

2014

Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from “Latin America”

Daniel R. Quiles

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, daniel.quiles4@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quiles, Daniel R.. "Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from “Latin America”." *Artl@s Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (2014): Article 7.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC-BY-NC-SA license](#).

Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from “Latin America”

Daniel R. Quiles*

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Abstract

This article examines the networked curatorial model popularized in the early 2000s by Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez's *Heterotopías: medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968*. The network allows for a paradoxical rejection and reinforcement of Latin American art's peripheral status, rendering the region simultaneously a bounded locality where new ideas emerge and a set of nodes in a global art ecology. Recent exhibitions such as the Red Conceptualismos del Sur's *Perder la forma humana* (2012-2014) have adapted the network and its possibilities of visualization, while revising anew the geography and ontology of “Latin American art.”

Resumen

Este artículo examina el modelo curatorial de una red que se popularizó en la década del 2000 por la exposición de Héctor Olea y Mari Carmen Ramírez: *Heterotopías: Medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968*. La red paradójicamente rechaza y refuerza el estatus periférico de arte de América Latina implicando que la región es al mismo tiempo una localidad delimitada donde surgen nuevas ideas y también un grupo de nodos de una ecología mundial del arte. Exposiciones recientes como *Perder la forma humana* por la Red Conceptualismos del Sur (2012-2014) adaptaron la red y sus posibilidades de visualización, al mismo tiempo que revisaron otra vez la geografía y la ontología del ‘arte latinoamericano.’

* Daniel Quiles is the 2013-2014 ARTL@S Postdoctoral Fellow and an Assistant Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he teaches courses on the theory and history of postwar art of the Americas. He is currently writing a book manuscript titled *Ghost Messages: Oscar Masotta and Argentine Conceptualism*.

Is Latin America still an art-historical “periphery?” Who gets to pose this question? Who gets to answer it? In what follows, I compare two of the most important exhibitions of Latin American modern and contemporary art of the last decade, both of which opened at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid: Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea’s *Heterotopías: medio siglo sin-lugar: 1918-1968* (*Heterotopías: A Half-Century Without-Place*), which took place between December 12, 2000 and February 27, 2001, and *Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina* (*To Lose Human Form: A Seismic Image of the Eighties in Latin America*), curated by the Red Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network), shown from October 26, 2012 to March 11, 2013.¹ I argue that, as inaugurated in the former and continued in the latter, the geographical conception of the region and its artistic production have been permanently altered by the use of the network as a curatorial model. The network allows for a paradoxical rejection and reinforcement of Latin America’s peripheral status. Networks imbricate “here” and “there,” attending to connections and flows of people, exhibitions, institutions and ideas.² Therefore, nothing happens in a vacuum, yet developments may occur in localized “nodes” that delay or distort the transmission of new developments to larger nodes within the network (formerly “centers”). In this way, “Latin America” can at once be seen as a (provisionally) bounded periphery in which important new ideas are formed and circulated, and a set of nodes in a global art ecology—an essential part of a system. The gradual ubiquity of the network as curatorial model has significant implications for the geographical construction of the region and its art history, for competitive institutions that have purchased such works for their permanent

collections, and for ongoing political debates both within and beyond museums and academia.

Heterotopías was reconstituted in close to identical form, but with a new, English-language catalogue, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston between June 20 and September 12, 2004 as *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*.³ Its place as the key revision of the Latin American canon in our time has been reinforced by the subsequent surge of retrospectives on the included artists, as well as scholarly books that have only begun to be published in recent years.⁴ A shifting group of curators and researchers in different Latin American countries, Red Conceptualismos del Sur produced *Perder la forma humana* as a collective and international effort; it traveled to Museo de Arte de Lima from November 23, 2013 to February 23, 2014 and ultimately to the Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, or MUNTREF, in Buenos Aires, from May 20 to August 17, 2014. In the *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias*, the network surfaced as a salient way to group and interconnect different tendencies and movements in the history of twentieth-century Latin American art. *Perder la forma humana* effectively revised the former exhibition’s definition of art as well as its provocative network diagrams. Yet in this case, the possibilities of the network extended beyond the exhibition or catalogue to structure the very model of collaboration and promotion between the curators—what could perhaps be termed a “meta-network.” It is revealing of the politics of both that one openly courted the United States as a physical and discursive context, while the other ignored it, setting up a South-South exhibition axis.⁵

To interpret these two exhibitions in this manner is, to some extent, to read against the very claims and intentions of their curators. Camila Maroja and

¹ See Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, eds., *Heterotopías: medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000), and Red Conceptualismos del Sur, eds., *Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2012).

² See, among many other titles, Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, exh. cat. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). The English translation of the catalogue’s section of primary texts was the first time that many of them had been translated. Remarkably, it is currently out of print.

⁴ An incomplete list of artists in *Heterotopías* who have since had major retrospectives includes Lygia Clark, Luis Camnitzer, Carlos Cruz-Diez, León Ferrari, Gego, Roberto Jacoby, Marta Minujín, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Mira Schendel, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Joaquín Torres-García.

⁵ The catalogue of *Perder la forma humana* is to date only available in Spanish, although a Portuguese translation is rumored to be forthcoming. Given the involvement of the Red in contemporary politics detailed at the end of this article, this can certainly be considered a political move against North American hegemony, privileging readers and viewers versed in the languages of the region.

Abigail Winograd's article for the next issue of *Artlas Bulletin* provides an excellent prehistory of *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias*, arguing that Ramírez and Olea closely adapted a curatorial model that featured in Frederico Morais's first Mercosur Biennial.⁶ Maroja and Winograd detail how Ramírez, in her catalogue essays, aimed to use a "constellar" model to present a Latin American avant-garde to rival those in hegemonic centers. Now nearly fifteen years on, *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* can only be said to have succeeded in its attempt to position expressionism, abstraction and conceptual art as canonical Latin American tendencies, and this is not to mention its effect on a correspondent market boom for such work.⁷ Yet this paradigmatic exhibition has yet to be closely scrutinized for how its curatorial model—one that was in fact altered slightly between its Madrid and Houston iterations—reconfigured how the very geography of the region is comprehended in terms of art history. More simply put: *where* is "Latin American art?" Can there really be such a thing as a periphery in a modernity characterized by perpetual circulation and exchange? In what follows, I contend that Olea and Ramírez repressed an inherent aspect of the network (if less so their "constellation"): its inexorable *spread* toward new connections with new nodes. This tendency undermines the peripheral delimitation of Latin American art, both geographically and stylistically, that *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* ostensibly posited. Likewise, *Perder la forma humana*, a sincere attempt at the next paradigm shift, boasted an expanded range of cultural products and a new, quasi-academic, quasi-artistic model for a curatorial team. Yet this exhaustive outpouring of archival materials from 1980s Latin America, much of which had never been exhibited before, conceals the debt that the Red Conceptualismos del Sur owes to the network model popularized by Olea and Ramírez. A comparison of these two

shows charts a decade of triumph for the field of Latin American art, and points to the present curatorial, institutional, and political stakes of mapping the region's heterogeneous cultural production.

Mapping "Latin America"

Whether or not Latin America's is a "periphery" depends in part on how the region is understood geographically by the exhibition in question. Whether made explicit by the curators or not, geography is of crucial importance to every exhibition of Latin American art because of the region's deeply problematic legacy as a totality. "Latin America" was itself an invention of sorts, posited by the French writer Michel Chevalier in 1836 in order to align the newly independent former colonies of Spain and Portugal in the New World with an imagined "Latin" Southern Europe against a "Teutonic" Northern foe that yoked together Germany, England and the United States.⁸ Since that foundational fiction, subsequent monikers of unity within the Americas have been ideologically or economically motivated—and they are frequently imposed from outside "Latin America" proper. The Monroe Doctrine, a purported declaration of mutual protection first articulated in 1823, was little more than an excuse for the United States to invade the region whenever it wished, which in the first half of the twentieth century came to be known as neo-colonialism.⁹ Initiated in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy," while less shamelessly exploitative, was designed to win Latin American countries over to the Allies.¹⁰ John F. Kennedy's "Pan-American" generosity was born of the Cold War and concerns over the Cuban Revolution.¹¹ Latin American artists and curators

⁸ See Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Walden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 77-82.

⁹ See Brian Loveman, *No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere Since 1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39-64.

¹⁰ See Fredrick B. Pike, *FDR's Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

¹¹ Institutional histories have explicated Cold War institutions' roles in developing Latin American art as a curatorial field. See José Luis Falconi and Gabriela Rangel, eds., *A Principality of Its Own: 40 Years of Visual Arts at the Americas Society*, exh. cat. (New York: Americas Society, 2006), Claire Fox, *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), and

⁶ Camila Maroja and Abigail Winograd, "Vectors or Constellations? Frederico Morais's and Mari Carmen Ramirez's Curatorial Narratives of Latin American Art," *Artlas Bulletin*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (Fall 2014, forthcoming).

⁷ With yearly art fairs in London and New York, Pinta is ample evidence of the link between canon-formation in museums and academia and its effects on market trends. See *Pinta: The Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art Show*, <http://pinta-ny.com/>, and *PintaLondon*, <http://www.pintalondon.com/>.

have, in a sense, embraced this problematic genealogy of the region as a given. As Gerardo Mosquera puts it, Latin America is “an invention we can reinvent... that provides the grounds for both provincialism and solidarity.”¹²

If it is possible to bracket these problematic origins, however, a cartographic typology of Latin American art exhibitions can be advanced. On the most basic level, there would be the solo show of a “Latin American artist”: someone born in any of the countries of the region, someone of Latin American ancestry (as in the definition of “Latino/a” in the United States), or someone born elsewhere who nonetheless moved to the region and produced an important body of work there (and indeed, this includes a number of canonical figures of Latin American art).¹³ By extension, there are also exhibitions of collectives of or featuring Latin American artists, such as the Getty-financed retrospective of the *chicano/a* 70s-80s performance collective ASCO.¹⁴ Expanding cartographic range from there, there would be shows that investigate particular cities or perhaps groupings of cities (certainly *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* and *Perder la forma humana* are themselves groupings of cities, even as they make claims to “Latin America” more comprehensively).¹⁵ The next largest category would be the country-based exhibition, which collects examples from a range of locations within one nation; recent examples include *Cruzamentos: Contemporary Art in Brazil*, curated by Bill Horrigan, Jennifer Lange and Paulo Venancio Filho

at Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio from February 1 to April 20, 2014.¹⁶ As is the case with many of these types of exhibitions, the Wexner’s focus on Brazil was accompanied with a range of programming designed to attract the public, such as film, music or dance events. If *Cruzamentos* is paradigmatic for such country-specific exhibitions’ focus on the wealthier nations in Latin America, there are also counter-approaches to such blockbusters, for example the tellingly titled *Bolivia existe (Bolivia Exists)*.¹⁷ Of the largest cartographic scope are exhibitions that examine groupings or networks between different countries, which includes those that claim to represent “Latin American art” or “art from Latin America” as a whole. *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* and *Perder la forma humana* fall into this category.

It is only on the level of the Latin America-wide exhibition that larger arguments about how to frame the region—and these include whether or not it is a “periphery” to some “center”—can be made. As detailed below, Olea and Ramírez focused on movements, particularly 1920s and 1930s modernisms, that aimed to trump the achievements of Europe (before the war, the United States was less of a concern). But “inverting the map,” Joaquín Torres-García’s formulation for turning South into North and periphery into center, comes at a price. Both *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* and *Perder la forma humana* heavily privileged certain Latin American countries at the expense of others, excluding many completely. As all exhibitions of the region inevitably turn out to be, they are maps of Latin America with holes, constituting new peripheries within the ex-periphery: what Gustavo Buntinx has described as “the extreme periphery.”¹⁸ The operation at play in virtually all shows of Latin

Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), María Cristina Rocca, *Arte, modernización, y Guerra Fría: Las Bienales de Córdoba en los sesenta* (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 2009), among other titles.

¹² Gerardo Mosquera, “Against Latin American Art,” in *Contemporary Art in Latin America*, eds. Phoebe Adler, Tom Howells, and Nikolaos Kotsopoulos, (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2010), 22. See also José Luis Falconi, “No Me Token; or, How to Make Sure We Never Lose the * Completely,” *Guggenheim Blogs*, October 13, 2013, <http://blogs.guggenheim.org/map/no-me-token-or-how-to-make-sure-we-never-lose-the-completely/>

¹³ MoMA’s Lygia Clark: *The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*, which opened May 10, 2014, and Hélio Oiticica: *Das Grosse Labyrinth = The Great Labyrinth*, at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, in 2013, are only the latest in the many retrospectives afforded these popular pioneers of Brazilian *neo-concreta* since 2000.

¹⁴ Originally at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the show traveled to Williams College Museum of Art in Massachusetts. See C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González, eds., *ASCO: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972–1987*, exh. cat. LACMA (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

¹⁵ See, among other examples, Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Carlos Amorales, eds., *Escultura social : A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007) and Paulo Venancio Filho and Annika Gunnarsson, eds., *Time & Place: Rio de Janeiro 1956–1964*, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2008).

¹⁶ See Jennifer Lange, ed., *Cruzamentos: Contemporary Art in Brazil*, exh. cat. Wexner Center for the Arts (New York: D.A.P., 2014). U.S. institutions are not alone in organizing these types of exhibitions; Daros Exhibitions in Zurich, for example, hosted *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos* in 2004–2005, in addition to a consistent series of solo exhibitions of Latin American artists.

¹⁷ See *Bolivia existe*, organized by Momena Art in collaboration with Kiosko Galería, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, December 6, 2013 – January 19, 2014, <http://www.momenaart.org/momenta-art-bolivia-existe.html>

¹⁸ See Gustavo Buntinx, “Communities of Sense/Communities of Sentiment: Globalization and the Museum Void in an Extreme Periphery,” in *Museum Frictions*, eds. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szewajka, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 219–246.

American art is synecdoche—part for whole—in which certain countries or cities come to represent the entirety of the region.

A last category of shows would be those interweaving Latin American artists with representatives from other parts of the world.¹⁹ Although such exhibitions are in fact quite common and multifarious, for my purposes here it is worth considering a more specific type within this practice: when the show in question still uses the term “Latin American art” in the title. In this case—and in truth, *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* corresponds to this—the mapping of “Latin America” that we get is a networked, international one that exceeds the conventionally mapped boundaries of the region. “Center” and “periphery” are here indeed negligible, as they become nodes in the same extended network of “art by Latin Americans,” wherever they happen to be, channeling people, works, institutional initiatives, and information. A tension between portraying the region as a bounded generator of avant-garde ferment and seeing it as a network that bleeds through borders and definitions alike characterizes both *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* and *Perder la forma humana*.

Escaping Essentialism

A larger shift in the field of Latin American art history had been set in motion several years before *Heterotopías*. Led by Cuban curator and critic Gerardo Mosquera, among others, a number of Latin Americanist curators and scholars were actively working to critique and undermine the field’s legacy of essentialism: the assignment of essential or *a priori* features to the cultural production of a given group or region.²⁰ The

essentialist claim was typically posited by linking Latin American art with the “magical realism” of the Latin American literary “boom” of the 1960s, which produced a canon defined by prewar artists who emphasized fantasy, figuration, and narrative: Fernando Botero, Frida Kahlo, Wifredo Lam, and Diego Rivera among many others. This designation characterized the 1987 exhibition *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987*, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and allowed other curators to yoke together vastly different periods by showing precolonial art alongside Latin American modernism, as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Mexico: Splendor of Thirty Centuries*, in 1990. Latin American art appeared with this essentialist emphasis—for example, traditional religious objects alongside contemporary artists—in larger exhibitions of global art such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989).²¹ One problem with this approach lay in its close proximity to exotification or neo-primitivism—the association with certain artistic choices based on identity rather than any other factor. Another arose from the fact that it does not hold up for many movements in twentieth-century Latin American art, most conspicuously abstraction and conceptualism in their various guises from the 1940s to the present day.

Mosquera’s first argued that the field was changing in 1996, in “El arte latinoamericano deja de serlo” (Latin American Art Ceases to Be Latin American Art), an essay for the *Feria Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo ARCO-97* in Madrid.

Latin American art is going through an excellent period at the moment, precisely because it is ceasing to be Latin American art... escaping from one’s own trap as well as from a distant one. One’s own trap in this case is the identity neurosis that Latin American culture has suffered as a result of the multiplicity of its origins. We are always asking ourselves who we are, because it is difficult to know. ...The danger lies in coining a postmodern *cliché* of Latin

¹⁹ Lines of inquiry might include: how “Latin American art” stands in for notions of authenticity vis-à-vis political oppression, poverty, crime, migration, or any other number of social ills, and how this “real” is set up in relation to the other countries represented in the exhibition. Recent examples of this include Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler, eds., *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s – 80s / South America / Europe*, exh. cat. Kunstverein Stuttgart (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010) and Eungie Joo, *The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial*, exh. cat. (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2012).

²⁰ This term became a flashpoint in U.S. feminist criticism in the 1970s, when a debate ensued over whether there is an essential link between the female body and the work of women artists. See Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger, eds., *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ See Jean Hubert Martin, ed., *Magiciens de la Terre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989).

America as a kingdom of complete heterogeneity.²²

Mosquera's observation that Latin Americans "are always asking ourselves who we are, because it is difficult to know" conjures the legacy of Latin American modernists to distinguish themselves from their counterparts in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. The fate of the "Latin American artist" is here portrayed as that the essentialized "marked term," forever chained to country or region. And yet Mosquera professed faith that this trap could be escaped; that year, he also published the edited volume *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. An eponymous 1992 essay by Ramírez was republished, situating her as a key voice against essentialist exhibitions of Latin American art in the United States.²³ It was certainly not a coincidence that 1992 was the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first encounters in the Americas, one marked by celebrations throughout the Hemisphere as well as its share of artistic critique.²⁴

These debates over essentialism had implications for the continued characterization of Latin America as a periphery. Both essentialism and the center/periphery dichotomy articulate the region as a bounded locality, whether via style or distance. In their major curatorial statement, Olea and Ramírez took aim at both suppositions, insisting on styles that were in open dialogue with international art and which were produced, in their words, "without-place."

Hegemonic Constellations

Heterotopías was part of *Versiones del Sur* (*Versions of the South*), a group of five

simultaneous exhibitions at the Reina Sofía that constituted the museum's largest Latin American art initiative in its history. It was a direct product of a 3 billion-peseta cultural funding initiative by the Spanish government in 1999, which included additional monies toward the restoration of the Prado and Reina Sofía.²⁵ Appearing not long after 1992, the choice of the former colonizer to showcase the culture of its former colonies was topical; it may also have been strategic, a move to begin building rich permanent holdings in a region that was still at that time relatively cheap compared to contemporaneous twentieth-century art from Western Europe or North America. Coordinated by Octavio Zaya, the different shows in fact offered a quite heterogeneous picture of approaches to Latin American art history in this moment—a far more pluralistic initiative than *Inverted Utopias*' appearance in the United States as a singular statement. The other four exhibitions (the Glauber Rocha retrospective *Eztétyca del sueño*, Gerardo Mosquera's *No es solo lo que ves: pervirtiendo el minimalismo*, Zaya and Mónica Amor's *Más allá del documento*, and Ivo Mesquita and Adriano Pedrosa's *F(r)icciones*, themed around the "presence of the people" in the history of Latin American art, filled in gaps that *Heterotopías* left in terms of medium.²⁶ In the case of *F(r)icciones*, an unconventional mixture of art from the Reina Sofía collection ranging across centuries, there was a direct commentary on Olea and Ramírez's survey-style show.²⁷

Heterotopías / *Inverted Utopias* privileged wealthier, cosmopolitan capitals. The centers of production for the tendencies emphasized in the show, particularly abstraction, weighted the exhibition's art in favor of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and metropolises such as Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas,

²² Gerardo Mosquera, "Latin American Art Ceases to Be Latin American Art," text emailed by the author (this essay is not in the exhibition catalogue for the *ARCO Latino* fair, but a compilation of related essays that is out of print). The arguments are reprised in Mosquera, "From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America," *Art Nexus* (Bogotá), No. 48, Vol. 2 (April-June 2003), 70-74. The former text is difficult to find in its original form, as it.

²³ See Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic': Framing Identity in U. S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art," *Art Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Latin American Art (Winter, 1992), 60-68, and Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

²⁴ See, among many examples, Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New York Press, 1995).

²⁵ Shifra M. Goldman, "Exhibition: Versions of the South: Challenging the Parameters," *ArtNexus*, no. 40 (May - July 2001), https://www.artnexus.com/Notice_View.aspx?DocumentID=5345

²⁶ These other exhibitions were on the whole smaller, but allowed for coverage of film (the Cinema Novo pioneer Rocha), photography (Zaya and Amor's exhibition), contemporary art that "perverted" minimalist conventions (Mosquera), and an alternative historical framework ranging across the colonial and modern periods (Mesquita and Pedrosa's notion of "friction").

²⁷ "[O]ur project would have to propose a counterpoint to the exhibition organized... by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea with a historiographic character but a relatively specific perspective." *F(r)icciones*, p. 213.

Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. The curators' exclusion of the figurative Indigenist movement means that contributions from Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru, among others, were minimal (that José Clemente Orozco's Expressionist side of muralism was left in allowed for Mexico to still be well represented, but Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were conspicuously absent other than copies of *El Machete*, the worker's magazine that Rivera occasionally illustrated in the 1920s). A number of the included artists were actually born in Europe, and only later relocated to Latin American countries, including Luis Camnitzer (Germany to Uruguay), Gego (Germany to Venezuela), Gyula Kosice (Hungary to Argentina), Mira Schendel (Switzerland to Brazil), and others. Likewise, many of the artists in the show spent significant periods of time in foreign countries, where they learned of modernist or postwar tendencies that they later adapted for their own ends—in many cases producing their key works abroad. This list includes Joaquín Torres-García, arguably the first fully abstract Latin American artist, who later founded a school of "constructive universalism" in Montevideo—in the 1920s and early 1930s he lived in New York and Paris, where he became a member of the abstraction group *Cercle et Carré* and its attendant little magazine. It is Torres-García who developed the trope of the "inverted map" that is one clear reference of the exhibition's title in English—an expressly oppositional model in which the Latin American avant-garde "flips the map" of modernism, claiming the canonical site of the North for Latin American art. As Torres-García's case makes clear, however, to accomplish such a move required the occlusion of the cosmopolitan character of his own development prior to returning to his home country in 1934.²⁸

In their curatorial framework, Olea and Ramírez's larger themes were synthesized in network diagrams designed for both *Heterotopías* and *Inverted Utopias* that testify to a process of refinement when the show traveled to the United

States. The *Heterotopías* catalogue features seven interconnected, multicolored, circular nodes identified as Kinetic, Advancer, Concrete-Constructive, Optic-Haptic, Universalist-Autochthonous, Contrarian, and Conceptual (Fig. 1).²⁹

For *Inverted Utopias*, the curators reduced these down to six dyadic squares: Progression and Rupture, Universal and Vernacular, Play and Grief, Vibrational and Stationary, Touch and Gaze, and Cryptic and Committed (Fig. 2).³⁰ These successive antinomies, which organized both the catalogue and the physical installation of the show, loosely correspond to shifts in Latin American art between the 1920s and 1970 (the first avant-garde "ruptures" circa 1921, the debates over how to produce a modernism both specific to Latin America yet universal in its implications in the 20s and 30s, expressionist representation from the 30s through the 50s, initial experiments in abstraction and kinetic art in the late 40s and 50s, participatory abstraction in the 60s, and political conceptualism in the 60s and 70s). In both diagrams, however, this chronology is jumbled—in *Heterotopías* somewhat randomly, and for the U.S. catalogue, as two chronologies, one formalist and one political, starting at the top right and bottom left and meeting in the center via the connecting line drawn between the participatory objects of "Touch and Gaze" and the conceptualism of "Cryptic and Committed." The diagrams themselves resemble early Argentine and Brazilian abstractions circa 1950, such as Raúl Lozza's interconnected Perceptismo paintings.

The majority of the essays remained the same for the *Inverted Utopias* catalogue, although essays about Torres-García's formation in Barcelona and Dr. Atl's link to the aristocracy in Mexico were dropped (perhaps because the former's early

²⁸ See Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Inversions: The School of the South," in *Inverted Utopias*, 73-83.

²⁹ My translations. The category "Promotora," which I translate "furtherer," could also mean "promoter." It suggests an avant-garde progressiveness that is implicit in much of the work the curators included. "Impugnadora," which I translate as "contrarian," suggests a political tone: fighting or objecting.

³⁰ From Madrid to Houston, mentions of specific artists within the nodes were abandoned, the avant-garde "Advancer" was split into "Progression and Rupture," the explicit mention of kinetic art was turned to a formal dialectic (vibrational versus stationary), and "Contrarian" and "Conceptual" were grouped together to form "Cryptic and Committed," nodding to how political art in the 1960s took both explicit, propagandistic and more veiled, or "cryptic," forms.

years involved figuration and the latter was a key influence on Rivera). The U.S. version begins instead with the explicitly aggressive (indeed cannibalistic) avant-garde philosophy of *antropofagia*, in which the “inverted utopia” begins firmly on Latin American soil.

periphery: there cannot be center and periphery when one is “without place,” and the bolder declaration that the avant-garde was firmly planted in Latin America implicitly argues for usurpation, rather than coexistence, with Europe or North America.

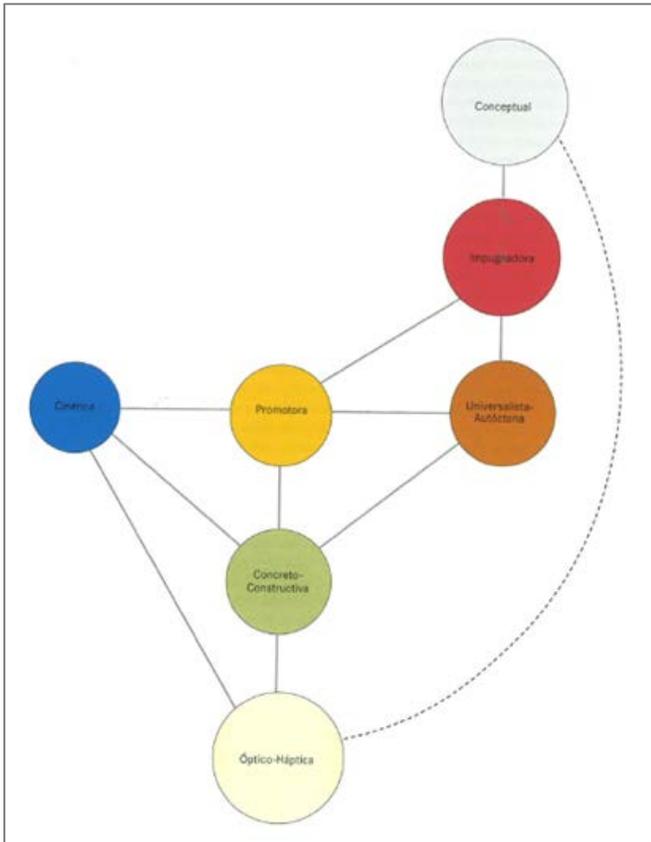


Figure 1

Curatorial diagram, *Heterotopias: medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968*, eds. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000), 26. Reproduced courtesy of Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez.

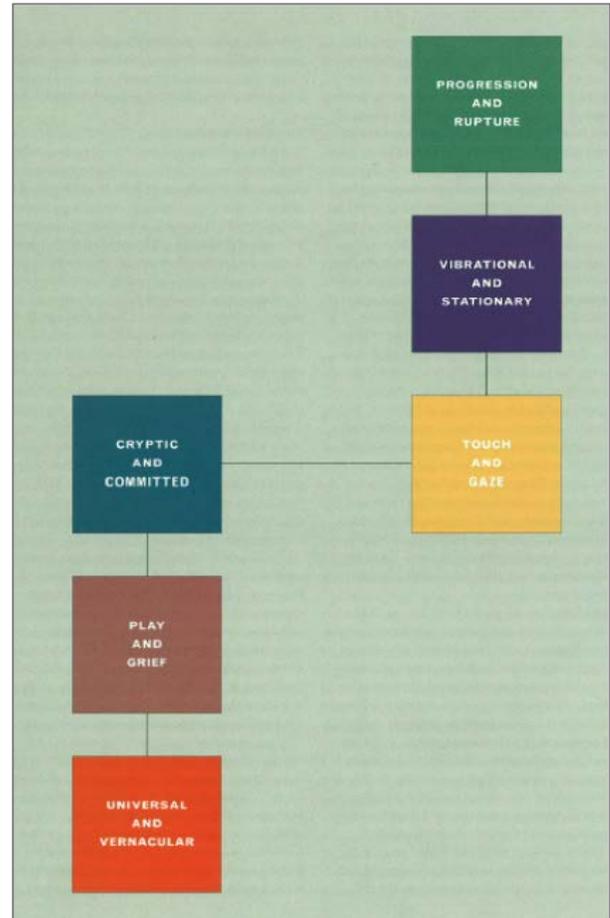


Figure 2

HvA Design, Henk van Assen, curatorial diagram, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, eds. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, exh. cat. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 6. Reproduced courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

In general, ambiguities in the Spanish title and network diagram were clarified in *Inverted Utopias*, as exemplified in the slight change in title: from “a half-century without place” to “avant-garde art in Latin America.” Both “avant-garde art” and “Latin America” are specific in a way that the prior exhibition had left more open-ended, which suggests a self-aware act of canonization in the U.S. context that was perhaps less necessary in Spain.³¹ Both versions refuse the logic of the

Both diagrams illustrate what the curators designated as “constellations,” which they adapted from Theodor Adorno’s in *Negative Dialectics*.³² For Adorno, the move to juxtapose two seemingly unrelated concepts can be resolved through the

³¹ This is supported by the academic conference that accompanied *Inverted Utopias* in Houston, which was published as an edited volume. See Héctor Olea and Mari

Carmen Ramírez, *Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

³² Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 162-163.

identification of opposite terms that are placed in explosive tension with one another. Olea explains:

Stemming from paradoxes, the Adornian concept of the *Konstellationen* offers a way of charting the controversial manifesto genre. The method systematically ventures “to interrelate,” rather than organize, the secret bond of antinomies—or, in our case, of the perpetual anachronisms, the misplaced echoes, and the unexpected ties between works and texts from the 1920s to the 1960s. In attempting to sort out these complexities and others, Adorno located the core of the argument at the moment “the subjectively created context—the ‘constellation’—becomes readable as a sign of objectivity.”³³

This is a description of a network—a system with interdependent parts—but it is a uniquely creative one. In his essay, Olea includes photographs of space, with myriad stars filling the frame. The clear implication is that the curator’s *impressions* of connections, whether based on formal affinities or parallels in subject matter or technique, are as valid as historical connections between works, artists, or institutions. This “subjectively created context” is nonetheless dialectical: a “secret bond of antinomies,” or ostensibly contrary terms. These antinomies are then linked together into a network that ostensibly unites the different avant-garde sensibilities of the region (but which, by extension, would additionally group in interlocutors and collaborators outside it to whom those artists were historically linked).

In “The Constructive Nexus,” a text that only appears in the Houston catalogue, Ramírez discusses what it means to unite the historically and geographically distinct experiments of Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García, the *Arturo* group in Argentina, and Brazilian *neo-concreta*:

Leaving the pretensions of continuity, totality, and identity aside—and taking advantage of the exhibition as a *discursive counter-site*—this essay provides an initial overview of the similarities and divergences between the theoretical and practical propositions of such heterogeneous artistic groups. ...My aim... is not to arrive at a

conclusive statement about Latin American geometric and constructive trends but to take advantage of the “fragments” brought together in this exhibition in order to objectify dialectically the *other* “possible orders” they suggest.³⁴

The term “counter-site” is a direct quotation of Michel Foucault’s 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces,” in which he first introduced the term “heterotopia.” Pronouncing the present moment “the epoch of space,” Foucault elaborates on different types of spaces in contemporary life, and particular those that, he writes,

have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. ...First there are utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. ...There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. ...Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.³⁵

Olea and Ramírez’s superimposition of Adorno and Foucault stands in contrast to previous canonizations of Latin American modernism and contemporary art such as those undertaken by Jacqueline Barnitz and Dawn Ades, which set themselves the task of filling in information based on specific temporal and geographic fields: Latin America, in the twentieth century, or the “modern era,” defined by Ades as post-independence.³⁶

³⁴ Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Vital Structures: The Constructive Nexus in South America,” in *Inverted Utopias*, 192.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, exh. cat., (New York: Prestel, 1998), 265. Originally given as a lecture in 1967, and originally published in *Diacritics* 16-1 (Spring 1986).

³⁶ *Heterotopías* and *Perder la forma humana* are far from the only exhibitions and/or books to have surveyed art and culture in “Latin America” as a whole. Previous such canon-formations of Latin American modern and contemporary art include Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, exh. cat. South Bank Centre, London (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), Alain Sayag, *Art d’Amérique latine, 1911-1968*, exh. cat. (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1992), and Edward J. Sullivan, *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), and *Latin American Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000). One distinguishing feature of these texts is that they tend to have been produced outside of the region, through the resources of Northern institutions or presses.

³³ Héctor Olea, “Versions, Inversions, Subversions: The Artist as Theoretician,” in *Inverted Utopias*, 444.

What this shows us is that *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* was not merely in the business of pushing Latin American art history “After Frida,” as the March 2008 *New York Times Magazine* put it.³⁷ With its purview limited to avant-gardes, *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* staged an avant-garde curatorial experiment, shaking off the obligations of the historian in favor of the creative freedom to posit new, networked connections. In doing so, however, they embraced something of a paradox. Using the network, Olea and Ramírez positioned the region as a fragmented yet interwoven totality over and against the former center. In their essays, they do not address what it would look like if a curator were to make those same connections and network diagrams in tracing links between Latin American and European artists, or between North American and South American institutions. Given the number of artists in the show who themselves traveled, studied or were born abroad, were members of avant-garde movements in other countries and, unlike Torres-García, did not actively take up the mantle of creating a “School of the South,” such an international network would certainly be possible to sketch.

Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” concludes by associating the heterotopia with apparatuses of discipline and containment that serve to process and normalize the deviance they represent.³⁸ At the risk of trivializing the real social repression to which Foucault was originally referring, the analogue for this process in exhibition practice is the larger field of art history, with its similar imperative to contain, organize, and define phenomena that deviate, in the sense that Latin America is a “deviation” from a simplistic modernist canon that prioritizes the Paris-to-New York trajectory from pre- to postwar. The avant-garde is that deviant category that is ultimately

coopted—the exception can be made the rule, the outsider into the canon. The heterotopia can easily be rendered the new norm, and this is what quickly occurred following the overwhelmingly positive reception that the show received in both venues.³⁹

The hegemonic aspirations of *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* are echoed in the longer-term project that Ramírez has pursued at the MFAH in the decade since *Inverted Utopias*: the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (ICAA), which hosts an online Documents database featuring archival materials from dozens of institutions throughout Latin America.⁴⁰ ICAA collected and redistributed precious archive materials that were once only available to those researchers who traveled to the region or worked there already in a centralized, virtual “location”—quite literally “without place”—funded by a North American institution. On the other, it has ostensibly respected those institutions from which it has collected high-resolution images of materials (each overlaid with an ICAA watermark), by not physically collecting those materials in Texas and leaving them where they are normally stored within Latin American countries and institutions. In addition, the ICAA cannot boast a comprehensive collection of the materials at these respective archives—there is only a small sampling from each. It is, ultimately, a kind of curated database, if such a thing is possible. Each document on ICAA comes pre-researched by a member of the MFAH’s international research team, with a short essay detailing its significance on the website. ICAA has selected what it considers to be the most important of the region’s archival resources, and marked them ahead of other researchers. This is an effort to consolidate hegemony while respecting less hegemonic

³⁷ Arthur Lubow, “After Frida,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 23, 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/23/magazine/23ramirez.html?pagewanted=all>

³⁸ Ibid, 267. The theorist argues that a transition is underway from what he calls “crisis heterotopias”—generally understood as specific human subjects, living “in a state of crisis,” such as “adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.”—to “heterotopias of deviation,” in which the sites that such “deviant” individuals occupy are fixed and organized as what Giorgio Agamben would call spaces of “exception”: “rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons...”

³⁹ Using the MFAH as a venue, Olea and Ramírez have produced subsequent exhibitions revisiting avant-garde artists in *Inverted Utopias*, particularly abstractionists, such as *Building on a Construct: The Adolpho Leirner Collection of Brazilian Constructive Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*, in 2009, and *Intersecting Modernities: Latin American Art from the Brillembourg Capriles Collection*, in 2013.

⁴⁰ See ICAA, “Documents of Twentieth-Century Latin American and Latino Art, A Digital Archive and Publications Project at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,” <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/>

entities—by bringing them into a network managed by a new, perhaps more benevolent, center.

In his recent book on Brazilian avant-gardes, Sérgio B. Martins quotes Taina Caragol and Isobel Whitelegg's critique of *Inverted Utopias*, which they presented at "Latin America: The Last Avant-Garde," a conference organized by myself and Irene V. Small in 2007. "This project," they write, "is traced over a series of discrete historical moments. Conveying the passage of time as an unfolding totality, the exhibition replicates the survey model from which it desires to break away in terms of display."⁴¹ Martins compares *Inverted Utopias'* gambit, circa 2004, to either expand or revise the canon through the addition of Latin American art with that of Hal Foster's well-known critique of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which advocated for U.S.-based practices from Neo-Dada to Minimalism as retroactively enlivening the prewar "historical avant-garde."⁴² "[T]he historiographical function of continuity and linearity is conveniently malleable. In Foster's case, it guarantees a 'provincialist' defense of an inherited position of mastery, whereas in *Inverted Utopias* a similar position is installed alongside the constitution of a 'field,' as narrative is deployed in order to demarcate the latter's boundaries."⁴³ It is Olea and Ramírez's expansion of the larger art-historical canon's geographical purview, rather than their intricate "constellations" that intentionally resist the conventional national demarcation of the region or any straightforward narrative of "time as an unfolding totality," that has defined the exhibition's legacy.

⁴¹ An archive of abstracts, and, in some cases, entire papers remained online for several years after the conference, but unfortunately it has since been taken off of the CUNY Graduate Center's website, along with all other archives of *PART*, the graduate student journal associated with the school's Art History Ph.D. Program.

⁴² Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

⁴³ Sérgio B. Martins, *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil, 1949-1979* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 7.

Network Fever⁴⁴

The *New York Times Magazine* profile on Ramírez is accompanied by a [photograph](#) by Dan Winters of her standing behind a work of art: the interwoven, stainless steel net of Gego's *Reticulárea*, 1975, which was featured in *Inverted Utopias* and was acquired by the MFAH. Due to the thinness of the wires and their large interstices, Ramírez seems ensconced within the work, in a quite literal avant-garde imbrication of "art and life." Yet this image might be read another way, as *Reticulárea* can be literally translated as a "network-area." Here, the work is a network that interlaces the work of art, the curator, and their institutional setting, but which also spreads: to the edges of the frame, and beyond.⁴⁵

The potential expansiveness, or spread, of the network "constellations" in *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* deserves consideration. As much as Olea and Ramírez sought to "flip the map" in favor of a genealogy of Latin American abstraction and conceptualism, they had to expose the region's close interrelationship to European and North American art and artists. Torres-García's iconic boast of a new Latin American supremacy was then, as it is now, utopian—a hope, against hope, that Northern hegemony could simply be undone, its major artists laid low in favor of those from a new part of the world. This, too, was the exuberant utopianism behind the concept of *antropofagia*, which informed the work of Brazilian prewar modernists as well as Hélio Oiticica's essential contributions to abstraction, conceptual, and participatory art in the 1960s and 1970s (which have in many ways, along with the work of Lygia Clark and a select few others, supplanted muralism, surrealism, prewar abstraction and even geometric abstraction as the best-known icons of Latin American twentieth-century art). If

⁴⁴ See Mark Wigley, "Network Fever," *Grey Room*, No. 4 (Summer 2001), pp. 82-122. Wigley uses this phrase to describe the contagiousness of positing connections through networks; he looks at how systems theorists in the 1960s and 1970s would frequently expand their models to encompass more and more phenomena or geographical areas. This logic might also be likened to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the rhizome, which Maroja and Winograd link in their article to *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias*.

⁴⁵ Mónica Amor, "Another Geometry: Gego's *Reticulárea*, 1969-1982," *October*, Vol. 113, (Summer, 2005), 101-125. This network logic is also apparent in the cover of *Heterotopías*, which features a late work by Gego—a kind of disintegrating grid or expansive network, depending on one's interpretation.

Olea and Ramírez did buy into these modernist tropes from a rhetorical standpoint, there would be nothing to stop future curators or scholars from connecting the dots and instead highlighting the expressly *cosmopolitan*, transnational character of this modernism and contemporary art. This was a clear move made in Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro's 2007 exhibition *The Geometry of Hope*, which emphasized international networks of objects, people, institutions and ideas to the point of including Paris as a center of "Latin American" art production.⁴⁶ The network-area implied in *The New York Times'* starmaking photograph of Ramírez had only one problem: once a network begins to spread, what is to stop it?

Seismic Images

The Red Conceptualismos del Sur began in 2007 with the "Cartographies" research initiative. It has increasingly become one of the most influential voices in this expanding field of curatorial research and discourse.⁴⁷ Composed of a shifting group of artists, scholars and curators primarily based in Latin America—hence "Southern"—the Red formed in 2007 and has organized increasingly ambitious conferences, exhibitions and "interventions" in biennial settings while also editing entire issues of academic journals as well as multiple exhibition catalogues.⁴⁸ The initial impetus for its formation was concern for the condition of conceptual artists' archives in Latin America, emblemized by the fire that destroyed a good percentage of the Hélio Oiticica estate. "It is not by chance," the Red argued, "that for several years now we have been witnessing the spread of a generalized process which canonizes, glamorizes and sterilizes artists' archives and estates, and particularly those related to the production of the

60s and the 70s in Latin America."⁴⁹ The Red produced exhaustive cataloguing for particular artists' archives in an attempt to identify aspects of the field that were still underrepresented in exhibitions and academic research.⁵⁰ This was expressly to counter what the Red calls "knowledge multinationals"—comparatively wealthy Northern institutions such as MoMA, the Getty or the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, which have contributed to a kind of archival drain of documents from Latin America to the international context. The Red itself has utilized the largesse of certain institutions such as the Reina Sofía, but generally insists on its autonomy in collaborating and has not relied on any exclusive venue or funding source.⁵¹

Perder la forma humana surveyed a vast range of practices that protested or otherwise engaged the state violence (repression, torture, and loss of life) inflicted by dictatorships on citizens in various countries in Latin America in the 1980s. Violence manifested as both subject matter and inspiration to radically refuse traditional conceptions of human bodies or behavior.

"To Lose Human Form": with this revelatory image of mutation, the Argentine musician Indio Solari took up and redefined Peruvian anthropologist Carlos Castaneda's concept that points toward the dissolution of the individual "I." This figure becomes useful as a way to interpellate the collected materials in this collective investigation from a double perspective. It alludes, on the one hand, to massacre and extermination, to the visceral effects on bodies by the violence exercised by military dictatorships, states of exception and internal wars. On the other, it refers to the metamorphosis of bodies and experiences of resistance and liberty that occurred in parallel—

⁴⁶ See Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exh. cat. (New York: DAP, 2007).

⁴⁷ See Red Conceptualismos del Sur, "Manifiesto instituyente (March 2009)," Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía website, <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/red-conceptualismos-sur/red-conceptualismos-sur-manifiesto-instituyente>

⁴⁸ The Red's journal-based projects include a dossier in the Argentine journal *ramona* (July 2008), a report on "counter-geographies of conceptual art" in *Artecontexto* (January 2010), and an entire issue of *Third Text* (as the Spanish-edition *Tercer Texto*, January 2012).

⁴⁹ Red Conceptualismos del Sur, "Estado de alerta: Los Archivos de Arte en América Latina," *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* website, October 2009, <http://eipcp.net/policies/rcsur/es/>

⁵⁰ Initial archiving projects generally focused on conceptual and mail artists, including Clemente Padín in Uruguay and Graciela Carnevale and Roberto Jacoby in Argentina, resulting in exhibitions related to the latter two. Beginning in 2011, the Red's focus began to shift to the 1980s and the performance, body, and subcultural art that would comprise *Perder la forma humana*.

⁵¹ Southern Conceptualisms Network, "Micropolitics of the Archive," *Field Notes 02*, http://www.aaa.org.hk/FieldNotes/Issue?Issue_num=2

as replica, refuge or subversion—during the 1980s in Latin America.⁵²

These political phenomena were accounted for primarily in the form of photography, posters, and archival documents—making for an extremely dense assembly of many artists and collectives that had never before appeared in a museum context (Fig. 3).



Figure 3

Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Installation photograph by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores. Reproduced courtesy of André Mesquita and Red Conceptualismos del Sur.

If innovative forms of political protest, performance art, and nightlife and punk subcultures were among the predominant approaches, the curators expressly went further, engaging practices arguably without aesthetic content—particularly those involving overt acts of violence. The catalogue is a collaboratively compiled “glossary” of strategies or concepts, in the tradition of Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* and Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s *Formless: A User’s Guide*. The chosen terms are revealing in terms of precisely how the Red understands the relationship between historical events and artistic practice. If “Graphic Action,” “Bodies and Flows,” and “Socialization of Art” fit into existing aesthetic categories, “Mass Grave,” “Guerrillas,” and “Internationalism” suggest a sort of total identification, however problematic, with political strategies. These terms were set in a vast network diagram—a completely creative, imagined sort of “map”—that the curators included in the

⁵² “Perder la forma humana: Una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina,” in *Perder la forma humana*, 11. My translation.

exhibition catalogue (Fig. 4). Here, the creative “constellation” logic pioneered in *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* is recognizable (it has of late become a curatorial convention, particularly in light of high-profile blockbuster exhibitions such as MoMA’s *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925* of 2012-2013), but the terms are no longer confined to art, and there are so many of them that they seem to multiply uncontrollably.⁵³ This should be understood for what it is: an unconventional and radical expansion of the field of aesthetic practice into political utterance and action, one which willfully disregards precisely the category of the “avant-garde” that Olea and Ramírez were so intent to define and regulate. *Perder la forma humana* did include another network diagram including the names of its artists, superimposed on a timeline—but it is the network of terms themselves, enlivened and interlinked through mysterious means, that offers a window into the logic behind the show, borne out as one reads the individual entries in the “glossary.” At every turn, trauma alternates with deviant sexuality, oppression with release, and in some cases, as of that of Gianni Mestichelli’s *Mimos*, the two are superimposed (Fig. 5). This set of choreographed group poses, constructed to be photographed, simultaneously adopts images from the ongoing torture of many Argentines circa 1980, while charting a libidinous form of collaboration—a loss of one’s body through intermingling with others.

In terms of its cartographic understanding of Latin American art, *Perder la forma humana* achieved precisely what *Heterotopías / Inverted Utopias* did not: it sketched an efflorescence of artistic production in the region that was very much autochthonous.

⁵³ *Inventing Abstraction* featured its own online interactive network that shifts and moves as one peruses connections between different artists across all of Europe (interestingly, while North America is implied in the map-like network that one can explore, its connections do not reach Central or South America). Designed by representatives from Columbia Business School, this mutable, participatory diagram bears a resemblance to the very abstract paintings—the lines of Rayonism, for example—that were included as actual works within the show, making the fetishization of the network a kind of recursive exhibition practice. See “Explore Connections,” *Inventing Abstraction: 1910-1925* interactive section, Museum of Modern Art website, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?page=connections>.

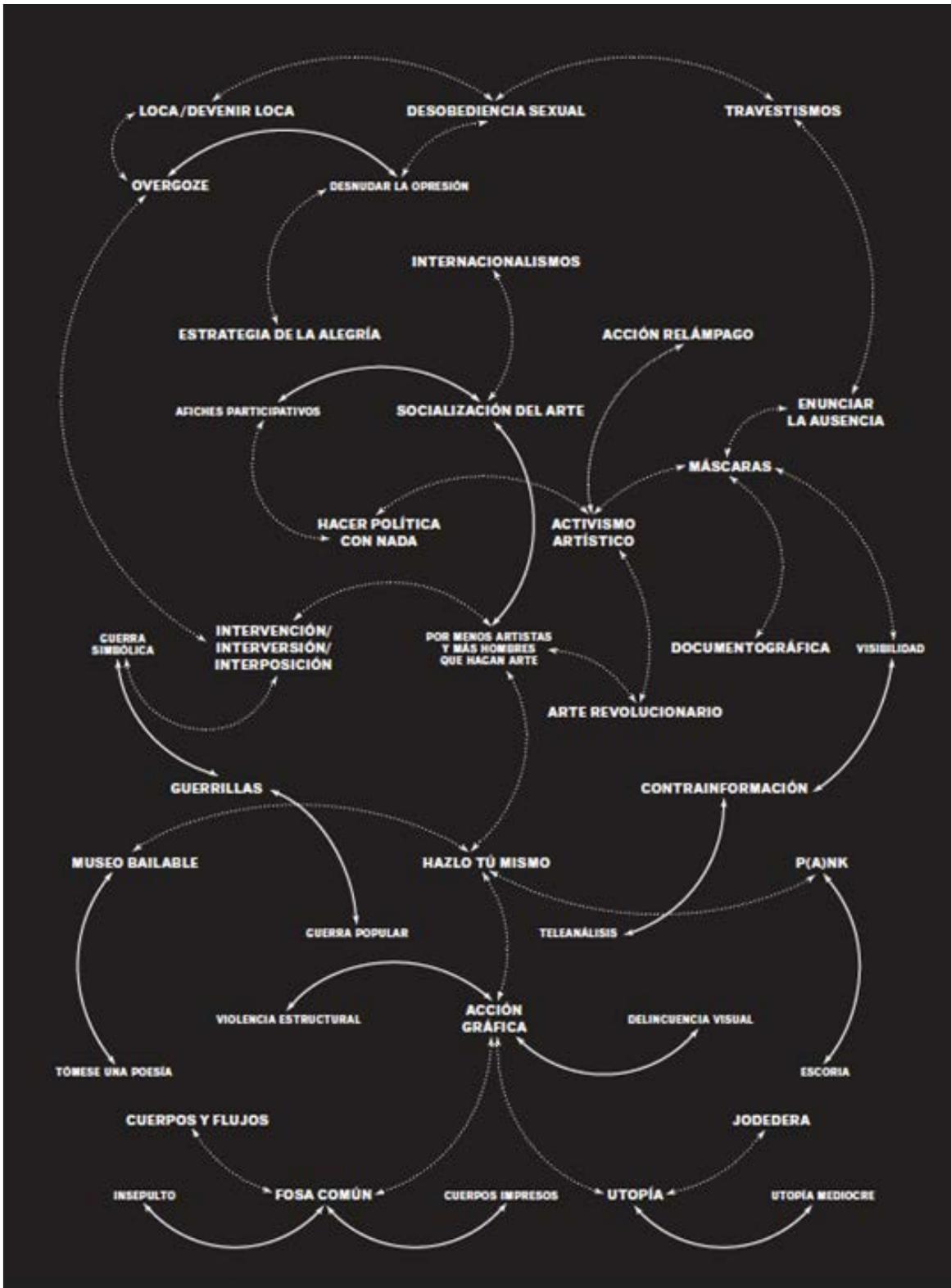


Figure 4

André Mesquita, *Perder la forma humana*, diagram of concepts, 2012. Red Conceptualismos del Sur, eds., *Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2012), 21. Reproduced courtesy of André Mesquita and Red Conceptualismos del Sur.

These projects were not products of modernist or developmentalist initiatives for advanced national culture, but of the violence that was visited upon citizens as a result of Cold War manipulations on the highest—and most Northern—levels.⁵⁴ As a result, the show was far more representative in terms of different countries than Olea and Ramírez's show, benefiting from a dissemination of modernism and conceptualism that dates to the later decade of the 1980s and adding work by Chilean, Colombian and Peruvian artists in particular. Buenos Aires, Rio, São Paulo, Montevideo and Mexico City remained significant, with Caracas (in Venezuela, where there was not a dictatorship on par with those in the Southern Cone), home of kinetic art and Gego's formalist network-areas, significantly less of a presence. In a notable exclusion, however, *Perder la forma humana* neglected art and expanded journalistic or protest practices in Central America, arguably the *cause du jour* for international leftists in the early 1980s, with major revolutionary struggles in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua in particular—preserving the problem of the “extreme periphery” for the foreseeable future.



Figure 5

Gianni Mestichelli, *Mimos*, 1980, in *Perder la forma humana: una imagen símica de los años ochenta en América Latina*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Installation photograph by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores. Reproduced courtesy of André Mesquita and Red Conceptualismos del Sur.

Perder la forma humana achieved another objective: to enframe a vast range of 1980s practices under the umbrella of “conceptualism.” The group’s use of “conceptualism” rather than “conceptual art” has its roots in the 1999 Queens Museum exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, which radically expanded the where and what of conceptual art to broadly reimagine “the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities within which it was being made.”⁵⁵ In *Perder la forma humana*, the Red sets up an analogue between its own collective labor and that of the myriad groups and projects included in the exhibition, implying a direct continuation of the conceptualist tradition in the curatorial project. Indeed, the Red does not merely aspire to be alongside, but to cycle the potential of past interventions into its own present-day activity. In 2009, the Red’s own manifesto proudly announced one of its objectives as “collective position-taking.” With *Perder la forma humana*, the Red renders “conceptualism” and “Latin American art” equivalent: borne of catastrophe, expressly collaborative, and ever opposed to power. It is the exclusions from its network that are instructive. When protesters, performers and punks constitute the new canon, it is precisely artists’ subtler interventions—what *Inverted Utopias* termed “cryptic”—operating on the politics and territories of art rather than a traumatic, localized real, that are left out. The intriguing question that might be posed is whether *Perder la forma humana* has reconstituted a periphery constituted by radical extremes of political and corporeal subjecthood rarely experienced in the Global North (Fig. 6). While a bold, provocative move, this risks a new sort of essentialism for Latin American art: that it necessarily responds to a never-ending onslaught of traumatic events.

⁵⁴ In this sense, *Perder la forma humana* is a latter day example of what Anthony Gardner has called “South-South” exhibitions that includes historical biennials in non-aligned nations during the Cold War. See Anthony Gardner & Charles Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global,” *Third Text*, 27:4, 442-455.

⁵⁵ Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), viii.



Figure 6

Elías Adasme, *A Chile. Registro fotográfico de Acción Arte*, in *Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina*. Installation photograph by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Reproduced courtesy of André Mesquita and Red Conceptualismos del Sur.

In February 2014, the Red Conceptualismos del Sur commented on the ongoing violence between protesters and state forces (or rioters and police, depending on one's perspective) in Venezuela. On their blog, the Red co-authored a February 22 post titled "Situación en Venezuela" that characterized widespread reports in the mass media of police abuses against protesters as a "media fiction created to hide the Bolivarian process, which is sustained by the force of a popular movement."⁵⁶ This terminology advocates for the late Hugo Chávez's legacy, as the former president invariably characterized his populist regime as a continuation of the Latin American liberation process initiated by Simón Bolívar in the nineteenth century.

⁵⁶ Red Conceptualismos del Sur, "Situación en Venezuela," *Red Conceptualismos del Sur: Platform for research, discussion and collective stance from Latin America*, <http://redconceptualismosdelsur.blogspot.fr/2014/02/situacion-en-venezuela.html#comment-form>, accessed February 25, 2014, my translation.

Describing the street protests throughout the country as nothing more than a "destabilization plan launched by the fascist faction of the Venezuelan opposition with funding and media transnational interests based in the United States, Spain and Colombia" aligns the Red with Chavez's successor Nicolás Maduro, who has repeatedly called his political opponents (including the protesters) "fascists." An opposition referring itself as "Venezuelan intellectuals" responded to the Red's claims with a petition vehemently rejecting their claims:

...A legitimate claim has surged that exceeds the individual and demands a truly inclusive society (of everyone and for everyone), a "common" space—public, political—that is not doctrinaire nor ideologically circumscribed. The claim of citizenship demands a government and state policy that are not governed by the empty propaganda that the Red Conceptualismos del

Sur is content to reproduce, becoming the intellectual apparatus of a political regime in the throes of de-legitimization. The majority of Venezuelans fearlessly demonstrated for a policy for all citizens, not only party militants who abused their privileges. They were thus brutalized by the government, in violation of the regime's own constitutional foundation that it had established for itself.⁵⁷

These recent exchanges over a country in crisis suggest that the stakes of mapping Latin America are now higher than ever, both within and beyond the academy. Are the neo-colonial networks that the Red Conceptualismos del Sur have historically traced across and outside the region still active, such that a would-be revolution in Venezuela may be nothing more than a coup by oligarchic foreign interests? Or could it be that events in the streets of Caracas are better understood as a local, organic phenomenon borne of specific governmental neglect of services and public safety? What would it mean if some combination of these two contradictory possibilities were somehow in play? One thing is certain: the Red's willful expansion of the "map" of artistic practice toward both the political and the contemporary have led it into new, uncertain territory—for which, at present, we have no compass.

⁵⁷ "Luis P., Estados Unidos," "Intelectuales venezolanos ante posición de Conceptualismos del Sur sobre Venezuela," *AVAAZ.org: Peticiones de la Comunidad*, February 24, 2014 https://secure.avaaz.org/es/petition/httpredconceptualismosdelsurblogspotcom/Publicar_esta_respuesta_en_su_blog/?shCSBbb. Accessed on February 25, 2014, my translation.

As of the access date the petition has received 645 signatures. The petitioner's username and location raises the intriguing possibility that he is in fact Luis Enrique Pérez Oramas, Chief Curator of the 30th São Paulo Biennial, 2012, and Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A prominent curator in New York confirmed on February 25, 2014 that Pérez Oramas did in fact write this text, in collaboration with Sandra Pinardi, a philosophy professor at Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas.