

Latin America does not exist!

The concept of “Latin American Art” is obsolete. It is similar to the concept at the origin of the famous exhibition of photographs called “The Family of Man”: a juxtaposition of images emphasizing basic similarities one can find in every human being: birth, eating, loving, old age, and death. Differences are erased in order to glorify a utopian idea of a non-conflictual life-a strong family under a benevolent God.

Once upon a time, the writing of History (with a capital H), served to define identities, often a national identity, the identity of a state worth remembering in all its glory, munificence and compassion. Admiration was standard. It is interesting to note that if some histories were critical of this particular type of construction- in particular the Marxist tradition-, this critique was never dominant. Today, as noted by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob in their book Telling the Truth about History, it is hard to accept the old traditional monolithic construction of History, as one is more and more aware of the complexities of the past, of the relationship of the historian with the construction of national identities and the construction of history itself. This recovered complexity is fascinating in its destabilizing effect, but also depressing to those who

would prefer to read the past as a link towards an ever brighter future. The heroes of the past have recently come back home humbler than ever sharing their limelight with hundreds of others in order to provide layers of contradictory meaning precluding, in this way, any linear and unique historical development.

It is in this new way of thinking about cultural history that some art history in Anglo-Saxon countries has lately been developed, reordering the aesthetic landscape. Changes have occurred to such a fundamental degree, that the chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the U.S., Lynne V. Cheney, went so far as to suggest that it was the fault of Social History and its politicization, that the field was in disarray and in profound crisis. She said: “The humanities had been reduced to arguing that truth- and beauty and excellence- are not timeless matters, but transitory notions, devices used by some groups to perpetuate “hegemony” over others.”

I think she was right; she was right to think that social history, social art history and even deconstruction were, in their suspicious questions, unable to accept hegemonic discourses, “the order of things”. Social history and new Cultural history study other things than “hegemonic” discourses. The thinness of straight “hegemonic” history is replaced by the thickness of social and metaphorical understanding. The great majority of Western historians are finally discovering what some had said for some years- but to no avail- that history was written from the point of view of the ruler, that it was profoundly ideological and that historians were locked -willingly or not- into a crucial cultural and political struggle. Now, this has become dominant parlance in the United States across fields and comes with many different colors and inflections.

Everywhere, the past is rewritten as an archeology of our beliefs.

When one talks about a reassessment of art, of a reexamination of images of canonical western production today and a reexamination of the canon itself, the task seems often tremendous. This is nothing compared to the rewriting of the art and of the cultural history of Latin America. There, things are complicated by the fact that before anything else, one has to deconstruct this generally accepted but abstract notion of Latin America, a notion literally constructed as a Flip-side of Anglo-Saxon North American culture. Moreover, this is cultural continent shattered amongst several traditions- a cultural body shared by many contradictory traditions, divided between local histories, themselves sharing different identities, divided between different continents (looking towards the U.S. towards Europe and towards the South American continent itself). The word Latin America pretends to hold together this shattered identity, this mosaic under a weak and not totally coherent transparent tape in order to give a sense of totality. But totality for what? It has been, in the past, in order to represent a mirror image of the other America, a mirror image of a world which it does not and cannot reflect. As has been made clear by post-modern inquiries, this has too often been a doubling of images concocted by specific interests. This analysis should be one of the first tasks accomplished if one wants to write this particular history without falling into traditional sets of stereotypes.

One could start by writing a critical analysis of art history like Les Histoires Générales de l'Art: Quelle Histoire, by Carol Doyon, Montreal, showing the “parti-pris” of historical narration.

Is it the History of Modern Art that is the projected discussion or only the contemporary visual production? Because with the notion of modern art comes a very specific way of

representing modern/industrialized countries. When did this happen in Latin America?
Was there a different pace and problems? This should be kept in mind.

Do we accept post-modern conclusions proposed by Nelly Richard ? (Published in Art Journal, Winter 1992 special issue Latin American Art) She talks about the periphery becoming involved and recognized by the center in a form of assimilation. It is still true that it is the center, or at least a minority of the center which defines the paradigms of this questioning and opening up- even if at times with very controversial results (see The Whitney Biennial). Discuss this catch 22 situation.

How does this work?

I myself think that much can be deduced and understood out of comparative studies, not in order to show influences but rather in order to insist on differences: differences of political and cultural analysis not only from country to country but also and more importantly inside each cultural entity. I would like to know, for example, why is it that some part of a country's elite has chosen this particular form of expression (modern) at this particular time, at this particular place, in opposition to what or to which other esthetic possibility. What kind of ramification can one see between the choice of a dominant style and the originator of this style. What kind of value system is a style representative of, and what kind of symbolic power does it exude and what kind of real political power does it represent. History in this case- the established, formal, narrative history should be in each case corrected by Memory, by everything that does not fit into the nice continuum of the historical account always dictated by the dominant power of the state, or the dominant group in the nation (nation as conceptual space being different from nation as state). See here the Subaltern in Latin American Studies, in The

PostModernism Debate in Latin America, special issue of Boundary 2, Fall 93, Duke University.

Rigoberta Menchu says: "I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets." An Indian Women in Guatemala, Verso 1994.

This form of revisionism should not be used in order to replace one line by a better one (popular realism against elite abstraction) as it happens often in the U.S. or France, but in order to show how representation is used, manipulated, and to insist on the social and political struggle, how forms and esthetics are involved, even if this threatens the illusion of national unity and identity.

Problem of emulation of the center, copy with a twist, parody as critique, but who sees and values the parody?

I would, in the analysis of each particular country's art be careful to analyze the particular relation of art to the particular internal tradition, in connection to other models (to the powerful models of modernity).

Nelly Richard: Celebrating difference as exotic festival-a complement of otherness as giving the subject of this difference the right to negotiate its own conditions of discursive control, to practice its difference in the interventionist sense of rebellion and disturbance as opposed to coinciding with the predetermined meanings of the official repertory of difference. see Boundary p. 161.

Is Latin American esthetic discourse a painful transference from European models? But is it a transfer which takes so many liberties that the model does not recognize itself and

then trivializes it in order to render it invisible? Latin American aesthetic discourses could then potentially be easily re-transformed into exoticism, into a new type of “Family of Latin American Man”.

It is this image and this tendency to homogenize that our studies should contradict. Let’s be a solvent which unglues the beautiful mosaic in order to give back a specific life to each part of a continent which possesses for sure a real difference from The States and Europe despite an ongoing dialogue with them.