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Abstract
This article focuses on a community of Latin American artists living in New York City and the influence of regionalism and politics in their identification as a group, taking up the case of the Contrabienal, an art book published in 1971 as a call to boycott the XI São Paulo Biennial in protest of censorship and torture in dictatorial Brazil. The book was aesthetically heterogeneous, including artists from different generations and movements. Nonetheless, its organizers were all part of the strong shift towards conceptualism then taking place. In light of the ongoing revision of the canons of Latin American modern and contemporary art, this article argues that Contrabienal is a key instance of intersection between the priorities of conceptualism and political identification for the expatriate community in New York at this time.

Résumé

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“It was in New York that I discovered that I was Latin American.” - César Paternosto

The simple red notebook can still be found in a few artists’ archives and fortunate libraries here and there (Fig. 1). Titled *Contrabienal*, this artist book was published in 1971 as a call to boycott the Eleventh São Paulo Biennial in condemnation of censorship and torture in dictatorial Brazil. This now-scarce, rarely discussed object exists as precious documentation of the role of politics for a community of Latin American artists living in New York City during the late 1960s and 1970s.²

Contrabienal drew on a political network of Latin American artists that could only have been possible in such a city. From the mid-1960s through the 1970s, New York enjoyed a privileged position: outside Latin America, yet paradoxically at the center of its expatriate community. In contrast to the picture of “Latin American art” prevalent in New York institutions and international biennials, *Contrabienal* offered a new identity premised on shared political goals and ideals. In addition, the book’s publication coincides with a moment in Latin American art in which many of the participating artists, and in particular its organizers, were shifting their work towards conceptualist practices.³ For that reason, *Contrabienal* is an ideal case study with which to examine, and critique, the association of Latin American conceptualism with the political.

The two artist groups behind *Contrabienal*, Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica (MICLA), were created to protest the cultural politics of the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR, today the Americas Society), one of the principal agencies promoting Latin American art in New York at the time. The groups created a space to discuss a variety of artistic and political issues related to the United States and Latin America. These included local concerns over the ethics of the CIAR’s board, protest against the Brazilian dictatorship and the support it received from U.S. politicians, and broader condemnations of American interventionism in the region.

Contrabienal, also known as the “printed biennial,” was a 114-page book of which nearly 500 copies were made and distributed among the participants and their artistic communities.⁴ After two manifesto-style introductions written by each organizing group, the book dedicated a series of informative pages to written and photographic testimonies denouncing governmental torture and

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1 César Paternosto, interview with the author, November 3, 2013.
3 The most comprehensive account of the events leading to the publication of *Contrabienal* was written by Luis Camnitzer, an artist included in the publication and one of the lead organizers of Museo Latinoamericano. See Luis Camnitzer, “The Museo Latinoamericano and MICLA” in *A Principality of Its Own: 40 Years of Visual Arts at the Americas Society*, eds. José Luis Falconi and Gabriela Rangel (New York: Americas Society, 2006), 216-229.
4 Ibid., 222.
murder in Brazil. The remainder of the work was composed of contributions from 61 artists and letters of support signed by 112 notable figures from throughout the Americas and Europe. The publication was not intended to function as a manifesto in favor of any given style or approach. It interspersed submissions by artists associated with diverse tendencies and movements, from Neo-Figuración to Op Art to Minimalism. Contrabienal was not the first case of politically motivated yet aesthetically heterogeneous publications or exhibitions by Latin American artists in this period. There had already been Malwenido Rockefeller, installed (and almost immediately censored) in protest of Nelson Rockefeller’s visit to Buenos Aires in June 1969, and Amérique Latine non-officielle, Non à la Biennale, a prior example of the exhibition-as-boycott, in Paris in April 1970.5

Contrabienal’s inclusiveness is belied, however, by its format as a “biennial” that consists only of a catalogue. The catalogues-as-exhibition is a conceptualist strategy with many precedents, from Yves Klein’s Peintures (1954) to Seth Siegelaub’s series of group shows throughout 1968 (such as The “25” Show and Xerox Book) to Lucy Lippard’s “numbers” exhibitions.6 In this sense—conceptualism as a sort of connective tissue for artists with divergent styles—Contrabienal reflected the fundamental shift, taking place in the work of many of its artists at this moment, toward the experimental practices that would later become known as Latin American conceptualism.

Latin American Conceptualism and Politics

Conceptualism has been a contested art historical category. In 1989, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh opened the term “conceptual art” into a parachute category for diverse stylistic and cultural manifestations.7 Buchloh writes, “From its very beginning, the historic phase in which Conceptual Art was developed comprises such a complex range of mutually opposed approaches that any attempt at a retrospective survey . . . resists a construction of its history in terms of a stylistic homogenization.”8 Buchloh nonetheless makes a case that the “institution critique” of Western European conceptualists Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke were more political uses of this approach than the “tautological” practices of Joseph Kosuth.

Diverse authors ascribed Latin American conceptualism a political character as early as the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that the identification of “other conceptualisms” became necessary.9 Mari Carmen Ramírez’s ground-breaking essay “Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America,” written for the catalogue of MoMA’s 1992 exhibition Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century, sparked renewed interest in the period, and reintroduced the argument that political content gave the region its distinctive character.10 Ramírez stated that the political logic of Latin American conceptualism rests on a different social and institutional model in which formalism and dematerialization of the artwork were not a principal concern, and as such the artwork could carry a “message” without betraying avant-garde intentions. She continued, “[I]f these artists, the act of replacing tautology with meaning is grounded in the larger project of exiting exhausted political and ideological circuits through the revitalization of contexts.” Thus, the version of conceptual art offered by Latin America

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8 Ibid., 41.


involved the "recovery of an emancipatory project . . . when most forms of contemporary art have run up the blind alley of self-referentiality."\(^{11}\)

Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950-1980, a 1999 exhibition at the Queens Museum, had an even more ambitious goal: to survey conceptualism on an expanded, international level by exploring its peripheral manifestations, arguing that the movement had had multiple points of origin.\(^{12}\) To do so, the exhibition’s curators began by differentiating the notion of "conceptual art" from "conceptualism," with the former referring to Northern, “mainstream” art and the latter conceived as a set of peripheral, open-ended strategies in reaction to social phenomena. The exhibition catalogue’s essays juxtaposed the art of different regions rather than locating common themes or strategies, reinforcing this quasi-essentialist reductionism.

In the past few years this notion of Latin American conceptualism has been questioned and expanded by different authors who have addressed the fact that many 1960s practices were not necessarily directed against institutions or political oppression, and that formalism was, in fact, a valid option on the periphery.\(^{13}\) One of the more provocative re-evaluations of Latin American conceptualism as conceived by Ramírez and by Global Conceptualism can be found in a 2010 article by Miguel A. López and Josephine Watson.\(^{14}\)

The authors highlighted the historiographical importance of these texts in the depoliticized representation of Latin American culture and history that reigned at the time, arriving at the conclusion that the Global Conceptualism's virtue was not only to broaden the cartographies of conceptual art, but to actually challenge the formalist, post-minimalist aspects traditionally associated with of North American conceptual art.\(^{15}\) However, at the same time they also brought attention to the danger of "the narrow and dichotomous path of analysis indebted to essentialist nuances that fail to establish a genuine antagonism."\(^{16}\)

In his 2008 interview with Fernando Davis, Camnitzer himself assumes that Global Conceptualism was an “impulsive . . . presumptuous and utopian” project, and that even though he is aware of the “dissident alterity” that the exhibition’s argument involved, it aimed to articulate new parameters with which to understand peripheral cultures.\(^{17}\)

Contrabienal offered a group of artists the possibility to at least partially contest the construction of “Latin American” offered by the CIAR. Distance from their home countries gave these artists a greater need for regional identification. As Camnitzer would later argue, “one could say that the idea of one unified Latin America (as opposed to a conglomeration of countries) was closer to reality in exile than in the continent itself.”\(^{18}\) Still, being Latin American also involved being classified under a cartographic system prone to stereotype and mis-representation. Ramírez explains the difficulty of using this regionalist label: “[I]dentity’ is not an ‘essence’ that can be translated into a particular set of conceptual or visual traits. It is, rather, a negotiated construct. How, then, can exhibitions or collections attempt to represent the social, ethnic, or political complexities of groups without reducing their subjects to essentialist stereotypes?”\(^{19}\)

Although Ramírez does not mention it specifically, Contrabienal exemplifies the political, message-based conceptualism identified in "Blueprint

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 165.


\(^{14}\) Miguel A. López and Josephine Watson, “How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?”

\(^{15}\) López and Watson, “How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?” 10.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 11.


\(^{18}\) Luis Camnitzer, Conceptualism in Latin American Art, 225.

Circuits.” The project consolidated a cosmopolitan group of artists who embraced a pan-regional “Latin American” identification rather than self-selecting by specific country or disavowing nationality altogether. In this sense, Contrabienal was quite avowedly “Latin American conceptualism”—as selected by its artists, rather than imposed upon them.

**Magnet, New York**

Up through the late 1950s, many ambitious Latin American artists undertook travel and study in Paris, the center of the art world and particularly of the avant-garde. However, as Serge Guilbaut has argued, by the mid-1960s New York had displaced Paris as a world cultural center and place to insert oneself within the new languages of art.20 As part of this process, and to strengthen links with Latin America, the U.S. government enacted a series of policies with support from private sponsors to create a network of cultural exchanges through institutional connections, exhibitions and grants for artists and curators to travel in both directions. The Guggenheim Fellowship was the main vehicle for artists and curators to travel in both directions.

The Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship was the main vehicle through which Latin American artists could spend time working and studying in the New York City. It supported, among others, Luis Camnitzer, Nicolás García Uriburu, Leandro Katz, Jorge de la Vega, David Lamelas, Marta Minuñin and Luis Felipe Noé.21

The Center for Inter-American Relations was created in 1966 as a private organization for the promotion of society and culture of the Americas. Its mission was divided into two categories, policy-related and cultural. The policy area sought “a more effective communications among those concerned with the process of political, economic and social development in the Hemisphere.”22 The cultural area attempted to promote “greater awareness in the United States of the artistic traditions and cultural accomplishments” of Latin America.23 In many ways the Center inherited the role of the Inter-American Foundation for the Arts, an institution that since the early 1960s had organized various symposia and supported the iconic exhibition *Magnet: New York*, held in the Bonino Gallery in New York and in Mexico City in 1964.24 The show was the first to categorically approach the contemporary production of Latin American artists living in New York, and included paintings from 28 artists presenting a wide panorama of stylistic tendencies.

In the words of its founder, David Rockefeller, the CIAR’s cultural mission was to challenge the “false images of indolence, poverty and inferiority as characteristic of the entire region [which] had become firmly embedded in the consciousness of almost every U.S. citizen.”25 Rockefeller cited President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress initiative as an important precedent, but later clarified that “many businessmen and bankers, including myself, were concerned that the Alliance… placed too much reliance on government-to-government relationships and left too little room for cooperation with the private sector.”26 An article announcing the creation of the Center described the political aims of the institution in more overt terms: “its organizers hope, [that CIAR] will help speed the development and modernization of Latin America (and, at least by implication, reduce the appeal of Mr. Castro’s Cuban experiment in Latin American communism).”27 Stanton Catlin, an art historian

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21 The Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship is offered to distinguished professionals in their fields. There is a specific category for artists coming from Latin America and the Caribbean.
23 Ibid., 48.
26 Ibid.
27 However, the reporter specified that the board members clarified that “the Center is a private, independent organization that will not be an instrument of United States foreign policy.” Cited in Lukas, “Ex-Soviet Mission on Park Ave.,” 48. It is worth noting that the post is an example of the creative and cultural field that was involved in the Soviet Union’s Mission for the Cuban Revolution and it was on its balcony that in 1960 Nikita Khruschev, former Soviet Premier, embraced Fidel Castro in solidarity with his
specializing in Latin American art, was appointed curator of the Center’s art gallery, which, as publicized in a New York Times article announcing their program, would be “New York’s first real exhibition center for the art of the Americas.” He also promised that the Center would look to “right the balance” surrounding the lack of attention to hemispheric contributions in the city.28

The New York art scene to which the Contrabienal artists arrived in the mid- and late 1960s was going through important changes. A younger generation was experimenting with new media and questioning the disciplinary boundaries of painting and sculpture through intermedia, performance, and other “dematerialized” practices. Newly arrived artists would insert themselves in preexisting circles according to their contacts or particular interests. Marta Minujín became deeply involved with Andy Warhol’s circle, but also with Wolf Vostell. Jaime Davidovich was in contact with the artists of Leo Castelli’s gallery and later worked with George Maciunas, even living in the Fluxus housing system.29 César Paternosto and Alejandro Puente became friends and neighbors of Lucy R. Lippard, to whom they were introduced by Sol Lewitt.30 These are just a few of the many examples of collaborations that were facilitated in equal measure by friendships and personal connections, on the one hand, and the funding and networking opportunities provided by cultural agents and institutions, on the other.

Identity and Protest

The artists participating in Contrabienal did not necessarily identify as Latin American when they arrived in the U.S. As César Paternosto says, “It was in New York that I discovered that I was ‘Latin American.’ Coming from Buenos Aires, we all aimed to be ‘universal’ artists . . . but the category of ‘Latin American’ was very much present. It was a label that they would stick on you as soon as you arrived.”31 Liliana Porter, an Argentine artist who has lived in New York for the past five decades, made a similar statement: “I was not so conscious of being Latin American... You had an accent and you were aware that you were from another place. But I think that the stronger differentiation appeared later with the category ‘Hispanic.’”32

The first group action addressed the politics of representation. In 1967, a group of New York-based Latin American mobilized to protest the exhibition Artists of the Western Hemisphere: Precursors of Modernism, 1870-1930, which reunited creators from the whole continent and inaugurated the Center for Inter-American Relations.33 This protest involved a double novelty: one, a group of artists uniting under the Latin American label; and two, one of the first public complaints against the presentation of Latin American art in exhibitions. Eighteen artists, including Julio Alpuy, Camnitzer, Minujín, Honorio Morales, Noé and Porter sent a letter to the editor published in the “Art Mailbag” section of The New York Times on October 8, 1967 in which they alleged that “as a group of Latin American artists residing in New York, [we] regret that this necessary institution should open with a show that exhibits an aspect of colonial culture.”34 They further criticized the way in which the exhibition related the northern and southern ends of the hemisphere, stating that “[t]he United States and Latin America cannot be wrapped together into one cultural heritage,” and that the show presented a chronology in which Latin American art was derived first from European models and later from North American ones. As an alternative, they demanded a fair and independent.

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29 As part of his multidisciplinary project, Maciuñas led an effort supported by the J.M. Kaplan Foundation and the National Foundation for the Arts to recuperate dilapidated loft buildings in the SoHo area for artists, calling them Fluxshoos Cooperatives. Davidovich lived in the Fluxus Apartment Number 2. Jaime Davidovich, interview with the author, November 15, 2013.
30 In 1966 Sol Lewitt travelled to Buenos Aires to serve on the jury of the Instituto Di Tella International Prize and showed interest in an exhibition by these two artists. See Alonso, Imán, Nueva York, 226.
31 César Paternosto, interview with the author, November 1, 2013.
representation for “the creative adventure of Latin America, which, through lack of economic and political power, does not have the vehicles of affirming itself, to be known.”

Common ground was additionally manifested in the form of shared political interests and activism, whether or not these activities bore upon individuals’ artistic practices. New York was part of an international context already shaken by widespread opposition to the Vietnam War and worldwide revolts in 1968. The New York art scene had entered a new moment of radicalization with the foundation in 1969 of the Art Workers’ Coalition. Featuring Lippard, critic John Perrault and artist Carl Andre in its ranks, this collective used assembly and union tactics to press museums and other institutions for antiwar, feminist, race and other left-wing reforms.

There were specific issues, however, that galvanized the Latin American artist community in this period: Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s assassination in 1967 and the Cuban Revolution more generally, the increasingly repressive, C.I.A.-backed dictatorships that were taking control in more and more countries in the Southern Cone and beyond, and the repression of Mexican students in 1968.

For Latin American artists in New York, the Bienal de São Paulo came to embody the relationship of art to international politics in the late 1960s. The biennial was founded in 1951 by industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo, conceived in the mold of the Venice Biennale and envisioned as part of an attempt to turn the city into a cosmopolitan art center. Over it first two decades, the Biennial became a symbol of democracy and cultural advancement, gaining international attention and becoming the most important art event in Latin America. A Paris-based call for a boycott against the São Paulo Biennial was a direct precedent for the 1971 protests. Responding to the 1964 coup d’état and the 1968 issuance of Act #5, also known as AI-5—a broad measure giving the government the right to supervise and censor any public statement or publication in the press—a group of artists met in Paris to debate France’s official participation in the event and eventually penned Non à la Biennale, their 1969 manifesto. Successfully promoted by Mário Pedrosa and Pierre Restany, the initiative received broad international support, inspiring representatives from the U.S., Holland, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, Spain and others to cancel their participation.

On a more local level, the CIAR became the principal target of the emergent political activism of New York’s Latin American artist expatriates. In 1971, a new demonstration took place, this time resulting in a formally organized artists association. At the time, Catlin was curating an event called Latin American Art Week, set to take place from April 29 to June 30 of 1971, in which the CIAR and a series of galleries would display Latin American artists residing in New York. This prompted a quick and vocal reaction from many artists, who were concerned about the way the event would be promoted and participants selected. Catlin resigned, and his successor, Hans van Weeren-Griek, called for a meeting to address the artists’ concerns about the event and CIAR’s mission more broadly. The meeting took place in January 1971. The new director promised to relay the group’s concerns to the board and to reformulate the event in a way that would be more representative of the artists. Meetings continued, however, at the artists’ studios and homes. The group presented a document signed by 34 artists that extended their demands to the removal of certain board members as well as an extensive left-wing reformulation of the CIAR’s mission and

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35 Ibid.
37 In 1968, a similarly cosmopolitan mix of phenomena influenced the Mexican student movement: both the Cuban Revolution and the recent Parisian uprising that May provided models of revolution. Protests were triggered by students’ discontent with the investment policies set in place by the government in preparation for the Olympic Games. The tragic result was the Tlatelolco Massacre on October 2, 1968, when President Díaz Ordaz sent ten thousand police and military operatives to dissolve a peaceful gathering of six thousand people at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, killing between 30 and 300 and incarcerating 1,345 others. See Raúl Álvarez Garín, *La estela de Tlatelolco. Una reconstrucción histórica del movimiento estudiantil del 68* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1998).
activities. Weeren-Griek took the demands to the board and, after their predictable refusal to accede, decided to resign his position in turn.

An article published by Grace Glueck in The New York Times on March 20, 1970 registered these events under the headline “Show is Suspended as Artists Dissent.” Glueck quoted a series of conditions submitted by twenty-five artists for any future participation in CIAR activities. Among them, she cited “a drastic revision’ of the center’s board of directors, with removal of those ‘who symbolize United States imperialist activity in the Hemisphere.” The article specified the board members named in the letter and explained why the artists considered them problematic.

William D. Rogers, a member of the board, provided a statement for the article in which he claimed that “the issues raised by the artists’ statement obviously go so directly to the central purpose and structure of the center that the board itself would have to set policy with respect to it. I doubt if any individual would be able to comment until the board has a chance to consider it—except to express a note of personal regret that the statement indulges in personalities.”

Weeren-Griek is also cited, describing his efforts to negotiate with the artists and give space to their concerns. The article also included a statement by Arnold Belkin, a Canadian-Mexican artist and “a great animator of the actions” according to Paternosto’s account. Belkin declared that “[i]t’s lamentable that it’s the only organization to speak for us here … culture for them is an afterthought, like brandy and cigars after dinner. They specialize in misrepresenting Latin America.” Glueck finished her account by presenting the artists’ project for Museo Latinoamericano: “An

*This included a demand that the CIAR abstain from relations with any organization involved in the repression of Latin American liberation movements, and to include Chican@ and Puerto Rican activities in its institutional programming. See Camnitzer, “The Museo Latinoamericano and MICLA” 218.


2 The artists claimed that Dean Rusk was responsible for the expulsion of Cuba from Organization of American States, that Lincoln Gordon, Brazil Ambassador at time of the coup d’état, had recommended that the U.S. send weapons to support the military dictatorship, and that Thomas Mann, in his role of Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs and Presidential Advisor on Latin America, had abetted President Lyndon B. Johnson’s intervention in the 1965 Dominican strike. See Camnitzer, “The Museo Latinoamericano and MICLA,” 220, R.4.

3 César Paternosto, interview with the author, November 1, 2013.

information center and gathering place for the Latin American creative community, it would develop a program of cultural activities, help to set up courses in Latin-American art at universities, and disseminate ‘moral information’ about censorship and suppression of cultural activities.”

The protest against Latin American Week would serve as the cornerstone for the formalization of these artists’ concerns and the formation of El Museo Latinoamericano, a virtual alternative space for the discussion and representation of their art. In the words of Camnitzer, the document “showed an unprecedented level of consciousness in the Latin American art community.” With this panorama of concern and dissent the Contrabienal would later become such an important testimony of the identity construction of these émigré artists living in New York. The foundational document of the Museo Latinoamericano was signed in February 1971. Belkin, Leandro Katz, Rubens Gerchman, Leonel Góngora, Luis Molinari Flores, Alejandro Puente and Rolando Peña formed the original group. Camnitzer, Eduardo Costa, Porter, Teodoro Maus, Carla Stellweg and Luis Wells, among others, joined the meetings soon thereafter. The group would quickly take on more adherents and the gatherings—held in members’ studios and houses—ultimately including dozens of participants. The group published a newsletter, Frente, that they themselves distributed both locally and internationally. Its first editorial, titled “Letter to Latin America,” reiterated the demands made to CIAR and explained the group’s platform, encouraging the creation of alternative spaces to “operate outside the control of foundations, corporations and other organizations which arbitrarily codify cultural hierarchies.”

The Museo Latinoamericano’s artists decided to organize an alternative exhibition for the galleries participating in the Latin American Art Week.
Titled *Contrainf*, it included twenty silkscreens with quotations and historical information detailing the interventionism of the United States in Latin America. Even though the Paula Cooper Gallery was the only institution to show interest in the project, the boycott was successful enough that the *Latin American Art Week* was completely cancelled. The group enjoyed another success when the CIAR offered to open their programming to the artists on February 21, 1971. This included a gesture to open their archives and organize events in order to address the group's concerns. The collective refused to negotiate, however, and stood by their demand that the board members be changed.

The Museo Latinoamericano's unity would soon thereafter be challenged by the divergent position of its members regarding the methods by which to negotiate with the CIAR. Some would disagree with its progressive shaping as a political tool, instead postulating that it should focus on demanding space for the artists to promote their work. In March 1971, the most radical members of the group seceded under the name Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latino América (MICLA). They continued with their anti-board demands and plans for a wider field of political action. According to Camnitzer, the secessionists included himself, Costa, Antonia Galbraith, Maus, Porter, Stellweg and Wells. Paternosto explains the differences as stemming from the fact that he and other members of Museo Latinoamericano were more highly dependent on exhibition possibilities, having had a more difficult time gaining traction in the local art scene. While they might have agreed with the ideological position of what would become the MICLA group, they had to prioritize their struggle for survival in New York.

This division would not prevent the two groups from working together, and they continued joint activities through lectures and private exhibitions for members. The groups also agreed, before separating, to what would become their most famous action: a protest against the Eleventh São Paulo Biennial.

Emboldened by the success of the 1969 boycott, the groups decided to call for a movement against participation in the 1971 edition of the Biennial and to prepare a publication under the title *Contrabienal*. After a trip taken by Camnitzer and Porter to Europe, the proposal would soon receive the support of a contemporary Parisian group, the Provisional Committee for a General Assembly of Latin American Artists, which would become key in the international promotion of the boycott. To gather funds for an offset printer and materials, the artists organized an auction of works. The call for participation was made to the artists’ network of contacts in their home countries, and their submissions sent by mail. Once the funds had been raised, the machine was installed in a house shared by Maus and Stellweg, and the almost five hundred copies were distributed for free among participants and members’ networks. The cover of *Contrabienal*, conceived by Luis Wells, who at the time worked as a graphic designer, was a typographical design imprinted on a photograph focusing on two tied hands, with a toning process to red. This chromatic choice suggested the violence the book would account for, but also made reference to the preferred color of the left-wing revolutionary ideology that many of the artists expressed.

**Images of Violence**

A letter inviting artists to join the boycott and to submit works to *Contrabienal*, which was later published as an introduction to the book, listed a series of declarations “rejecting a cultural event organized by a government that employs a system of repression based on brutal torture” and the São Paulo Biennial as an “instrument of cultural colonization in our countries, a function that this biennial shares with many other cultural activities.

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49 César Paternosto, interview with the author, November 1, 2013.

50 Luis Camnitzer, interview with the author, November 6, 2013.
that take place in Latin America.” In this way, the declaration was justified not only as a political protest but also as a broader institutional critique. The rejection of the biennial system of prizes and national presentations and its association with imperialist practices was present in many of the artists’ statements and submissions, particularly those of Lorenzo Homar and Gordon Matta-Clark. This was also the primary content of the manifesto published by Museo Latinoamericano, whose remaining members wanted to focus on artistic and institutional demands, in contrast to MICLA’s anti-imperialist critique.

MICLA’s introduction, on the other hand, was significantly longer, and started by clarifying that their goal was broader: “[T]his CONTRABIENAL does not have the intention of substituting one exhibition for another, nor to change form by substituting an exhibition for a publication. It has to do with simply exploring one possibility of action against cultural imperialism. Such an aim could be achieved by “demystifying the values supporting cultural imperialism” and open pathways to create a new culture which would allow the artist and the intellectual to identify with the revolutionary struggle of the region. This continental identification required an ideological positioning against imperialism. The manifesto highlighted this by declaring that even though national realities were different, the collective action of Latin Americans was essential for the development of a common consciousness. As distant as Brazil’s violent dictatorship might seem from New York, it was, in the group’s view, a scenario that could play out in other countries.

The call for participation explicitly excluded Brazilian artists, to prevent the possibility that they would become the object of reprisals in their home country, with one exception. Rubens Gerchman, who lived with Paternosto at the time, was involved in the group meetings and the book’s production. In the place of Brazilian artists, the publication dedicated 24 pages to descriptions and

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51 Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica, CONTRABIENAL (New York: Museo Latinoamericano, 1971), n.p. All translations of CONTRABIENAL mine.

52 Ibid.
testimonies of censorship and violence in the country. The opening pages of this section featured a “ficha técnica”—a sort of fact sheet—explaining *Pau de Arara*, a torture method in which a person is tied upside down to a pole “so that it is easier to do other tortures” (Fig. 2). The book continues with the deposition of Gilse María Cozenza Avelar, a young activist from Minas Gerais who had been detained illegally, tortured and raped by police forces. The testimonies and images had reached the hands of the organizers of *Contrabienal* through a contact of Maus. The literal relationship between text and image in these pages, an illustrative strategy meant to emphasize the violence described in the testimonies, would contrast with more metaphorical choices made by the majority of the participating artists.

The 62 individual submissions can be divided into two large groups according to graphic versus written participation. Among the first group, many artists created images that did not relate stylistically to their larger practices at that time. Two factors seem to have affected this decision: the restrictions of the two-dimensional, black-and-white format of the print, and the (perceived) limitations of abstract art as a denunciatory message. Such was the case for Uruguayan painter and sculptor Leopoldo Nóvoa, who instead of his informalist painting sent a comic-style drawing in which a military figure is about to sodomize an artist under the text “award ceremony” (Fig. 3).

A parallel sexualized metaphor was used by Luis Wells, who made use of the similarity between the words “Pablo” (the Spanish translation of São Paulo) and “palo” (stick) to create an

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*Figure 3. Leopoldo Novoa’s entry, Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica, *Contrabienal*, 1971. Book with illustrations, 11 x 8 ½ in. (28 x 21,5 cm.). Collection Luis Camnitzer, New York. Copyright Fundación Leopoldo Novoa.*
advertisement-style graphic for a suppository named “san palo via anal,” with “imported scents, in fragrances minimal, conceptual, systems and more!!” Wells’ submission accounts for the larger concerns about the imposition of mainstream styles and categories upon Latin American art and culture, perceived as part of the cultural and political imperialism that Contrabienal was denouncing. Antonia Galbraith’s Latinoamérica drawing addresses American interventionism in the region. It presents a scissor tagged “Made in USA,” next to silhouettes with simulated cut-out lines like those of paper dolls (Fig. 4). Her entry identified military intervention with the way North American institutions conceived of Latin American art.

Other artists used resources from journalism to emphasize the denunciatory tone of their submissions. Luis Camnitzer’s page presented, under the headline “Content: Body of Carlos Marighella,” a photographic record of the cadaver of the Brazilian politician and leader of the dictatorship’s opposition movement, killed by the government in 1969 [Fig. 5]. The work was based on a series from the same year of “fallen heroes of Latin American independence,” composed of eight engravings, including one of Marighella. The contradictory role of artists in society was another prevalent topic. Julio Le Parc’s two-page manifesto was formatted as a numbered list with the title “Social Function of Art in Contemporary Society.”

Point twelve argued that to fight the totalitarian view of art promoted by power, the artist’s status needed to be that of a common blue-collar worker. León Ferrari’s letter also addressed the role of artists in bourgeois society:

Almost all artists work with their back turned to the people, creating pleasures for the

Figure 4. Antonia Guerrero Galbraith’s entry, Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica, Contrabienal, 1971. Book with illustrations, 11 x 8 ½ in. (28 x 21.5 cm.). Collection Luis Camnitzer, New York. Copyright Antonia Guerrero Galbraith.

Figure 5. Luis Camnitzer’s entry, Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica, Contrabienal, 1971. Book with illustrations, 11 x 8 ½ in. (28 x 21.5 cm.). Collection Luis Camnitzer, New York. Copyright of the artist.

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56 Luis Camnitzer, interview with the author, November 6, 2013.
cultural elite that promotes them, and for the money that buys them, and the avant-garde, with their back turned to their country, seek prestige in international art centers by collaborating in the creation of a Western art that will later be used as a justification of all the excesses committed by the West. 57

The delicate balance and search for communion between art and life typical of the 1960s avant-gardes would be tested by the political realities of these countries. In Argentina, for example, many artists abandoned their work and refocused their attention on direct political actions, or in some cases even joined guerrilla movements. 58 This was anticipated by Edgardo Vigo’s submission to Contrabienal, where under the acronym “T.N.T.” a message stated, “this cannot be solved any more with ideas but with DIRECT ACTIONS, like the use of the above mentioned” (Fig. 6). Finally, Contrabienal also included a section with collective statements of support. The Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de la Universidad de Chile joined the boycott in a collective letter signed by the institution’s director and 74 artists. Two large groups also sent letters from Mexico and Argentina.

This brief survey of the book allows us to see the varied approaches to graphic design and rhetoric that were employed to address equally diverse ideological concerns. From institutional critique and anti-imperialism to avant-garde reevaluations of the role of art and artists in society, the submissions in Contrabienal advance critical positions against the stereotypes of “Latin Americans” offered by CIAR and other international institutions. It is interesting to note that in these varied expressions, the artists, perhaps ironically, ultimately grouped themselves under the same label “Latin American,” and that, as Camnitzer notes, the actions offered them an unparalleled sense of community. Contrabienal thus came to embody the symbolic struggle over the regionalist denominator “Latin American”—both confining institutional framework and call for solidarity and activism.

57 Museo Latinoamericano, Contrabienal, n.p.
58 For this process in the Argentine case, refer to the book Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde”: vanguardia artística y política en el ’68 argentino (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2008).

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Figure 6. Edgardo Vigo’s entry, Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica, Contrabienal, 1971. Book with illustrations, 11 x 8 ½ in. (28 x 21,5 cm.). Collection Luis Camnitzer, New York. Copyright Archivo del Centro de Arte Experimental Vigo-La Plata-Argentina.

**Systems and Counter-Systems**

The group section of Contrabienal was followed by the publication of the letters of New York-based Chilean artist Gordon Matta-Clark and Argentine curator Jorge Glusberg, who had engaged in a polemic over the exhibition Arte de Sistemas, which Glusberg was preparing for the São Paulo Biennial. 59 Perhaps inspired by the boycott

59 Jorge Glusberg (1932-2012) was an Argentine writer, curator and professor. In 1968, he founded Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAVC) with artists Víctor Grippo, Jacques Bedel, Luis Fernando Beneditt, Alfredo Portillo, Clorindo Testa and Jorge González. Directed by Glusberg, the group had an exhibition space and organized touring exhibitions. Taking on the leading role previously held by Instituto Di Tella, which closed in 1969, CAVC would become the main promoter of Latin American conceptualism internationally. Glusberg is a controversial figure due to the fact that his family’s company sold lighting to a stadium built by the military dictatorship, implicitly collaborating with the regime. His role as Director of the Museo Nacional...
organized by Museo Latinoamericano and MICLA, Gordon Matta-Clark wrote a letter on May 19 canceling his participation in the show.⁶⁰ His text warned, “the works exhibited in São Paulo would shamefully give importance to this totalitarian government and its allies.”⁶¹ Given this situation, Matta-Clark explained that he would have to withdraw his work from the Glusberg exhibition, and asserted the support of the boycott from a broad range of American and European artists.⁶² Glusberg titled his response “Why I decided to participate with ‘Art Systems’ in the São Paulo Biennial and now I desist.” The text aimed to explain the reasoning behind his proposal. Initially doubting his interest in participating because of the precedent of the 1969 boycott, Glusberg decided that it would “constitute a positive event to allow Brazilian artists to inform themselves, dialogue and communicate with works and artists representing the whole world, allowing them to in a way break with the isolationism to which they are subjected by the police state.”⁶³ The curator continued the missive by listing the participating artists, dividing the list according to whether they had agreed to take part in writing or simply verbally; Matta-Clark appeared in the first group. Glusberg finally admitted that due to a series of letters he had received after withdrawing from participation—and even though he disagreed with the boycott as a useful strategy—he had decided to cancel the whole exhibition to show his ideological agreement with the larger cause. He closed the letter by defending himself against Matta-Clark’s accusations of sending the works against the artists’ wishes, calling this claim a “gratuitous attack on an intellectual worker.”⁶⁴

This polemic expressed some of the main issues dealt with by *Contrabienal*, which went beyond the question of whether or not to participate in the event, by displaying a general exhaustion with models of inclusion and the representation of peripheral artists.⁶⁵ Glusberg’s proposal stated that it would be beneficial for Brazilian artists to be surrounded by international avant-garde artists, and through artistic dialogue they could break the boundaries established by their authoritarian government. This position echoed the common stance of many Latin American cultural agents under the influence of the internationalist trend of developmentalism, which had arisen in the 1950s throughout the region. Developmentalists postulated that strong bonds with global centers could improve the quality of artistic production in the periphery.⁶⁶ Glusberg’s implication was that exposure to internationally recognized artists would help peripheral artists simply via proximity. It was precisely such developmentalist assumptions that the *Contrabienal* artists regarded as paternalistic. In Camnitzer’s words, these “arguments with regards to piggybacking on hegemonic fame . . . seemed . . . like a ‘colonized’ attitude.”⁶⁷ Herein lay *Contrabienal*’s critique: the adjective “Latin American” offered artists a place of exhibition in the international scene, but also limited them to secondary roles in such networks.

A Two Sided Effect

Almost four decades after *Contrabienal*, Luis Camnitzer reviewed the project and addressed its limitations. In his estimation, the initiative “could only bring politics into the art scene and stir up, but not change, the artistic parameters. The group’s publication revealed the simultaneous expansion and dilution of Latin America.” The diaspora of Latin American artists had “a two sided effect . . . the artists had lost their sense of place, but they maintained their allegiance to their culture.”⁶⁸ The use of art-historical categories such as “Latin American” and “Latin American
conceptualism” is here a double-edged sword, offering methodological tools for understanding a series of artistic manifestations, but also packaging identity for scholarly and commercial purposes. The significance of Contrabienal thus goes well beyond the particular case of the CIAR or the São Paulo Biennial. It is a case study of the complexity concerning the use of cultural categories, and the role they have as labels or identity markers. To varying extents, these artists believed in the power of ideology and the possibility of reshaping categories, in the hopes of changing society; this belief undergirded their conceptualism. To self-identify as Latin American, in this context, meant a chance at recognition, both as visual artists and as political activists within and beyond the art world.

The New York expatriates were aware of the political implications of their collective work. As Paternosto states in his interview, “New York was consolidating the geopolitical power of its art and Latin America was, particularly with regards to visual arts, more than ever ‘the backyard.’ And a Latin American artist, especially if he or she aspired to make avant-garde art in New York, was perceived as an annoyance or as an intruder.”

The battleground of categories was, in the first place, a dispute over exhibition spaces and visibility in the city. The rupture between the two groups was provoked by the desire of MICLA members to expand that battle towards a broader political contestation. Contrabienal united both groups, internationalizing their concerns by including artists who resided all over the world.

Forty years later, it seems hard to understand the importance these artists gave to regionalism. Some contemporary artists, backed by the supposed virtues of a globalized art scene, prefer to consider themselves beyond labels. In this respect, it is important to return once more to Paternosto’s testimony that “we all aimed to be ‘universal’ artists,” in order to understand that they aimed for that also, but that a series of geopolitical reasons beyond their work’s quality prevented them from doing so. For that generation, being Latin American was something worth fighting and even dying for, particularly as authoritarian violence worsened throughout the region in the 1970s.

The symbolic battle would continue over the subsequent decades and, ironically, as the Americas Society, the CIAR would ultimately become an important ally in the production of space for Latin American art in New York. Identity politics and multiculturalism would continue the battle for acceptable representations of Latin American art, replacing the foci on class and anti-imperialism with a vocabulary based around ethnic identity, post-colonialism and gender. The category “Latin American”—historically changing, subjective and symbolic—has proved to be more exigent than ever. In this sense, the generation of Contrabienal can be considered ahead of its time.

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69 César Paternosto, interview with the author, November 1, 2013.