centralist discourses.

For example, it would be provocative to consider the term ‘dematerialisation’ in the context of Argentina’s experimental art scene in the 1960s as the Argentinean theoretician Oscar Masotta proposed in 1967 – independently from Lucy Lippard – as deriving from El Lissitzky and his plan to integrate artists into the publishing industry of revolutionary Russia of the 1920s.²⁸ It also would be challenging to rethink a term such as ‘no-objetualismo’ (non-object-based art), coined in Mexico by Peruvian critic Juan Acha around 1973, as part of a Marxist approach to counter-cultural protest and collective artistic experiences of the Mexican ‘grupos’ (Proceso Pentagono, Grupo Suma and No-Grupo, among others), but most significantly to indigenous aesthetic processes, such as popular art and design, that question Western art history.²⁹ Or to re-examine concepts that artists employ to reflect on their own practice: Argentinean Ricardo Carreira uses the term ‘*deshabitación*’ (‘dishabitation’) to refer to an aesthetic theory based on the political transformation of the environment through estrangement.³⁰ In the early 1960s Alejandro Jodorowsky spoke of ‘*efimeros*’ (‘ephemerals’) in reference to his series of improvised and provocative actions confronting conventional theatre,

No-Grupo (Maris Bustamante, Melquíades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez and Rubén Valencia), poster of the action *Montaje de Momentos Plásticos (Assemblage of Fine Art Moments)*, presented at the Primer Coloquio de Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano (First Congress on Non-Object and Urban Art) in Medellín, Colombia, 1981, offset print in three parts, 57 × 87cm each. Courtesy Andrea and Neus Valencia

24 Alexander Alberro, ‘Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977’, in A. Alberro and Blake Stimson (ed.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999, pp.xxv–xxvi.

25 Pilar Parcerisas, *Conceptualismo(s) Poéticos, Políticos, Periféricos: En torno al arte conceptual en España. 1964–1980*, Madrid: Akal, 2007, p.27.

26 In a 1997 text Camnitzer celebrated Ramírez’s argument, which he found enlightening for its understanding of the regional differences of Conceptualism, which emphasised the relationship between Duchamp and the modern tradition of Mexican muralism, starting from its foray into the social sphere with communicative goals. Broadly speaking, however, Camnitzer shares Ramírez’s view of North American Conceptual art, which he brands ‘a quasi-mystical search for the imponderable’. L. Camnitzer, ‘Una genealogía del arte conceptual latino-americano’, *Continente Sul Sur*, no.6, November 1997, p.187. Other historians who have used the expression ‘ideological Conceptualism’ more or less critically over the past few years include Andrea Giunta, Ana Longoni, María José Herrera, Ivonne Pini, Miguel González, Cristina Freire and Alberto Giudici. Due to problems of space, this text will not compare the conflicting meanings and the implications inscribed in their uses.

27 ‘A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. [...] The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. [...] We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.’ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (trans. Dana B. Polan), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp.16–18.

28 See Oscar Masotta, ‘Después del pop, nosotros desmaterializamos’ (1967), in O. Masotta, *Revolución en el arte: Pop-art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta*, Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004, pp.335–76. For Lucy Lippard’s use of the term, see L.R. Lippard, *Six Years*, op. cit.

29 As yet, there is no study dealing with Juan Acha’s critical thinking of the 1960s and 70s, and the political process that led to the emergence of ‘no-objetualismo’. For a first, partial attempt, see Miguel A. López and Emilio Tarazona, ‘Juan Acha y la Revolución Cultural. La transformación de la vanguardia artística en el Perú a fines de los Sesenta’, in Juan Acha, *Nuevas referencias sociológicas de las artes visuales: Mass-media, lenguajes, represiones y grupos* [1969], Lima: IIMA — Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2008, pp.1–17.

30 Ana Longoni, ‘El Deshabitador: Ricardo Carreira in the Beginnings of Conceptualism’, in Viviana Usubiaga and A. Longoni, *Arte y literatura en la Argentina del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires: Fundación Telefónica, Fundación Espigas and FIAAR, 2006, pp.159–203.

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"EL CARNICERO DE
LA FORMA"

ALFREDO

NUNEZ

"EL ARTISTA DESALMADO"

**RUBEN
VALENCIA**

"EL DESTRIPIADOR DE LA CRITICA"

REGINA 17
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¡ VANGUARDIA SALVAJE !



halfway between psychotropic mysticism and fantastic esotericism,³¹ while Edgardo Antonio Vigo's 'revulsive' aesthetic agenda pledged to destabilise the roles of the artist – on other occasions Vigo defined himself as an 'un-maker of objects'.³² These are but a few of the entries in the critical repertoire still in the shadow of the hegemonic rhetoric. Such subterranean theoretical constructs pose a latent conflict, a *multitude* of not-yet-articulated and potential genealogies. Beyond mere naming, these words appear as proof of the fact that there is something irreducible – a discordant crossing of stories that point to divergent ways of living and constructing the contemporary – its capacity to unfold other times.

IV

Forty years after 'Tucumán Arde', the exhibition 'Inventario 1965–1975. Archivo Graciela Carnevale', organised in 2008 in the Argentinean city of Rosario, offered one of the sharpest readings among the host of curatorial approaches that have explored the episodes of radicalism and rupture in Argentina in 1968.³³ That year, several groups of artists, film-makers, journalists and intellectuals organised a series of experiences that connected cultural and artistic production with dissenting forms of political intervention – often with revolutionary claims – in collaboration with militant sectors of the workers' movement. These collaborations dramatically modified artistic and cultural practices, resulting in progressively radicalised experiences in several contexts. In this context, a group of artists – invited to the exhibition 'Experiencias '68' that was organised by the pre-eminent Instituto Di Tella – broke with the institution, exhibiting in 'Experiencias' politically critical artworks. When the police banned one of these – an installation of a public toilet, in which the public wrote slogans critical of the military dictatorship – the artists protested, destroying their works in the streets and distributing a text denouncing the increasing repression in the country. This incident became the trigger for a major rethinking of their commitment to the artistic avant-garde, formulating a new programme of action that comprises the 'Tucumán Arde' episode. Once outside of the institution, the artists began a process of documentation and social intervention aimed at generating counter-information about the causes and consequences of the crisis that was affecting the Tucumán province after the closure of several sugar mills, and then mounting two public displays in the labour unions in Rosario and in Buenos Aires, which was closed by the police. The project connected artists with sociologists, journalists, theorists, unions, the workers' movement and others in a process of dispute and intervention in which aesthetic and political strategies were interchanged.³⁴

The 'Inventario' exhibition tried to re-assess the celebrated entry of 'Tucumán Arde' into the canonical historiography of international art,³⁵ as well as its recognition as a foundational episode of Latin American, even global, 'ideological Conceptualism' (or 'the mother of all political works', as artist and sociologist Roberto Jacoby has ironically called it).³⁶ The project introduced itself as a questioning of the process of legitimisation and institutionalisation of 'political art' that in recent years had focused

31 See Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Recovering Panic', in Olivier Debroise (ed.), *The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968–1997*, Mexico DF: UNAM, 2007, pp.97–103.

32 In October 1968, in a newspaper and on local radio Vigo made the surprising call for his first 'señalamiento' ('appointment') titled *Manojo de Semáforos* (*A Handful of Traffic Lights*). The proposal called for people to look at an ordinary object for its aesthetic potential to cause 'revulsion'. See F. Davis, 'Prácticas "revulsivas": Edgardo Antonio Vigo en los márgenes del conceptualismo', in C. Freire and A. Longoni (ed.), *Conceptualismos do Sul/Sur*, São Paulo: Annablume, USP-MAC and AECID, 2009, pp.283–98.

33 'Inventario 1965–1975. Archivo Graciela Carnevale', Centro Cultural Parque de España, Rosario (3 October–9 November 2008). The team working on the show was made up of the artist Graciela Carnevale, historians Ana Longoni and Fernando Davis, and Ana Wandzik, an artist from Rosario. This project constituted the first curatorial experiment in political activation by the Red Conceptualismos del Sur group.

34 For further discussion of the experiences of 1968 in Argentina, see G. Carnevale et al. (ed.), *Tucumán Arde. Eine Erfahrung: Aus dem Archiv von Graciela Carnevale*, Berlin: b_books, 2004.

35 While its earliest mentions date back to the late 1960s, its incorporation within the canon since the late 1990s, through a series of essays, exhibitions and publications, quickly multiplied its visibility. International exhibitions include I Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, Brasil in 1997; 'Global Conceptualism' in 1999 and 'Heterotopías' in 2000; 'Ambulantes. Cultura Portátil' curated by Rosa Pera at CAAC, Seville; 'Inverted Utopias' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2004; and 'Be what you want but stay where you are', curated by Ruth Noack and Roger M. Buergerl at Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2005.

36 Roberto Jacoby, 'Tucucu mama nana arara dede dada', *Ramona*, no.55, October 2005, pp.86–91.

on the 1968 events, in particular on 'Tucumán Arde', and resulted in a global tour that took it, among other places, to documenta 12 in Kassel in 2007.³⁷ What is won and what is lost in the process of 'Tucumán Arde' becoming a legend? How should we approach the complex and heterogeneous web of political subjectivities inscribed in the rupture of the Argentinean avant-garde of the 1960s? Is 'Tucumán Arde', as a landmark, a watershed moment, capable of giving an account of the most intense and radical moments of that process?

The exhibition took the transformation of 'Tucumán Arde' into an artwork as its starting point, approached through a selection of photographs and documents from the Carnevale archive in an attempt to visually compose a chronological micro-narrative that would describe the events of 1968. The adoption of this origin not only implied returning to the several narratives in which the Argentinean event had been inscribed over the past decade, but also exploring the documentary framework, the material background from which those reconstructions seemed to appear and disappear. The archive was put forward as capable of disrupting all narrative certainty.

The exhibition had four sections, and its focus was on the display of the Carnevale archive, the most comprehensive archive of Argentinean art in the 1960s. The installation made the archive freely available (providing desks and the possibility of consulting and copying documents), enabling the circulation of conflicting accounts coming from other people involved at the time. If the fetishising logic had managed to fix the image of 'Tucumán Arde', reducing its complexities to mere forms with seemingly immediate meaning, this exhibition attempted to suggest a totally different cartography based on the analysis of the processes of institutional legibility, their discursive production, exhibition formats, economic transformations and publishing products, uncovering their interrelations and tensions.

'Inventario' opened with a long, empty corridor in which beams of light were aimed at the walls and floor. At the end of the tunnel a large number of archival images (many of them photographs taken by the group of artists from Buenos Aires and Rosario in 1968) were projected, accompanied by audio fragments of interviews held in the 1990s with trade unionists, artists and student leaders, protagonists and witnesses of several of the actions.³⁸ The entrance thereby presented an empty architecture that both revealed its own modes of display and suggested the impossibility of establishing a single story, disrupting, implicitly, the idea of the singular official version.

A second corridor presented a substantial part of Carnevale's archive on walls and tables: photographs, posters, catalogues, writings and manifestos of the various Argentinean avant-garde events, alongside graphic work, pictures and other documents of experiences that connected art and politics in other contexts (from silkscreen prints by Taller 4 Rojo in Colombia to posters of the Brigadas Ramona Parra made before or during Salvador Allende's socialist government in Chile, and others of the Encuentros de Plástica Latinoamericana in Havana). A panel in a third corridor traced the numerous events and exhibitions in which 'Tucumán Arde' had been recovered, quoted, exhibited or referenced, including information about the political and economic protocols in place in each institution, and photographs of how it was installed on each occasion. Materials related to the exhibition venue of 'Inventario' and the catalogue of the project (a detailed inventory of all the material in Carnevale's archive) were displayed on several of the tables, where each publication, catalogue and edition referenced in the gallery was made available. Finally, a space presented the contributions of two recent archives generated

Edgardo Antonio Vigo,
Señalamiento 1:
Manojo de Semáforos
(Appointment 1:
Handful of Traffic Lights),
25 October 1968.
Courtesy Centro de Arte
Experimental Vigo,
La Plata

37 Even though the most prevalent reading of 'Tucumán Arde' places it within the 'Conceptual' genealogy, others have tried to relate it to a history of political intervention, collective production or militant research. Examples of this are the dossier 'Les fils de Marx et Mondrian: Dossier argentine', published in *Robho* magazine (nos. 5–6, 1971, pp. 16–22) or anthropologist Néstor García Canclini's discussion of 'Tucumán Arde' in the context of the process of integration of artistic avant-gardes with popular organisations. See N. García Canclini, 'Vanguardias artísticas y cultura popular', *Transformaciones*, no. 90, 1973, pp. 273–75. More recently, Brian Holmes has noted the impact this experience had on several activist groups operating in Europe in the late 1990s. See A. Longoni, Daniela Lucena et al., "'Un sentido como el de Tucumán Arde lo encontramos hoy en el zapatismo": Entrevista colectiva a Brian Holmes', *Ramona*, no. 55, October 2005, pp. 7–22. Similar readings are proposed by exhibitions such as 'Antagonismes. Casos d'estudi', curated by Manuel Borja-Villel and José Lebrero at MACBA, Barcelona, 2001; 'Collective Creativity: Common Ideas for Life and Politics', curated by What, How and for Whom at Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel in 2005 and the project *ExArgentina*, organised by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann.

38 The interviews were conducted by Mariano Mestman and A. Longoni; some of them were eventually published in their book *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán Arde'. Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino*, Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto, 2000.





'Inventario 1965—1975. Archivo Graciela Carnevale', installation views, Centro Cultural Parque de España, Rosario, 2008. Courtesy Archivo Graciela Carnevale

by Argentinean activist-artists more recently involved in local experiences, posing questions about the different ways of granting visibility to those practices in an exhibition space.

The show was constructed as a series of interludes that paradoxically reformulated the collisions that had initially configured the history of the archive. The passage between one space and another acted as a distancing effect that rejected any possible teleology of facts. While the first gallery had seemed to point out the impossibility of a narrative through the random polyphony of voices and images, the third gave an account of an 'excess of narratives' on 'Tucumán Arde' and on its own construction (historiographic, curatorial, institutional, economic and social) through its recognisable trajectories and the multiple ways in which it was activated.³⁹ Conversely, in the second gallery, the archive appeared as a potential story, an exhibited archive in use that offered its own migratory movements, its excesses and absences, its revolutions to come.

Put to use, the archive not only attempted to misplace 'Tucumán Arde', but to question its simple narration, re-enacting its original misidentification (its initial refusal to describe its practice as art but also its dissolution as an event driven by urgency), opening and exposing the layers of sedimentation it had accumulated. Unlike some recent interpretations that have tried to make it legible as a work of art either by taking a small number of documents and images accompanied by comments, a system of marks and footnotes for illustration purposes, or else by a total lack of comments or stories (dangerously verging on aestheticisation, as in documenta 12), this *mise en scène* brought fragments together according to their differences, including everything that was usually excluded from the consensual art-historical configurations that repeated its name. The installation of this exhibition rejected from the start all 'reasonable' understanding, showing, as Georges Didi-Huberman would say, not only the direction of its movement but the locus of its agitations.⁴⁰

By presenting the actual archive, 'Inventario' also fell into contradictions: in spite of an attempt to present a multiplicity of times and events, as reflected by the heterogeneous archival material presented in the second tunnel, the inclusion of images of some of the most recognisable actions within 'Tucumán Arde' contributed to a repetition of the excessive prominence that 'Tucumán Arde' had already been given in written accounts of the late 1960s experiences. The photographs displayed throughout the gallery space, which had been enlarged for previous exhibitions in which they had been shown, provided an imposing presence themselves, at times even offering an unwitting chronology, especially if compared to the assemblage of documents that pointed to the complexity and impossibility of offering full descriptions. And yet, is it possible to escape from this already constructed significance?

V

In his most recent book, Luis Camnitzer establishes two key events for the reading of Latin American Conceptualism: the Tupamaro guerrilla group of the late 1960s in Uruguay, and the experience of rupture that led to 'Tucumán Arde' in 1968.⁴¹ What is important for me here is the invocation of the Argentinean experience in relation to *politics* from the point of view of *militants*, or even armed conflict. Despite the possible good intentions behind its attempt to politicise historiographic accounts, we should ask ourselves whether the twosome Tupamaros/'Tucumán Arde' and the idealised image

39 See F. Davis and A. Longoni, 'Apuntes para un balance difícil: Historia mínima de "Inventario 1965—1975. Archivo Graciela Carnevale"', unpublished text presented at the 2nd Red Conceptualismos del Sur Reunion, Rosario, October 2008.

40 'Politics are only displayed by exposing the conflicts, the paradoxes, the reciprocal clashes that weave history,' says Didi-Huberman in his considerations of the Brechtian notion of montage. '[M]ontage appears as the procedure *par excellence* in this exposition: its objects are not revealed when taking position but once they have been taken apart, as is said in French to describe the violence of a "unbridled" storm, wave against wave, or as is said of a watch "dismantled", i.e. analysed, explored and therefore spread by the passion of knowing applied by a philosopher or a Baudelairian child.' G. Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, Madrid: A. Machado Libros, 2008, p.153. Editors' translation.

41 See L. Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007, pp.44—72. Camnitzer, however, points at alternative coordinates, such as the writings of nineteenth-century Venezuelan writer and educator Simón Rodríguez, who taught Simón Bolívar. For Camnitzer, the Tupamaros's use of 'aestheticised military operations' and Rodríguez's 'ideological aphorisms' contribute to what he calls a 'didactics of liberation': communication process aimed at generating actual changes in society.

of 'resistance' in which it places the Latin American Conceptual art history implies a pre-established consensus that reaffirms a certain stereotype of subversive art. If that is the case, does this point to a dead end for the politicisation of Conceptualism, and for its criticism? To what extent has an experience such as 'Inventario' managed to suggest an alternative representation of the usual story, to fracture narrative certainties or to dispute its stereotyped places? Is it possible to establish a topography of that which cannot yet be named, an index that refuses nomenclatures and stands alone, only to become disorder and pure unpredictability?

I have followed two clues in what I consider the cartographic or diagrammatic forms of critical reading that operate in tension with recent processes of historicisation of 'Latin American Conceptualism'. The first is an open question that speculates on the interpretative categories stabilised and legitimised in a specific order of discourse, and other secondary notions subsumed in that particular configuration of the 'Latin American' which presents itself as a uniform fabric – decentred concepts that would otherwise distort the usual flows of meaning and expose us to dissenting testimonies. The second is the gap between the conventional exhibition formats of 'Tucumán Arde', between the individuation of a set of documents that present the chronology of what is considered the artistic 'episode', and the presentation of the archive that disrupts and dismantles the order of this appearance. Besides its obvious limitations, the return to the archive is also a misidentification of an event countless times named – classified, arranged, defined – and whose name and materiality are repeatedly questioned in an attempt to bring difference to the surface. On display are merely temporary installations that enable us to return to those operations as a potential space from which to redefine relations between spaces, words and bodies.⁴²

Forty years ago the Argentinean artist Eduardo Costa made a piece in which he proposed a counter-history of Latin American Conceptualism, one based on mixing up the dates: *A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else*. In this short text, written for the exhibition 'Art in the Mind', Costa suggested stealing history as a political activation of Conceptual practice, challenging 'reasonable' consolidations by historical narrative – a historiographic practice deliberately formulated around error.⁴³ His work seemed to insist on the possibility of thinking that rationalist history has been permanently mistaken – that there is no possible story, but merely a circumstantial sum of paradoxes, trades and sleights of hand, and that an erratic alteration in its diagram of successions simply adds to its most joyous (in)coherence, celebrating its impossibility.

Costa's work reminds us that history is never neutral, and if there should be any pending task it is precisely to be unfaithful to it, to betray it. This does not mean giving up on historical reflection, but rather corrupting whatever degree of Christian fidelity and Calvinist obedience history still inspires, unravelling its destiny and ultimate causes. Looking back at those events consigned to oblivion should allow us to recover their salutary force, their emancipatory thrill and at the same time to activate a nostalgia for the future. We do not recover the past in order to make it exist as a bundle of skeletons, but to disturb the orders and assurances of the present. The task of reintegrating the subversive component of whatever we happen to be historicising can't be resolved by communicating as truth what we apparently know. It is neither a question of producing exhibitions or books on a certain theme, nor of drawing up lists, directories or summaries. It is a question of making the event spill over and break down established modes of thinking about the past and the future, and generating ways of allowing for whatever is excluded to eventually challenge the consensus and bring back the parts of an unresolved conflict.

Eduardo Costa, *A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else*, 1970, printed text on paper, 28 × 19cm.
Courtesy the artist

42 'Politics is a specific rupture in the logic of *arche*. It does not simply presuppose the rupture of the "normal" distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions "proper" to such classifications.' Jacques Rancière, 'Dix thèses sur la politique', *Aux Bords du Politique*, Paris: Gallimard, p.229.

43 A.T. Spear, *Art in the Mind*, *op. cit.*

Translated by Josephine Watson.

A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else.

EDUARDO COSTA
January 1970