

COLLECTING LATIN AMERICAN

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Collections don't create history—not automatically, and not in isolation. One need only study the boom in collecting Latin American art over the last decade. In the entire history of the region there has never been a time during which a greater number of works have been integrated into museum and private collections in Europe and North America; there has also probably never been another curatorial practice more bereft of narratives and guiding discourses. One might reply that this is only a symptom of a more general condition, of what today is designated as “the contemporary”;¹ but the resistance to formulating narratives has even extended to the curatorship of periods that can already be regarded as “historical.”

In spite of the absence of guiding discourses, however, it's still possible to discern in this process a succession of canons that determine changes in the course of the art market with impressive speed. The positioning of modernism as the new cosmopolitan model, displacing the construction of a “fantastic” America, is already firmly established; in its place is a new chapter of Latin American “conceptualism,” which in the last

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years has redefined both the market and the practice of curating regional art. This new order is entrenched in those collections which have created, in both the private and the public spheres (spheres which today are inevitably enmeshed), a space for Latin American art outside of Latin America.

But it would seem that there's no longer really an "outside" in a globalized world system that affirmatively and emphatically incorporates productions created in places situated on the periphery. The international market, the globalized collections, the heterogenous sites of artistic and critical production, have in fact reformulated the contemporary art space as a non-place. Collectors, artists and curators from various parts of the world participate actively in market processes and circuits and on the international museum scene. They are intimately linked together in an activity that provides them with support and offers them the possibility of relationships with the globalized system. Paradoxically, this supposedly decentralized activity operates, necessarily, by

employing categories that insist on geographic specificity. The labels “Africa,” “Asia,” or “Latin America” allow the creation of manageable units that impose order and allow the possibility of comprehension in the administration of a universe that has expanded to the point that it is now in many ways impossible to encompass.

Regional categories are thus employed as organizing instruments at institutions like the Museum for Latin American Art in Long Beach, California, the Latin American collection of the University of Essex, and the Museo del Barrio in New York; and by specialized curatorial staff at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, as well as by other collections which have been created or reinforced in the last decade as a consequence of the demands for inclusion that resulted both from the multicultural debates of the 1980s and ‘90s and from pressure applied by Latin American collectors and curators in the United States. The region’s art is also represented through private initiatives such as Daros Latin America or the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection. But even when the term “Latin America” is not used to designate a niche within the administrative structure of museums, para-curatorial authorities arise that insist on reference to the region. The committees that oversee the acquisition of Latin American art at major museums like the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Tate Modern extra-officially institute the category as a part of their practice. As a consequence, “Latin America” has become a pragmatic designation, one that facilitates the administration of an expanded art corpus in museums that have gone from representing modernism to representing the world.

This employment of the term “Latin America” today is less than ideological and more than rhetorical. It has been emptied of all meaning; its essentialist drive, its totalizing representations, its place in the discourse on identity--all of which have been challenged in the critical discourse of the last decades²--are no longer the vectors of the debate. The resulting void can thus be understood as a positive step, as the liberation from

old paradigms;³ but even in its new and apparent limpidity the term persists as a framework that defines and organizes a curatorial field. The problem lies in the imbalance that underlies the structure of that field, in the fact that Latin America as a category remains particularly elusive even when approached from the very region it designates. The fact that critical discourse surrounding Latin America has developed in the region doesn't necessarily imply the existence of a corresponding museum structure. Seen in this regard, perhaps only the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) can claim a place in this new approach, which deploys the regional category as the core concept for building its collections. It's a project with little precedent and few parallels.⁴

Like the collections, the projects that engage the region in broader undertakings almost always seem to originate from outside as well. One example is the project called *Documents of 20th-century Latin American Art and Latino Art*, directed by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, which convokes and incorporates local teams to research and digitize documents. The project's very conception and development would be possible only in the United States, within the context of the particular requirements of that country's internal politics. The teams participating in the project, in Bogota, Buenos Aires, Lima, Mexico, São Paulo and Santiago, frame their work from a national standpoint, as local history projects. The entire undertaking, the compilation and digitization of thousands of documents on the art of the region in the 20th century, is to be integrated into a free-access website, where national projects will, inevitably, be subsumed and dispersed under the rubric of "Latin America."

To state it clearly, Latin America as a region doesn't exist as an operative possibility for the museum practice of the region itself. The problem is a structural and logistical one: there are no collections, libraries, subsidies, or channels in which to circulate works, books, or agents that would enable the construction of an idea of the region from *within* the

region. In the specific field of collection building, “Latin America” thus ends up referring to an asset or a value of artistic consumption⁵, one that reveals a serious imbalance in the production and circulation of art on the global scene.

Today we’re paying the price for the unexpected success of the struggle to include Latin American works within international art circuits. No one foresaw such precipitous growth, nor the impressive expansion of the market. To the dismay and frustration of many regional collectors, critics, and curators, a growing number of pieces, of both historical and recent vintage, are now enriching the holdings of museums in Europe and North America. There are major episodes in the history of Latin American art that will scarcely be able to be represented in the places where the works were created and in the contexts that gave them form and meaning. The isolated efforts of some Latin American institutions are insufficient to compensate for the loss of local cultural patrimony. Above and beyond the issue of heritage, the problem is that the possibility of access to and representation of certain traditions of modern and contemporary art in their places of origin is almost irremediably limited. The debate that arose following the acquisition of the Adolpho Leirner collection by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston exposed the Brazilian critics’ lack of narratives to explain this breakdown of the local art system, a system which is otherwise one of the most developed in Latin America. This isn’t the place to try to explain this failure, which has more to do with institutional efficiency than with any narrative based exclusively on the disparity in resources (witness, for example, the donations made to European and North American museums by Latin American collectors and entrepreneurs over the last decade). For now it’s enough to recognize the absence of a local infrastructure sufficiently solid and financially endowed to be able to compete in the new global arena. The result, an unequal distribution of the art corpus, legitimized by the international system, is aggravated by the growing upward pressure on prices.⁶ It’s hard to imagine that the region’s museums

could come to compete on an equal footing, in the short run or even over the medium term, with institutions in Europe and North America. For this reason, one of the most pressing tasks for museums in the region for the foreseeable future will be the creation of local collections. Having said that, however, there is no reason to necessarily idealize the collecting practices of the few museums in Latin America that do maintain an effective acquisition policy.

Nevertheless, there are responses that can make a difference. Research projects designed from the standpoint of local micro-histories make it possible to reinforce institutional activities that are often overwhelmed by administrative requirements. The work of the Southern Conceptualisms Network, which brings together a group of nearly fifty researchers from different countries in an open conversation about the recent history of contemporary art, proposes a different formula for historiographic production, one that is activated through specific and intermittent insertions in museums and universities. It's a decentralized model, but one that is politically positioned to promote the recovery of a new historic fabric.⁷

The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, curated by Olivier Debroye, Pilar García, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Álvaro Vázquez, suggests another model. Its starting point was a twofold finding: the absence of local historiography and public collecting in Mexico since the 1960s, combined with the misinformation and stereotypes that governed the critical reception of contemporary Mexican art in international circuits during the 1990s.⁸ Patient work in the archives and the recovery of lost or forgotten works gave rise to an exhibition that became, tacitly, an exercise in curating collections for a museum in the process of being created, the MUCA—now known as MUAC. Whether or not its objective was realized the result is a benchmark that provides a starting point for the debate about contemporary art in Mexico. It's difficult to imagine that histories constituted in this way could be produced today by means of international collecting. The fact that one

of the curators of *The Age of Discrepancies* was also the first curator of Latin American collections at the Tate Modern suggests that the position from which narratives of regional art history are generated matters—in fact, that it matters a great deal. In all likelihood, a significant number of the works included in that exhibition will never be part of the collections of metropolitan museums, and it's also unlikely that the local histories that lend meaning to these works will bear much weight when the pieces are seen from an international perspective. But only from this historical perspective will it be possible to lend relevance to productions that would otherwise remain suspended in the present-time of an artistic contemporaneity that is ultimately controlled by the market.

Here, then, in the density of the information and in the precision of the data with which their narratives are constructed, lies the usefulness of projects like the Southern Conceptualism Network and *The Age of Discrepancies*. As they create their own contexts, they can weave alternative histories that don't depend on grand narratives or on established categories. The micro-practices of their research focus their analysis, and also situate the knowledge within stories and precise debates. In this way, they allow for the creation of an alternative to narratives that draw on old geographic categories, vague thematic coincidences, or worse, on the return, whether admitted or not, to the concept of style.

To the extent that it is not embraced as a defining condition but only as a tactical position in the face of the processes of internationalization, local knowledge can also avoid the greater danger of becoming aligned with nationalist discourses or of remaining entrenched in a naïve provincial point of view. But such an undertaking doesn't just lead to the creation of local histories; it also proposes the weaving of much broader fabrics. It even allows us to imagine the possibility of a micro-history of globalization.

To go from micro-history to micro-curatorship requires that we move from academic speculation to institutional work, and that we reformu-

late the idea of context in order to re-think notions of audiences and of the public that are not objectified as instrumental praxis. But the potential of this option can only be realized if the deep gap that currently separates the university from the museum, and research from curatorship, is closed. Viewed from either side, the issue underlines the importance of creating a political practice of curatorship, one determined by precise strategies and objectives, one in which the debate doesn't end simply in an institutional critique but results in the adoption of new stances. In any of the various histories and collections that could thus be constructed, maybe, just maybe, Latin America might begin to represent a relevant category.

1 Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), p. 681-707. Also see the two issues of e-flux journal on the topic "What is contemporary art" No. 11 (December 2009) and No. 12 (January 2010).

2 See Juan Pablo Pérez's interview with Gerardo Mosquera, "Contra el arte latinoamericano." *Ramona*, Buenos Aires, no. 91 (2009).

3 For example, Néstor García Canclini, "Geopolítica del arte: nociones en desuso" *salonkritik* March 21, 2010: http://salonkritik.net/09-10/2010/03/geopolitica_del_arte_nociones.php.

4 Other than the Latin American collection of the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, perhaps the only regional collection that one could cite would be the Art Museum of the Americas of the OAS, in Washington D.C., which remains an epitome of the failure of international diplomacy in the art field. Once again, precedents are scarce. During the Cold War, the region was an arena for friction within hemispheric politics, but it didn't lead to the creation of a space within the art market, much less within the realm of collecting. In the 1960s and 1970s, collections like the Museo de la Solidaridad con Chile, or the Galería Latinoamericana (today the Colección de Arte de Nuestra América, Casa de las Américas) in Havana, were created as structures for political action, in which mere adherence to the institution, as a personal act on the part of each artist notwithstanding any aesthetical or regional position, determined the guidelines for collecting. Today these projects are virtually at a standstill.

5 Joaquín Barriandos, "Museographic Imaginaries: Geopolitics of Global Art in the Era of the Expanded Internationalism" in *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 2, no. 1 (2009), p. 189-201.

6 See comments by Paulo Herkenhoff and Suely Rolnik in the context of the roundtable discussion "La voz subalterna: Latinoamérica" in *10.000 francos de recompensa (El museo de arte contemporáneo vivo o muerto)*, Manuel Borja-Villel and Yolanda Romero, eds. (Spain: Asociación de Directores de Arte Contemporáneo de España, 2009), p. 202-203.

7 Information about the network at <http://conceptual.inexistente.net/>

8 See Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Genealogía de una exposición," in Olivier Debroise, ed., *La era de la discrepancia. Arte y cultura visual en México, 1968-1997*, Mexico, Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte, 2007, p. 18-23.