Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985

At Museo Jumex, Mexico City, a dance survey of work disrupting oppressive power dynamics in formerly colonized regions

BY LAVIA FASSA

In his 1985 interview on Brazilian cinema, filmmaker Glauber Rocha observed: “Our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that the hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.” Rocha’s manifesto appears at the entrance to “Manifestos of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985,” a densely packed exhibition at Museo Jumex, curated by Juliana Lenz. The works in this show share a “decolonial” rhetoric, by which they seek to disrupt oppressive power dynamics in the formerly colonized region. A sufficient cultural appetite for change, Rocha believed, would birth a new, more liberatory aesthetic to be embraced by Latin American filmmakers and artists: “Only a culture of hunger, by undermining and decolonizing its own structures, can qualitatively surpass itself.”

Archival photographs and videos documenting the rapid construction of metropolises such as Mexico City and Brasilia line a narrow hallway near the show’s entrance. Photojournalist Juan Guzmán’s monumental photograph of the construction of Mexico City’s Torre Latinoamericana, “Estructura de la Torre Latinoamericana, Ciudad de México: Construction of the Torre Latinoamericana Mexico City, 1952,” shows the mid-century skyscraper dwarfing its neighbors in size and style, a totem along Mexico’s uneven path towards modernization. In an adjacent gallery, meanwhile, a chaos of eclectic, screeching permits great visitors in Hélio Oiticica’s installation “Tropicalia, Reflexos: PN 2 ‘Xinuçu: e um mitê e um ‘mágico’ (Tropicalia, Reflexos: PN 2 ‘Xinuçu: e um mitê e um ‘mágico’).” The installation’s entire body of work by Lygia Pape and Eugênio Espíncio. Despite its setting of sand, palm trees, birds, and cheerful colors, the installation’s pandorine structures – two dissipated, firmly constructed, wooden enclosures – directly reference the flavelas (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, surrounding visitors with the provisional qualities of the fraught social context. On a nearby
other works on display engage directly with the body politic. ‘Reforma Agraria’ (Agrarian Reform, 1968–75), a series of graphic posters by Peruvian artist Jesús Ruiz Durán that were made to drum up support for the Solidar movement, recall the work of Raúl Literstei. Embracing the language of pop-art, Durán drew over photographs of agricultural workers and transformed them into punchy, accessible images replete with product advertisements. The Argentine art collective Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) employed a multitude of disciplines to inexorably depict the state of art and culture in Latin America. Occupying an entire wall, the 25 Images comprising Hacia un perfil de la tortilla (Towards a Profile of Latin-American Art, 1972) homophonically employs graphic design tropes to evoke advertisements and textile diagrams as a form of critique. One image, by CAyC co-founder Antonio Berni, mimics a language-school advertisement and proclaims the economic importance of speaking English. A vampire saltshaker boxes his hinges, accompanied by a speech bubble: ‘I love my Argentina – and you?’

Interventions in public space became an inevitable tactic for protesting repressive political regimes across Latin America. Photographic documentation of Alfredo José’s Intervenencias urbanas (Urban Interventions, 1985), from his Tú tú tú sobre la fachada series (Studies in Happiness, 1979–80), captures billboards mounted around Santiago printed with the question: ‘¿Sos usted feliz? (Are you happy?)’ The question seems simple but was really a call to action in response to the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (in office from 1973–90). The artist’s three-year project materialized in seven distinct stages. Jose also interviewed Chileans about their well-being, disseminated surveys and captured perennials of happiness (and unhappiness), documenting and presenting his findings until his exile for political dissidence in 1991.

Caricatures are another recurring theme within the show: many works appropriate the pictorial tool of colonization in order to resist its rationalization of geography. Here, maps appear skewed, collapsed and reconfigured, cut and burned. Anna Belza Gelger’s Variedades (Variations, 1995–2010), for instance – four small linen patches, each screen-printed with a distorted map of the world – are reined with wads, red embroidery that is tangled around each landmass. The Middle East, bulgy and bloated, is inscribed, in English, with ‘The world of oil’, as it hangs off the edge of Asia. In the lower left-hand corner, a map depicts Africa and India as defined, almost imperceptible forms. Below North America, a distinctive appendage grows. The caption reads: ‘Cleavage/chichón y subdesarrollo/Developed and underdeveloped’. Despite its frank condemnation of the world as it is, the work does not invite pessimism; as Gelger reminds us, we must first understand structures of oppression before we can devise a way to overcome them.

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LATIJA FARIAS
Light Foals is a writer based in Mexico City.

London
10 Acorn Grove
London
E2 7TL, UK
+44 (0)20 372 611

New York
14 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10019
+1 212 460 7488

Berlin
Zahnarbeiter Str. 28
10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2562 6506