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## “Memories of Underdevelopment”

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO | DOWNTOWN

(Web exclusive content)



Jesús Ruiz Durand, *Afiche de difusión de la Reforma Agraria* (Promotional Posters for the Agrarian Reform), 1969–72, offset print on paper, 3834 × 2756".

Featuring some four hundred works of Conceptual, performance, and video art by more than sixty artists and collectives, “Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985,” currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego’s downtown location, examines how late-twentieth-century artists responded to political tumult and the disintegration of the utopian promise of modernization. (The exhibition borrows its title from Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memories of Underdevelopment* [1968], which is set in Havana in the wake of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, although there are no examples of Cuban art in the show and little reference to the Cuban Revolution.)

In the show’s extensive “Decolonial Geo-Historiographies” section, located in a large central gallery, artists use maps to challenge the concept of the nation-state. Argentine Elda Cerrato is represented by five pieces, including the india-ink drawing *América fragmentada* (Fragmented America), 1973, which portrays Latin American countries as a constellation of floating islands hovering above a mass of marching figures. Juan Downey, Anna Bella Geiger, Claudio Perna, and Horacio Zabala also experiment with cartography, critically engaging colonial and imperial histories. In an exquisite selection of works by Zabala, the artist burns or blocks off parts of maps with ink squares, alluding to the social turmoil of military dictatorships in his native Argentina and other South American countries. Venezuelan Conceptual artist Perna brings environmental concerns to bear in works such as *República de Venezuela, Mapa ecológica* (Republic of Venezuela, Ecological Map), 1975, in which art-history slides are dispersed across a printed map from 1965. The map shows an area identified as *ZONA EN RECLAMACIÓN* (zone in reclamation), a contested territory between Guyana and Venezuela alternately known as “Guyana Esequiba.”



View of "Memories of Underdevelopment," 2017–18. Center: Juan Downey, *Anaconda Map of Chile*, 1973. Photo: Pablo Mason.

Also prominent is the "repertoire of cartographic explorations" (as lead curator Julieta González describes them in her excellent catalogue essay) of Geiger, whose work is robustly foregrounded throughout the exhibition. The Brazilian multidisciplinary artist developed historical counternarratives through speculative geographies. For example, in *Variáveis* (Variables), 1976/2010—a mixture of drawing, screen-printing, and embroidery on a white-linen ground—labeled global maps present different world orders: those of the developed and underdeveloped worlds; THE WORLD OF OIL; the cultural dominion of the West. Rather than rely on stable or defined relations between representation and territory, these maps are characterized by elision, fusion, and fragmentation. They revel in a playful—which is to say, critical—disjointedness.

On a nearby wall, a small group of objects examines food and agriculture, charting colonialism's persistent exploitative nature. Downey's multimedia installation *Make Chile Rich*, 1970, for instance, draws attention to the ecological benefits of nitrate from soda potash, indigenous to northern Chile, as compared to synthetic fertilizers. Victor Grippo's iconic sculptural installation *Analogia I* (Analogy I), 1970–71, measures energy collected from potatoes via electric circuits and meters; the analogy is with harnessing collective power. Geiger also repurposes food in *O pão nosso de cada dia* (Our Daily Bread), 1978, for which she ate into the centers of bread slices to form holes in the shapes of Brazil and South America. Photographs of this performance were printed on six postcards, aligning the work with the mail art and artists' publications shown elsewhere in the museum. *O pão nosso*, like the disruptions of everyday life carried out by Chilean group Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA)—such as *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* (Not to Die of Hunger in Art), 1979, a milk-distribution project documented in video and photography—takes up the hunger epidemics of this turbulent era, when dictatorial regimes plagued South America. (Both Brazil and Chile were under military rule during much of the time charted by the exhibition.)

The human casualties of these dictatorships are explicitly referenced in Antonio Manuel's potent seven-minute film *Semi ótica* (Semi Optic), 1975, which cycles through stills of killed or disappeared Brazilians, to the accompaniment of Guilherme Vaz's pop-ballad soundtrack. The images—often grainy reproductions of portraits and forensic photography—are intercut with fictionalized police records that identify the victims by name, age, and *CÓR* (color); colors include *SEMI VERDE* (semi green), *SEMI AMARELO* (semi yellow), and *SEMI AZUL* (semi blue), evoking the Brazilian flag. Elsewhere, hanging in glass frames on the wall, the viewer encounters Manuel's "*Clandestinas*" (Clandestines) series, 1973–75, a media intervention involving alterations to the front pages of the Brazilian tabloid *O Dia*, in which Manuel's friends (such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape) are pictured under absurd headlines in Portuguese. One reads *OTÁRIOS DE SANGUE: CRIME PASSIONAL DAS VAMPIRAS* (Blood Suckers: Vampire Crime of Passion); another *DEU A LOUCA: HOMEM APRESENTA SE NU NO MUSEU COMO OBRA DE ARTE* (It Was Crazy: Man Presents Himself Nude in the Museum as a Work of Art). The latter is accompanied by a photo of the artist himself, taken at an action staged at Rio de Janeiro's Museu de Arte Moderna on the occasion of the opening of the XIX National Salon of Modern Art in 1970; when an earlier proposal was rejected, Manuel disrobed and posed nude in the museum, presenting himself as art. A friend of Manuel's who worked at *O Dia* gave him access to the journal's printer, allowing Manuel to distribute his "*Clandestinas*" to unsuspecting readers by stealthily inserting them into popular newsstands.



Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, 1970, transfer text on glass, three bottles, each 7 1/8 × 3 1/8 × 3 1/8".



This method of hijacking modes of production and circulation parallels Cildo Meireles's iconic *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Coca-Cola* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project), 1970. *Inserções* consists of three soda bottles whose stickers reveal their purpose: *GRAVAR NAS GARRAFAS INFORMAÇÕES E OPINIÕES CRÍTICAS E DEVOLVÊ-LAS À CIRCULAÇÃO* (Register information and critical opinions on bottles and return them to circulation). Meireles also added transgressive messages to the bottles—which serve as conspicuous symbols of US imperialism—such as *YANKEES GO HOME!*, and instructions on how to turn them into Molotov cocktails. It's thanks to tactics such as these that the works of artists like Meireles and Manuel were ever able to bypass state censorship.

The section "Popular Invention," spanning two galleries, focuses on how artists in Brazil and Peru incorporated popular traditions into experimental and avant-garde practices. On one wall hangs Jesús Ruiz Durand's suite of six political posters, "*Afiche de difusión de la Reforma Agraria*" (Propaganda Posters for the Agrarian Reform), 1969–72, which self-consciously adopts a Roy Lichtenstein-esque style. The posters are juxtaposed with photo-documentation of a massive mural organized by the collective E. P. S. Huayco, *Sarita Colonia*, 1980, which was painted on some ten thousand empty cans of evaporated milk. The mural depicts an unofficial saint—the titular subject died of malaria in 1940 at the age of twenty-six, and has since become a cult figure for migrants arriving to Peru's capital city—and overlooks the Pan-American Highway. Data-driven works by Conceptual artist Teresa Burga, who was a member of the pioneering Grupo Arte Nuevo in Lima from 1966 to 1968, dot a section of the show titled "Communicational Circuits: Information and Ideology." For her pivotal *Perfil de la mujer peruana* (Profile of the Peruvian Woman), 1980–81, Burga collaborated with psychotherapist Marie-France Cathelat to conduct a survey of Peruvian women, asking them questions about gender, class, and political repression, and to reflect on the military dictatorship of Juan Velasco Alvarado.

*Perfil de la mujer peruana* was first exhibited at a local gallery in 1981, before being shown at Medellín's "Primer Coloquio latinoamericano de Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano" (First Latin American Colloquium of Non-Objectual and Urban Art), coordinated by Juan Acha at the Museo de Arte Moderno. That same year, the celebrated Colombian painter and art historian Beatriz González produced *Esta Bienal es un lujo que un país subdesarrollado no se debe dar* (This Biennial Is a Luxury That an Underdeveloped Country Should Not Give)—a yellow silk-screened banner emblazoned with the title's declaration—which hangs in the "Marginality as a Structural Problem" gallery alongside works by Artur Barrio, Eugenio Dittborn, Diamela Eltit, Catalina Parra, and Glauber Rocha. Although the banner is clearly a critique of art institutions, other than the title there is no additional information provided. One might want to know which biennial specifically González is condemning, since several are referenced throughout the show. (Importantly, González's banner was created for and censored from the fourth Bienal de Medellín, which immediately followed the Medellín Colloquium featuring Burga's work.)



EPS Huayco (Maria Luy, Francisco Mariotti, Charo Noriega, Herbert Rodriguez, Armando Williams, Mariela Zevallos), *Sarita Colonia*, 1980, enamel on tin cans, approx. 196' 10 1/4" × 196' 10 1/4".

Informational gaps aside, this sprawling exhibition compellingly spotlights how Latin American artists deployed experimental strategies and utilized popular forms to grapple with social concerns as they navigated the volatile political and ideological circuits of the time. Artists repeatedly questioned the developmentalist rhetoric of both modernism and oppressive governments through myriad heterogeneous approaches, ranging from public spectacles such as Chilean architect Manuel Casanueva's ludic tournaments of the 1970s (here represented via photo-documentation) to modest yet powerful works on paper such as Argentine Luis Pazos's *Dependencia/Liberación* (Dependency/Liberation), 1974, in which the titular words appear in red ink and are stamped with black text reading *ANULADO* (canceled) and *URGENTE* (urgent). In this way, the Latin American vanguard of the late twentieth century broke with tradition and abstraction in order to rethink the modern in response to cultural and economic dependency and underdevelopment. Embracing alternative modes of production and address, these artists proposed alternative political and social models through their artworks—models that often promoted critique, dialogue, and participation.

"*Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985*," organized in partnership with the Museo de Arte de Lima and the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego through February 4.

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