Vectors or Constellations? Curatorial Narratives of Latin American Art

Camila Maroja  
*Duke University*, marojacamila@gmail.com

Abigail Winograd  
*University of Texas at Austin*, agwinograd@gmail.com

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Abstract
This paper examines the curatorial visions guiding the Mercosul Biennial (1997), curated by Frederico Morais, and Inverted Utopias (2004), co-curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea. Both strove to shift the association of Latin American art with the fantastic that had dominated the region’s historiography. The structural metaphors used to frame these shows demonstrated differing aims: Morais’s desire to create an autochthonous historiography versus Ramírez and Olea’s wish to revise constructions of global modernism. Nonetheless, both exhibitions showcased similar works and helped to consolidate a revised vision of Latin American art.

Resumo
Este artigo examina os projetos curatoriais que guiaram a I Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul, curada por Frederico Morais em 1997, e a exposição Inverted Utopias, curada por Mari Carmen Ramírez e Héctor Olea em 2004. Ambas tentaram dissociar a arte latino-americana da noção de arte fantástica preponderante na historiografia da região. As metáforas estruturais utilizadas nas mostras demonstraram objetivos diferentes: o desejo da parte de Morais em criar uma historiografia autóctone e a vontade de Ramírez e Olea em revisar a construção de um modernismo global. No entanto, ambas exposições terminaram mostrando trabalhos símiles, ajudando a consolidar uma visão renovada da arte latino-americana.

* Camila Maroja and Abigail Winograd are art historians specializing in modern and contemporary art with an emphasis on Latin America. Maroja is completing her Ph.D. in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. Winograd is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin.
This article examines two major exhibitions that developed diagrammatic models to revise the existing canon of twentieth-century art from Latin America. For the 1997 I Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, known as the Mercosul Biennial, Brazilian art critic and curator Frederico Morais devised a “vectorial” curatorial scheme to create a cohesive regional historiography.1 The 2004 Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America, co-curated by the Texas-based Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmen Ramírez and the Mexican poet Héctor Olea at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), employed a “constellation” model to recreate a history of the Latin American avant-garde that would establish the legitimacy of the region’s art on an international scale.2 Our aim in this paper is to understand why, despite Ramírez and Olea’s conscious attempt to revise Morais’s scheme and their distinct geographic and art historical motivations, both curatorial formulations ultimately resulted in exhibitions that promoted a similar vision of Latin American art. This contribution to the historiography of Latin American art exhibitions also offers a new critical understanding of the curators’ attempts to formulate a new canon for the region based largely on constructive and conceptual art.3

Both exhibitions adopted a structural metaphor to frame their curatorial projects. Morais’s employed the vector, a concept with mathematical and biological connotations, in order to represent transnational cultural interchanges within Latin America. In geometric terms, the vector is an entity with both magnitude and directionality; biologically speaking, a vector transmits infectious elements from one organism to another. Morais’s model engaged both; his vectors were broadly thematic but capable of overlapping and cross-pollination. The model was also a radial image and thus, like the principles of Euclidean geometry from which it borrowed, was primarily linear, chronological, and hierarchical. In contrast, Ramírez and Olea’s constellation schema—an accumulation of infinite luminous points—allowed for an endless series of groupings, juxtapositions, and connections. This web-like format created a framework unburdened by linear, chronological, or geographical restraints, in which constellar groupings could incorporate difference and connect antagonistic conceptions. At the same time, Ramírez and Olea’s model also suggested a hierarchy within the galaxy of movements and artists it displayed.

Both exhibitions responded to an earlier formulation of Latin American culture as synonymous with “the fantastic” that had dominated artistic discourses until the 1990s and were intended to reformulate the identity Latin American art.4 These shows thus consciously projected an image of the art of the region as modern and avant-garde, which likely explains why both ultimately promoted similar artists and movements (more specifically, abstraction and conceptualism). Nevertheless, these curatorial discourses were also distinct in their ambitions. Whereas Morais wanted to begin rewriting the history of art from an autonomous, internal Latin American viewpoint, Ramírez and Olea’s project was a confirmation of the participation of Latin American artists in the development of global modernism. These projects also reflected different political concerns. The Mercosul Biennial aimed to propose an independent canon for Latin American art informed by 1970s anti-imperialist debates

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3 Both the Mercosul Biennial and Inverted Utopias were informed by and responded to previous, identity-based canons of Latin American art, including the structural and formalist legacy of the narrative of modernism established by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and José Gómez-Sicre’s influential work for the Pan-American Union’s Visual Arts Unit (1946-1976). For more information on these earlier constructions, see Claire Fox, Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Andrea Giunta, Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael Wellen, Pan-American Dreams: Art, Politics, and Museum Making at the OAS, 1940-1976, doctoral dissertation, (Ph.D. Diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2012).
4 The intention to shift from this association with the fantastic was explicitly addressed by the curators of both shows. Morais wrote in his curatorial proposal that he would not include the fantastic in the biennial, and Ramírez in 1992 wrote an article that in retrospect can be read as a curatorial manifesto. In that essay, Ramírez identified three exhibitions that had associated Latin American and Latino art with the fantastic: Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987, Indianapolis Museum of Art (1987); Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth-Century Art, Frankfurt Kunsthalle (1988); and Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors, Museum of Fine Arts Houston (1988). See Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Beyond the ‘Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art,” Art Journal, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter 1992): 60-68.
within the Americas, whereas *Inverted Utopias* was formulated from within the center to create a new curatorial framework capable of breaking the cycle of misrepresentation that had relegated Latin American art to the periphery for decades.

Uncovering and elucidating this history is vital in an increasingly global art world in which major cultural institutions, including the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among many others, are actively building Latin American collections. The current taste at these institutions, and elsewhere in the field, has been guided in large part by exhibitions and conceptions of Latin American art such as the first Mercosul Biennial and *Inverted Utopias*. What follows is an account of the circulation and refinement of curatorial methodology, from Porto Alegre to Madrid to Houston, that has been profoundly influential for today’s Latin American art field.

I. Vectors

In 1996, Morais submitted a curatorial proposal for the first Mercosul Biennial, which had been scheduled to open in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in the following year. A direct development of the creation of the Mercosul free trade zone among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay in 1991, the biennial was sponsored by local politicians and businessmen to help foster a regional identity and promote a modern, integrated, and independent vision of Latin America. Morais made an ideal candidate for this project, given his longstanding interest in conceiving and advocating a common cultural identity for Latin America. In 1979, he published *Artes plásticas na América Latina: do transe ao transitório* (Visual Arts in Latin America: From Trance to Transitoriness), the first Brazilian book to theorize a transcultural narrative of art. The book, deeply shaped by its author’s earlier interest in sociology, urged the creation of a substantive cultural dialogue between Brazil and its neighboring countries aimed at resisting the cultural impositions of hegemonic powers. Morais denounced the São Paulo Biennial, the biggest art event on the continent, for perpetuating a colonial mentality by closely mirroring developments in the United States and Europe while ignoring artistic developments in Latin America. Remobilizing this critique in his 1997 project, Morais’s stated curatorial aim for the first Mercosul Biennial was “to initiate the urgent task of rewriting the history of art from a Latin American standpoint or, at least, a standpoint which is not exclusively Euro-North American.”

To trace this history from a regional point of view, Morais’s proposal delineated three main “vectors” or “axes” that defined Latin American art in the twentieth century: political, constructive, and fantastic. He began his history of the development of political art with Mexican muralism, followed by political art’s strong resurgence in the Southern Cone during the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s, a moment when artists abandoned the figurative and embraced other visual languages, many of which are associated with conceptual art. In Morais’s scheme, the constructive vector in Latin America began with the 1934 return of the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García to Montevideo after forty-three years abroad. Torres-García’s subsequent *Universalismo constructivo: Contribución a la unificación del arte y la cultura de América* (Constructive Universalism: Contribution for the Unification of Art and Culture of America, 1944), collected his writings on

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5 In 1991 Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay signed the Asunción Treaty, which established a free trade zone among the countries titled Mercosul. Responding to neoliberalism and globalization, the Mercosul was intended to foster regional integration and development for the area, similarly to other free trade bloc agreements like NAFTA.


7 Morais first book makes patent the critic’s Marxist view of art history as well as his interest in sociology, especially in the studies of Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros (Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies, ISEB, 1955-1964). Marked by left-wing politics and influenced by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 1948), the ISEB promoted the nationalist and developmentalist ideas that would mark Morais’s utopian and optimistic conception of constructive art. See Frederico Morais, *Arte e indústria* (Belo Horizonte: Imp. Belo Horizonte, 1962).

Morais did not conceive of the vectors as static, but rather as having the potential to "overlap and merge into new formations." Morais’s final vector was fantastic art, affirming Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier’s concept of the real maravilloso (marvelous real) and the position that in Latin America, “the uncanny is part of daily life.” Despite acknowledging the role of the fantastic, Morais decided to limit the biennial’s display to the first two vectors, primarily because he identified the last vector with “Mexico, Colombia and the Andean countries”—areas not included in the Mercosul treaty. This strategic decision challenged traditional exhibition and collecting practices in Latin American art, including those of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which had launched its own engagement with the region in 1931 with a solo show of Diego Rivera and continued to favor the work of Mexican artists for decades. Moreover, by eliminating these countries from his curatorial model, Morais differentiated his project from the Argentine (later Colombian) critic Marta Traba’s political construction of Latin American art in Los decadas vulnerables en las artes plasticas latinoamericanas, 1950–1970 (Two Vulnerable Decades for Latin-American Visual Art, 1973), which focused on the art of the Andean region. In that volume, Traba built on sociologist Darcy Ribeiro’s concept of zones that can be open or closed to foreign imperialism to argue that the Andean area, especially Colombia, was particularly resistant to cultural domination and was therefore more representative of Latin America. In the final version of his curatorial proposal, Morais replaced the “fantastic” axis with the “cartographic” axis, which featured artworks addressing geopolitical concerns, into his vectorial scheme.

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8 Joaquín Torres-García, Universalismo constructivo: Contribución a la unificación del arte y la cultura de América (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidón, 1944).
9 Morais, “Curatorial Proposal.”
10 An earlier draft of the Mercosul Biennial proposal, suggested to Morais by the Mercosul Biennial Foundation in 1996, predicted the inclusion of not only the original countries that signed the Asunción Treaty that formed the Mercosur but also Chile and Bolivia, which joined the trade region via the Área de Libre Comercio Sud-Americana (ALCSA) in 1996. Morais’s decision to invite Venezuela (famous for its kinetic art) but ignore Bolivia (an Andean country) suggests that the curator was interested in giving priority to the first two vectors, political and constructive.
12 The cartographic vector was envisaged as a small parallel show in the first curatorial proposal of August 20, 1996 and fully integrated with the political and constructive vectors in the final version of the show. Despite its promotion to an independent axis, it in effect served to reify the political vector, as most of its artworks presented explicit political content or were made by artists associated with Latin American conceptualism, such as Alfredo Juar’s A Logo for America (1987).
13 Morais’s vectorial structure created a cohesive, easily identifiable regional narrative for Latin American art and proved highly influential across the Southern Cone, operating as a regional connector. Morais’s final vector was fantastic art, affirming Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier’s concept of the real maravilloso (marvelous real) and the position that in Latin America, “the uncanny is part of daily life.” Despite acknowledging the role of the fantastic, Morais decided to limit the biennial’s display to the first two vectors, primarily because he identified the last vector with “Mexico, Colombia and the Andean countries”—areas not included in the Mercosul treaty. This strategic decision challenged traditional exhibition and collecting practices in Latin American art, including those of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which had launched its own engagement with the region in 1931 with a solo show of Diego Rivera and continued to favor the work of Mexican artists for decades. Moreover, by eliminating these countries from his curatorial model, Morais differentiated his project from the Argentine (later Colombian) critic Marta Traba’s political construction of Latin American art in Los decadas vulnerables en las artes plasticas latinoamericanas, 1950–1970 (Two Vulnerable Decades for Latin-American Visual Art, 1973), which focused on the art of the Andean region. In that volume, Traba built on sociologist Darcy Ribeiro’s concept of zones that can be open or closed to foreign imperialism to argue that the Andean area, especially Colombia, was particularly resistant to cultural domination and was therefore more representative of Latin America. In the final version of his curatorial proposal, Morais replaced the “fantastic” axis with the “cartographic” axis, which featured artworks addressing geopolitical concerns, into his vectorial scheme.
American art that was also dynamic, presupposing the continuous inclusion of new vectors. Morais’s framework thus fulfilled the Mercosul Biennial’s goal of rewriting art history from a Latin American viewpoint. To make explicit the political stakes of theorizing the region’s art as autochthonous, Morais cited Torres-García’s América invertida (Inverted America, 1936), a now canonical image that represents a foundational gesture of defiance against the exclusion and marginalization of Latin American art (Fig. 1).

In contrast to almost all previous surveys of the region, the Mercosul Biennial greatly privileged abstract and political art. Morais conceived of the political vector as a response to difficult economic and political realities, among them the imposition of dozens of brutal dictatorships across Latin America. This perspective grew out of his earlier experience as a Brazilian critic living under dictatorship. Mixing conceptual and pop art, the political axis in the Mercosul Biennial showcased groups such as Nueva Figuración (New Figuration) and individual artists such as Luis Camnitzer, León Ferrari, Cildo Meireles, and Rubens Gerchman (Fig. 2), together with extensive archival material documenting, for example, the Argentinean collaboration Tucumán Arde (Tucumán is Burning) and the Chilean escena avanzada (advanced scene). Morais’s scheme reflected the ongoing reading of conceptualismo as eminently political, a position espoused in 1993 by Ramírez’s “Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America.” Furthermore, the biennial elaborated an interpretation of Latin American pop as inseparable from its local context rather than merely derivative of North American precedents—a now widely accepted art-historical premise.

Along the constructive axis, Morais similarly linked the art that flourished from the 1940s through the 1950s to modernization projects across the region. This premise could also be seen in the curator’s earlier catalogue for the show, América Latina: Geometría Sensible (Latin America: Sensitive Geometry, Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, 1978), for which Morais wrote the essay “Vocação Construtiva (mas o caos

at the Luis Ángel Arango Library and the Banco de la República in Bogotá, Colombia, as part of the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas. Earlier examples like the Bienal Americana de Arte (1962, 1964 and 1966) in Córdoba, Argentina, and the Bienal de Arte Coloejer (1968, 1970, and 1972) in Medellín, Colombia, should not be included in this genealogy since they were Pan-American and internationalist in scope.

Morais established this position with the 1970 exhibition Do corpo à terra (From Body to Earth) at the Palácio das Artes in Belo Horizonte, which promoted a generation of artists who deployed art as a form of political protest and included Cildo Meireles and Artur Barrio.


For example, besides the two exhibitions scheduled to open in 2015—International Pop exhibition at the Walker Art Center and The World Goes Pop at the Tate Gallery, London—América do Sul, a Pop Arte das Contradições (South America, the Pop Art of Contradictions, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 2013) has recently explored local and critical forms of pop art. See http://mamrio.org.br/exposicoes/amrica-do-sul-pop-ar-t-das-contradi%C3%A7oes

By connecting the constructive movement with the country’s development, Morais evoked his 1960s association with SEB and CIPAL (see note 5). In a show like the Mercosul Biennial, intended to promote the regional integration, autonomy and development sought by the treaty, this theory was particularly welcomed.
permanence)" ("Constructive Vocation [but the chaos remains]").²⁴ In that text, which was heavily quoted in the 1997 Mercosul catalogue (Fig. 3), he theorized an integrated regional identity under a common “constructive vocation,” casting Latin America’s concretist movements as part of a larger impulse that included references to foreign artists like Vladimir Tatlin and Piet Mondrian. Nonetheless, Morais skilfully inverted the predominant “original-derivative” discourse by postulating the existence of a “constructive will” among artists in the Americas prior to its appearance in Europe—a move that, while maintaining the presence of a vivid transatlantic exchange, guaranteed the autonomy of a Latin American cultural identity. Allowing foreign references in the ideation of Latin American art and stressing modernization, Morais differentiated his curatorial discourse and vision for Latin American art from contemporaneous critics like Traba and her aforementioned notion of an “art of resistance” in Latin America. Despite both critics’ concern with denouncing cultural imperialism in

the region and advocating art as political, they ended up promoting very different artists, movements, and geographical areas. In the constructive vector, Morais also established connections among the several movements inside the region, associating the Argentinean Madí group with Brazilian Neoconcretism, for example.25

Morais’s theory of a “constructive vocation” was also his answer to the earlier call of Juan Acha, the Peruvian art critic based in Mexico, for the study and elaboration of local Latin American aesthetic theory during a 1975 symposium at the University of Texas in Austin.26 This request was particularly appealing to Morais because it echoed his concerns about cultural colonialism in the continent, as amply discussed in his 1979 book. Thus, the Mercosul Biennial can be seen as the result of Morais’s reflections and curatorial activity in the 1970s, as its curatorial mission to rewrite art history from a regional viewpoint built on his existing theories as well as his creation of new and independent paradigms for Latin American art. The show’s focus on political and constructive art therefore remobilized Morais’s earlier trajectory as art critic and cultural mediator in Brazil. In his post-exhibition report to the Biennial Foundation, Morais highlighted his creation of a multi-vector scheme as the most important achievement of the 1997 Mercosul Biennial.27 Supporting this claim, Morais quoted a letter he had received from Ramírez in which she claimed that his decision to “organize the show according to conceptual axes, as well as the judicious representation of artists and movements according to an internal legitimation criterion and not according to the market, gave an unusual freshness to the event.” She concluded: “Few times have I seen a reading of Latin American art so right in all its dimensions.”28

Ramírez visited the show and participated in the Biennial’s seminars (Fig. 4), presenting the paper “Más alla de la identidad: Apuntes sobre la globalización y el arte en América Latina” (Beyond Identity: Notes on Globalization and Art in Latin America).29 As the title indicates, her lecture explored the internationalization of Latin American art, which, she argued, operated in “a hierarchical and unequal way” and was highly

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25 Morais and Argentinean curator Irma Arestizábal particularly emphasized the correspondences between the constructivist movements in Argentina and Brazil in the catalogue. In the show, the correspondences among the several regional movements theorized in the catalogue took visual form in juxtapositions of artworks by groups such as Concreto-Invenção, Concretismo, and GRAY, among many other works by individual artists.

26 Argentinean critic Damián Bayón organized the 1975 symposium titled Speak out! Charla! Bate-Papo! Contemporary Art and Literature in Latin America that brought together Latin American art historians at the University of Texas in Austin. See Morais, Artes plásticas na América Latina, 17. In this 1979 book Morais listed his own theory as part of local theories that were being created to answer Acha’s call: “Anyway, there was a considerable advancement in our theoretical production. And the novelty of this production resides in the attempt of its critics to analyze the Latin American production as a whole, guided by the manipulation of some basic concepts: resistance ([Marta] Traba), liberation ([Néstor García] Canclini), constructive vocation (Frederico Morais), an autonomous visual thinking (Juan Acha) or the adoption of some concepts coming from such other areas as dependency theory (Mirko Lauer).” Ibid., 36.

27 Morais composed a final report of the show for the FBAVM that he revised into an article. He claimed that foreign critics and academics appeared to better understand his curatorial scheme, quoting Jacques Leenhardt’s statement that “the great merit of the show was to organize the artworks according to axes,” composing a “sampling pedagogy.” See Frederico Morais, “1 Bienal do Mercosul: Regionalismo e globalização,” in Frederico Morais, ed. Silvana Seffrin (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 2004), 182.

28 Ibid. Morais quotes Ramírez in the article. A copy of the letter is available at the FBAVM / NDP.

dependent on the legitimization of hegemonic art circuits.\textsuperscript{30}

Advocating for a "new geography of cultural power" that was more global and less hierarchical, Ramírez ended her paper by questioning the ability of a regional biennial to generate an apparatus of local or continental legitimation that could win or surpass the recognition of the center of the art world. Ramírez, who raised concerns about the possibility of replacing existing inequities from within the periphery, was soon to be appointed the first curator of Latin American art in the United States.

\textbf{II. Constellations}

In 2001, Ramirez was appointed the Wortham Curator of Latin American Art at the MFAH as part of an initiative to make the museum the premier institution for Latin American art in the United States.\textsuperscript{31} Already established in the field thanks to a combination of exhibitions and articles on artists and movements then little known to North American audiences, Ramírez cemented her curatorial reputation at the MFAH with \textit{Inverted Utopias}. The exhibition built upon the structure elaborated in \textit{Heterotopias: medio siglo sin-lugar: 1918-1968} (Heterotopias: Half a Century Without-Place), part of the monumental project \textit{Versiones del Sur}, a quintet of shows mounted by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.

\textsuperscript{30} Although there was a project to publish the conference's proceedings, the papers remain unpublished. Some of them, including Ramírez's, are available at the FBAVM / NDP.

from 2000 to 2001. Joined by the MFAH’s director at the time, Peter Marzio, the curators announced their intentions to showcase and develop the most complete narrative of Latin American modernism. Ramírez stated, “We are using ‘Inverted Utopias’ as a kind of blueprint for the artists and works that we aspire to.”

The premise of the show pivoted around Ramírez and Olea’s characterization of Latin American avant-gardes as going back to “their glorious, untainted past in search of the chimerical elements for their avant-garde approach” in opposition to the “forward thrust” of the historical European avant-gardes. To highlight this difference, the exhibition adopted the concept of utopia, an idea deeply intertwined with the image of Latin America in the global imaginary as ahistorical.

The curators’ goal was to establish the quality and depth of Latin American artistic production, a gesture of repudiation intended as a rebuke to North American and European histories of art that had marginalized the contributions and innovations of Latin America artists for centuries. As Ramírez and Olea’s project was planned to take place in a North American institution, it represented an opportunity to critique the course of canonical art history from within the center and thus a chance to initiate “a new geography of power” similar to the one she had advocated in her 1997 presentation. In its effort to redraw the map of curatorial interest and power, Torres-García’s revolutionary image América invertida worked, as it had for Morais, as a vital reference, and in this case as an inspiration for the title and spirit of the exhibition.

The exhibition proposal relied heavily on existing European theories of the avant-garde to elaborate a “constellar” model. In particular, the curators borrowed their concept from Theodor Adorno’s Negative Dialectics. Adorno conceives of the “constellation” as a site of juxtaposition in which it is possible to resist the tendency to reduce meaning to a common core and thereby preserve the tension between the universal and the particular, an essential idea for artists such as Torres-García. Ramírez and Olea adopted the model for its ability to challenge the essentialism of Euro-North American modernism, which located the authenticity of modernity outside of Latin America. To the curators, the flexibility of the constellation as a model—both in its theoretical deployment by Adorno and its schematic visual qualities—made it an ideal tool to organize a massive group exhibition intended to challenge the conventions of the traditional art survey exhibition.

In her 1992 article “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” Ramírez contended that the problem undergirding the invisibility of Latin America art was the persistence of myths and stereotypes that obscured the complexity of the region. Paramount among the falsehoods relegating Latin America to the periphery, she argued, was the perpetuation of the notion of Latin American art as existing outside of the Western tradition. For Ramírez, the region’s colonial legacy forged a formative and sustained relationship with Europe and North America. Advocating instead that Latin American art should be considered an alternative expression of Western culture, she placed the onus of Latin America’s exclusion from the Western cultural...
legacy on North American curators and institutions. The problem, Ramírez suggested, was the inadequacy of curatorial frameworks based on linear models that allowed for the persistent misperception of the region’s artistic production as derivative and the assumption that exhibition visitors were “incapable of viewing the arts of non-First World societies without the ethnological lens that resulted from colonialism.”

Ramírez singled out the tendency of survey exhibitions toward “reductionism and homogenization” as primarily responsible for these continued misunderstandings of the region, a critique that echoed Homi Bhabha’s contention that large retrospective exhibitions always reasserted the primacy of Western linear canonical museological structures, even when they attempted to deconstruct them. Ramírez’s principal complaint was that curators tended to impose a vision of continental identity onto works of art based entirely on the exoticism associated with the Latin American or Latino as “other.” Latin American identity, Ramírez argued, “was conceived of in terms of a primal, ahistorical, and instinctual essence that was presumed to convey the peculiarities of the Latin American character by allowing itself to be expressed through art.”

The curatorial imposition of a unified identity was typically justified in terms of authenticity, another concept inevitably tied to indigenous aesthetics or subject matter that explained the predominance of Mexican Muralism in the public imaginary of Latin American cultural production. If the public perceived the folkloric as synonymous with authenticity, artists whose work instead engaged European art were considered unoriginal. It was the duty of the curator, according to Ramírez, to disabuse the museum-going audience of this misconception by presenting alternative artists, movements, and theories that challenged the market and art historical orthodoxy toward Latin America. To do so, she argued, it was necessary to develop new curatorial models capable of accurately conveying the multiplicity of Latin American identity. Such a model would reclaim the value of hybridity and replace neocolonial, “vertical” relationships with those that fostered “horizontal” exchange. The constellation was all these things: an original curatorial concept that mounted serious challenges to the chronologies, geographies, and canons of Western art by highlighting artists, relationships, and aesthetic proposals that were internal, parallel, or adjacent to existing narratives of the modern.

In keeping with Adorno’s understanding of the constellation as able to encompass antagonistic ideas, Ramírez and Olea’s conceptual framework eliminated the negative connotations of derivation by equating selective assimilation with originality. As Ramírez declared, “These are not adaptations of existing concepts . . . but rather original contributions denoting an interactive assimilation of Modernist, avant-garde, and New World principles.” Like Heterotopías, Inverted Utopias resisted the fallacy of Latin American unity that, according to the curators, had promoted reductive, essentialized characterizations of Latin American identity in the past. In this way, the constellation model differed from the unified view of the region offered by Morais’s vectorial scheme. According to Ramírez, “a constellation is a series of randomly connected luminous points that have no intrinsic relationship to one another, yet whose primary function lies in their potential to orient travelers in the exploration of vast territories.” By applying this malleable model to the diverse Latin American identity, curators could “reafirm the confidence of North American curators and institutions in the aesthetic potential of Latin American art.”

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38 Ramírez, “Beyond the ‘Fantastic,’” 62.
40 Ibid.
41 Mexico’s role in perceptions of Latin American art is difficult to diminish. Mexico’s proximity to the United States and the artistic exchange between the two countries often eclipsed the artistic scenes occurring in countries through Central and South America.
43 Although neither Ramírez nor Olea acknowledged the influence, their non-linear, schematic drawings bear similarities to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s earlier rhizome, an open model that allowed for the establishment of connections between disparate points. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Martinican literary critic and writer Édouard Glissant had previously foregrounded the relevance of the rhizome for the Americas in his Poetics of Relation, a text that examined the hybrid nature of the francophone Caribbean. See Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
45 Ramírez, “The Displacement of Utopias,” 121-130.
American avant-garde scene, the curators’ were able “to group artists from different countries and time periods into several ensembles focused on artistic, ideological, or thematic concerns” and therefore allow the viewer to concentrate on the “luminous points” without forgetting that there were “trillions of stars left behind.” In *Inverted Utopias*, Ramírez and Olea organized their exhibit around six constellations or pairs of opposing concepts: “Universal and Vernacular,” “Play and Grief,” “Progression and Rupture,” “Vibrational and Stationary,” “Touch and Gaze,” and “Cryptic and Committed.”

In the exhibition’s introductory text, Ramírez and Olea identified four defining characteristics of the Latin American avant-garde that informed these constellar pairs and emphasized the region’s plurality so as to avoid essentialist readings. The first was Latin America’s aforementioned tendency towards a regressive utopian vision, which granted the region an original past but also suggested ahistorical readings. The second was a syncretic, formal eclecticism epitomized by Torres-García’s proposals for *La Escuela del Sur* (The School of the South), which called for a universal constructivism that inserted pre-Colombian iconography into the modernist grid. The third defining feature of the Latin American avant-garde was selective assimilation of the European and American models that contributed to its hybridity and originality. The final feature was a desire on the part of the artists to influence the socio-political events of their respective countries, thus filling the space between art and social engagement.

This fourth characteristic of Latin American art disseminated the notion of Latin American art as inherently political, an idea central to the Mercosul Biennial and Ramírez’s aforementioned 1993 article “Blueprints,” which she later expanded in “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin American Art, 1960-1980,” first published in the catalogue of the groundbreaking show *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* and reproduced for *Inverted Utopias*. In that essay, she described conceptualism as the second major development in modern art history, following the avant-garde rebellions of the previous century. Following Ramírez and Olea’s sixth constellation, “Cryptic and Committed,” which explored the growth of conceptual art, would thus, by Ramírez’s logic, constitute the most significant twentieth-century artistic developments on the region. Unlike Morais, who exhibited both conceptual and pop art under the political vector, Ramírez and Olea included the majority of their pop examples in the “Play and Grief” constellation, which juxtaposed social and political reflection with humor and sexuality. The curators ended up conflating conceptual art with the political aspect of Latin American art, arguably its most important feature. This emphasis explains the prominent place that Ramírez assigned to *Tucumán Arde*—a moment she pinpointed as a definitive “climax” in the progression of Latin American conceptualism.

Along with conceptual art, *Inverted Utopias* also privileged permutations of abstraction, whose associated movements appear in four of the six constellations: “Universal and Vernacular” (The School of the South), “Progression and Rupture” (Torres-García, Madi, and Neoconcretism), “Vibrational and Stationary” (kinetic art), and “Touch and Gaze” (op art). As in the Mercosul Biennial, conspicuously absent from the exhibition was any evidence of “the fantastic” or surreal. Praising the “very wise” curatorial decisions in Houston, art historian and curator Robert Storr noted, “there’s no Diego [Rivera], there’s no [Wifredo] Lam, there’s no [Roberto] Matta, and so on, in this exhibition.” For Storr, the show did not diminish the importance of those artists but, by not including the usual suspects, “other things can be seen.” As a result, we can conclude that, like Morais in his 1997 Biennial, the curators of

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Inverted Utopias wanted to create a modern narrative for Latin American art that kept a distance from the fantastic and its previous association with the folkloric, which may help to explain Ramírez’s enthusiastic appraisal of the Mercosul Biennial despite her differences with the schema it employed.

III. Vectors versus Constellations

Beyond this effort by both exhibitions to repudiate the frequent conflation of the “art of the fantastic” with the cultural production of the region, Morais’s vectorial scheme and Ramírez and Olea’s constellar model shared much in common. The shows limited their scope to selections from the twentieth century and focused their geographic range on countries with a stronger urban tradition—specifically Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The shows used their respective structural frames to spotlight the abstract and conceptual art experiments of the Latin American avant-gardes, emphasizing their political dimension as a local characteristic. Aspiring to display a large number of artworks, the curators adopted models that encouraged accretions and the possibility of growth and variation. Despite the previously mentioned differences between the linear structure of the vector and the network format of the constellation, the result was the inclusion of many of the same artists and movements, including Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Madí, Neoconcretismo, Alberto Greco, Torres-García, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Diez. By privileging such a selection, the two shows strongly asserted that these tendencies, especially in their political aspects, formed the foundation of a new canon, which also created substantial ripples in the Latin American art market.51

In their attempt to radically transform the narrative of Latin American modernism, both shows operated as massive survey exhibitions, despite Morais’s preference for curator Catherine David’s term “retro-prospective show” to describe his biennial and Ramírez and Olea’s statement that Inverted Utopias was not a “survey exhibition.”52 As examined above, Morais understood the 1997 Biennial as an opportunity to showcase a vision of a unified (though non-totalizing) idea of Latin American art that he had been constructing since the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to critics who accused the show of being excessively historical, Morais also stressed that the Mercosul Biennial had “particularities that differentiated it from its counterparts.”53 Arguing that the past is “always open to new interpretations,” Morais insisted that the exhibition’s importance was not about “differentiating the historical from the contemporary” but the way that canonical works were approached, as “you can make an aged reading of the contemporary production or, inversely, a reading capable of actualizing art history.”54 As we have seen, Ramírez and Olea’s rejection of the survey exhibition was based on their understanding of the format as responsible for perpetuating distortions of the artistic production of the region, namely by presenting an uniform and general view of its art.55

Regardless of the similarities between the two schemes and the complimentary appraisal Ramírez penned for Morais, in Inverted Utopias she and Olea pitted themselves against Morais’s Biennial by criticizing his lecture on constructive art. Ramírez took specific aim at his theorization of a “constructive vocation,” as it unified the abstract investigations across Latin America. Using their show’s catalogue as a platform, Ramírez distanced herself from Morais with a lengthy and pointed rebuttal of his transnational claims, associating them with “the outworn framework of art history and the naïve parameters of essentialism” and arguing that “with the exception of the well-documented connections between Torres-García and several Madí artists, it is impossible to

51 Lubow, “After Frida.”
54 Ibid.
55 As noted British critic and curator Guy Brett argued in his favorable review of the show, Inverted Utopias functioned as a survey exhibition, a format that, he argued, had a long and troubled history in its treatment of Latin American art. Guy Brett, “Inverted Utopias,” Artforum International, Vol. 43, No. 3 (November 2004): 217.
establish historical links between the South American Constructive groups.” Taking issue with his notion of a “constructive will” originating among Latin American artists, she argued that “this interpretation is more closely related to the persistence of 1960s developmentalist ideology within a certain sector of Latin American critics than to the type of primeval utopia that, as we will see, the avant-garde artists and groups in question pursued.”

Ramírez and Olea differentiated their show from these views, positioning _Inverted Utopias_ as pioneering in its scope and ambition. By rejecting the legitimacy of internal exchanges between constructive Latin American groups, they insisted upon a reading of Latin American art that maintained the relevance of heterogeneity and national specificity. Moreover, by presenting Latin America as a “No-Place,” Ramírez and Olea embraced an ahistorical view of Latin America, opting to present avant-garde production as fragmented and utopian rather than inserting it directly into a historicized transnational economic and political context, as in Morais’s exhibition.

Ramírez and Olea constructed a narrative of Latin American modernism based on a vision of the Latin American avant-garde as looking back into “a kind of primeval utopia”—a fundamental element in their assertion of the originality of Latin American art. Morais, on the other hand, viewed utopia as deeply linked to the artistic project of constructivist artists who wanted to build a better and more equal society. In his curatorial proposal for the Mercosul Biennial, he wrote, “The constructive project is fundamentally optimistic. And utopian. The Constructive artist believes that art can be an instrument of society’s transformation.”

As Ramírez noted, Morais associated this project with the modernizing schemes implemented in Latin America in the 1950s, Brazil’s planned capital, Brasília, being perhaps the most paradigmatic example. Surely, both shows attempted to highlight the originality and distinctiveness of Latin American art without reference to the fantastic and showcased similar and sometimes the same artworks. Nevertheless, by employing the concept of a utopian past via a “constructive will” that preceded the European presence on the continent and anchoring this conception on modernization projects in the region, Morais’s vision was firmly rooted in time and space, escaping ahistorical notions of art.

Morais’s historicized, unified narrative of Latin American art was framed in opposition to a partisan “universal” art history that only occasionally included isolated Latin American artists such as Rivera and Matta. Supporting this view in accordance with his trajectory as a critic, Morais argued that “to construct a Latin American art history means to de-construct a metropolitan art history.” In its anti-imperialist tone, the project was in line with the ideology of Latin American criticism in the 1970s, as Ramírez pointed out. In contrast, Ramírez and Olea’s constellation model, following Adorno, located a meaningful tension in the space between the center and periphery and identified it as the site of Latin American originality. If, on the one hand, _Inverted Utopias_’ constellar model managed to keep oppositional pairs together without reaching a totalizing synthesis that, according to the curators, would generate an essentialist view of Latin America, on the other hand, their use of imported theory repeated a convention that critics like Morais had been denouncing as colonialist since the 1960s. The likely motivation for this decision lies in Ramírez and Olea’s exhibition goal. _Inverted Utopias_ was not a regional project. Therefore, it did not promote a unified view of Latin America intended to foster cultural integration and establish internal networks, but rather aimed to insert another narrative of Latin American modernism into the existing canon.
Therefore, an integrated, contextualized view of Latin America would have been detrimental to their project’s ultimate end. Consequently, the new parallel art historical narrative presented in Inverted Utopias echoed in many ways the existing modernist canon, including its reliance on European theory (Adorno), a foundational artistic genius (Torres-García), the prominence of abstraction, and the ever-diminishing importance of the object amidst a political conceptualism. It is perhaps for this reason that Inverted Utopias played a decisive role in the subsequent assimilation of new names into this larger, preexisting canon of world art.

To demonstrate the differences between the discourses constructed by the two models—vector and constellation—we can examine how each mobilized Torres-García’s 1936 drawing as an emblematic image of their show. In both exhibitions, the drawing operates as a fundamental ideological premise regarding the originality of Latin American artistic production, but each mobilizes this premise toward a different end. Torres-García’s drawing, which he reworked for the publication Universalismo constructivo, visually reiterated the artist’s first Latin Americanist manifesto of 1935, “The School of the South,” in which he claimed, “our North looks South . . . For us, there must not be a North, except in opposition to our South . . . This correction was necessary; because of it we now know where we are.”

His utopian map graphically employs the language of Constructive Universalism to define the artist’s cultural reorientation away from Europe.

The enduring currency of Torres-García’s map lies in its capacity to expose the relational nature of images (both cartographic and artistic) that can be perceived as ideological constructs. In Morais’s curatorial proposal, this image’s ability to disrupt and nullify colonial relationships—perpetuated, as he saw it, in exhibitions like the São Paulo Biennial in the 1970s—made a powerful visual statement that reinforced the goals of the exhibition, while simultaneously reflecting Morais’s interest in autochthonous theory. In the 1997 Biennial, the drawing became a predecessor of pan-regional anti-imperialist struggles in the 1970s and a symbol of the geopolitical ambitions of the Mercosul Treaty in the present. For Ramírez and Ola, the power of Torres-García’s drawing lies in its interrogation of Latin America’s relationship to Europe and North America. Both artist and curator selectively employed visual and philosophical language—both adeptly inserting European theory into a Latin America context—to propose a dramatic inversion of the status of Latin American art. In Inverted Utopias, Europe operated as a counter-marker, placing Latin America in an inverted or oppositional position.

Despite using different conceptual models and having different political aims, both exhibitions have helped to firmly align sophisticated Latin American art in a trajectory from constructive abstraction to political conceptualism, a narrative that has been reinforced by later shows that have heightened the visibility of the artists associated with both programs. The Mercosul Biennial and Inverted Utopias were thus fundamental in elaborating the depth and variety of the canon of Latin American art and escaping earlier stereotypes related to the figurative and fantastic. Whether these models have nonetheless resulted in the construction of other, perhaps equally restrictive stereotypes is an issue currently being debated.

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61 Torres-García, quoted in Ramirez, “Inversions: The School of the South,” in Inverted Utopias, 73.

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