

Integrating the Museum: Contemporary Latino Art in Context

*The making of a work of art is one historical process among other acts, events and structures—it is a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt these structures. A work of art may have ideology (in other words those ideas, images and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as it material, but it works that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology.*¹

—T. J. Clark

In his assessment of the influence of new media on the construction of culture and the writing of history, Nestor García Canclini discusses the significance of photocopiers, VCRs, videos and video games. As his text was originally published in 1989, I would add color ink jet printers, DVD players, CD burners, and hand-held video recorders to this list. García Canclini reflects on the uses of such tools, noting that:

*Their simple formal innovation implies cultural changes, but the final sign depends on the uses different actors assign to them...they crack the orders that used to classify and distinguish cultural traditions; they weaken historical meaning and the macrostructural conceptions to the benefit of intense and sporadic relations with isolated objects, with their signs and images.*²

These new technological objects, have deeply influenced a series of other powerful carriers of imagery and, subsequently, meaning: print media (specifically magazines), billboards, commercial signage, and television as a whole. For my purposes in this paper, I would also specify that music videos, in particular, have been deeply influential due to the radical filming and editing techniques frequently used in their production. The final part of this equation is the corresponding influence between new resources, current media and the work of contemporary artists. In hoping to depart from traditional explorations of ethnic identity, I am interested in organizing exhibitions that

take the influence of such media and various contemporary themes as their point of departure and feature the work of artists from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Today, young Latino artists create work that occasionally addresses some of the same themes engaged by their predecessors, but through very different formal and conceptual statements. Having grown up with a different set of critical and theoretical parameters, not to mention different life experiences, the work of a newer generation of Latino artists should be examined for its relationship to the work of other non-Latino artists and their mutual exploration of a variety of important contemporary topics. Indeed, I believe it is vital to artistic production and to the revitalization of institutional discourse to integrate aesthetic statements that illuminate similar tendencies.

In the work of these young artists, old hierarchies are displaced, old paradigms are inverted or reconfigured and new aesthetic statements consider a variety of perspectives, reflecting the Bakhtinian notion of “heteroglossia.” The re-arrangement of hierarchies is particularly significant for our purposes, as the description locating the self within contemporary culture becomes the decisive factor marking the development of the entire work of art. The crosscurrent of cultural influences apparent in these works illustrates how their aesthetic borrows from an ethnicized and racialized past that has asserted itself in the present. This presentation of difference is mediated through knowledge of art historical practice and through texts inspired by particular rhetorical “statements” or artistic productions.

This strategy seeks to re-negotiate the language game played by the voice of authority (the grand narrative) as epitomized through the development of various art historical movements.³ In their rhetorical strategy, the new artists purposefully

incorporate operating systems and significations put into place by artists such as Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler, Nan Goldin and others. The heavily masculinized and inherently first-world movement is referenced and reconfigured by the two young artists who work through its influence to articulate a specifically Caribbean post modernity. By selectively using the formal rhetorical “speech” of various art historical movements, young Latino artists share a system of signs and references in the development of these aesthetic forms that refer specifically to subject matter relevant to the heteroglossia of contemporary life. As part of the language game they play with historiographical narratives is what Homi Bhabha refers to as “a double dimension, a dramatic action”:

The signified is distanced; the resulting time lag opens up the space between the lexical and the grammatical, between enunciation and enounced, in-between the anchoring of signifiers. Then, suddenly, this in-between spatial dimension, this distancing, converts itself into the temporality of the ‘throw’ that iteratively (re)turns the subject as a moment of conclusion and control: a historically or contextually specific subject. How are we to think the control or conclusion in the context of contingency?⁴

Particularly significant in this passage in Bhabha’s use of the word “(re)turns,” for is various allusions. The turning of the content, context, function and meaning of various subjects in the work of these artists underscores their position as speakers, uttering original statements about a tradition with which they are intimately familiar. Their ability to turn—or re-negotiate—its aesthetic meaning in terms of an aesthetic practices that draws from an historical movement as well as from a contemporary perspective

Perhaps even more significant, however, is the de-territorialization or de-nationalization that is evoked in the artists’ imagery. They work decidedly against the modernist project of articulating a national culture, or the utterance of an ethnic or

racialized self. The historiographical narrative of art history places modernist movements in the Americas and the Caribbean in the position of articulating an aesthetic created for the express purpose of nationalizing an art form or giving rise to a national art that expressed the ethnic and racial make up of the country. These statements can also be understood as engaging in a primitivist aesthetic drawing specifically from European interpretations of the influence of “authentic” objects from Africa, the East and the Americas. This new generation of artists addresses the modernist struggle over the very notion of authenticity and the power of representation in their attempt to create a non-nationalist statement through their work. Seeking to create, instead, a statement about their particular subject matter, their reductive aesthetic works to extract the work of the Latino artist from the rhetoric of nationalism, ethnocentrism and essentialism. In their work, subject matter becomes not specific to the ritualized ceremony, performance or act of one country or even region, but instead can function as a system of signs for the concept behind the statement—still unequivocally recognizable as a system of signs for the ideas presented but without national or even necessarily ethnic specificity.

Creation of a discursive transaction whereby the viewer’s knowledge of or familiarity with the way that photographs, collage, video and installations function.

In bringing up music videos, I also want to underscore the role of contemporary urban music, particularly the genres known as hip hop and R & B and the codes of language, dress, lifestyle and attitude subsequently associated with them and their influence on contemporary art. The work of the Cuban American artist Luís Gispert is a prominent example. Featured in this year’s Whitney biennial, Gispert’s work has also been seen in galleries in Chelsea and at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, among other

institutions and galleries in this country. Trained in photography at Yale University, Gispert's unmistakable style is the result of training in the history of art, watching telenovelas and teenage American culture. This seemingly incongruous melange of sources becomes a logical blending of influences once the images are deconstructed.

In an early two-person exhibition, titled *Bling Bling*, Gispert's work, with its potent visual messages, immediately took possession of the exhibition's title and created a range of meanings and associations that were absent in the work of his fellow artist.⁵ His image of two young women seated in the back of a limousine adorned with

Alexandra Exposito

Beginning initially with an intense study of self-portraiture, Alexandra Exposito made a study of gender and self-knowledge. The ever present rooster in her works eventually became their own subject matter.

Elia Alba

Method of production underscores essential meaning of the work—layers of self that are worn or created by societal impulses.

Use of object/reference to stand for the self/sign—reversal of portraiture to the inverse “the inverted portrait” or “the inverse of portraiture.”

The sign is twice removed from its context, so that we see a representation of a representation. The dual removal of the real subject acts, contrarily, to re-inscribe notions of presentation.

As she was growing up in New York City, Ms. Alba saw her mother, who worked in a clothing factory, constantly at her sewing machine. Given this history, Ms. Alba sought to incorporate this kind of labor—a feminine labor—into her work. Her installations with handmade shoes are an attempt to unify high art with the work of women who do manual

labor. By incorporating hand-crafted work into her sculpture/installations, Ms. Alba acknowledges the history of women's labor and its role in contemporary society. In a labor-intensive process, Ms. Alba dyes and makes the shoes by hand. By piling the shoes together or, occasionally laying them out side by side, Ms. Alba underscores the endless work that is involved in women's labor. In addition to the shoes, Ms. Alba will also show a photographic work in which her hand-made "dollheads" are placed in an urban landscape. Taking photographs of friends or acquaintances, she minimizes all gender references in the portrait and transfers the print onto fabric, which is then stuffed into a pillow form. The pillow/doll heads are then placed in water, on doorsteps, in telephone booths, in interior settings and other seemingly incongruous environments as metaphors for the human experience.

Vargas Suarez Universal

With his colossal wall drawings, the artist who calls himself Vargas-Suarez Universal inserts himself and his work into a liminal terrain between architecture, line drawing, biology, astronomy and myth-making. Beginning with the plan of a building such as the Kuala Lumpur International airport or the Tate Modern, the artist builds not only upon the literal image of the building's footprint, but also incorporates, sometimes into the same drawing, elevations, cross-sections and fantastic experimentations. As an undergraduate, the Vargar-Suarez Universal studied astronomy; he combined this with a strong interest in biology, physiognomy and physics. This intense examination of the functioning of the universe and the natural world is apparent in his obsessive, powerful, excruciating creation of systems of lines. Prior to the larger-architecturally based works, the artist created blue ball-point ink drawings that took months to finish, even though their finished size is only 20 x 24in. Each drawing, unique, constructs a mesh of woven miniscule ink lines that eventually form soft undulations of lush, royal blue, ocean-like

waves. Eventually, VSU began to place several of the drawings in an environment to which he added a soundtrack. The scratching of the ball-point pen against the surface of the paper, magnified, re-configured, distorted, sampled, looped, and overlaid becomes the environmental sound that accompanied installations such as this one at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York City's Chelsea. In addition to including framed drawings, the artist moved his lines directly onto the walls of the gallery, leaving a maze of lines in his wake and surrounding the spectator with his linear speculations. From here, he broadened his concepts and began working specifically with architectural plans as the starting point for his drawings. This work was shown at the Queens Museum of Art, where VSU was included in the colossal exhibition *Crossing the Line*. The monumental drawings here are based on plans for the General Motors pavilion and the NAME pavilion, both created for the 1939 World's Fair.

Cross-section, plan, elevation are all inscribed within corpus of wall-drawing. Representation of the outline of a building—the ghost of itself relates the working process, so that outline, inline, underline are in tension with one another.

Tension also created between original line—plan of the first architect—and the superimposed line of the artist. The second line works with and against the first, highlighting and, at the same time, obliterating it.

Original line is followed in its essence but then obliterated by an ordered frenzy of carefully orchestrated “super” outlines. What does work say about the relationship of order to chaos? Here is ordered chaos?

What is the significance of using architectural plans and maps? Maps and plans represent attempt to create order—basis of urban planning; map represents political

entity—state; architectural plan represents sign for power as embodied in structure, whether corporate or public. Public buildings represent the aspirations of the civic center.

Re-inscription of the state's power? Power of function of the building read as symbolic purpose—ie to move people, to contain and foment the production of knowledge, to present aesthetic enterprise—but in particular one associated with the status quo.

To overwrite the outlines of these kind of structures signifies an important move in positioning the self. To circumscribe and yet (obliterate) shadow; render to imagination—transparency? Skeleton of form of building plan alludes also in infrastructure and complexity of urban environment.

Astronomical relevance relates to chaos/order dichotomy.

Alessandra Exposito

Spent time exploring notion of self and concepts behind portraiture. Questioning purpose of portrait and self. Uses portrait at first to explore own identity and then to explore possibility portrait holds as a cultural metaphor. What is the function of the portrait bust? Portrait of rooster as metaphor for cult of fame. Rooster as Elvis. Also closely connected to emblem of nationalism, creole culture, independence, authenticity and masculinity within Latin culture. Rooster is frequently symbolic of the countryside, the location of an authentic national culture. Associated with poswers—symbol being taken up by a woman becomes subversive act.

Glossiness of surface reflects formal interest in minimalist aesthetic; influence of media culture also evident in their kind of surface—polished, smooth, impeccable.

Playfulness is reconsideration and subversion of purpose of portrait.

Contemporary version of pet portraiture. Animals appear frequently within history of art and especially within tradition of portrait painting, but here becomes focus of work.

Sandra Bermudez

Reflecting on the ways in which the female body is fractured by commercial media, Sandra Bermudez focuses on specific body parts, such as the mouth or the hands in order to prove how images, particularly those prevalent in the media, manipulate the conception of the female body. Her wall-sized installations of multiple views of her lips underscore the frequency with which such images are shown and, ultimately, taken for granted. By fracturing her own body in her works and focusing particularly on her lips, she underscores the power of the media to construct images and concepts about the female body. Implicit in the work is a critique of the influential power of the cosmetic industry. She also considers the saturation of images of the woman's body through her creation of wallpaper covered with stylized images of her own body in a pose that might be seen in an advertisement for a commercial product. By using her own body as the site of her studies, Ms. Bermudez uses self-portraiture to explore how the body can be used to negotiate the co-optation of gender.

¹ T. J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," from *Modern Art and Modernism : A Critical Anthology*(CITY: PUB), p. 252-253.

² Nestor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 226-227.

³ Here, I am using the concept of language game as expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 9-11. Among the rules stated by Lyotard to pertain to language games are a mutual understanding that there are rules involved in the creation of an utterance and that every utterance constitutes a "move" in the game. While Awei and Boddie are not in a language game with the Minimalists directly, they are in dialogue with the historiography of the movement as articulated by art historians and critics and with the "utterances" of the original formal moves through systems of knowledge passed on to them through education.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 186.

⁵ This exhibition was held at Massimo Audiello Fine Arts (now Audiello Fine Arts) in Chelsea in late 2000.