

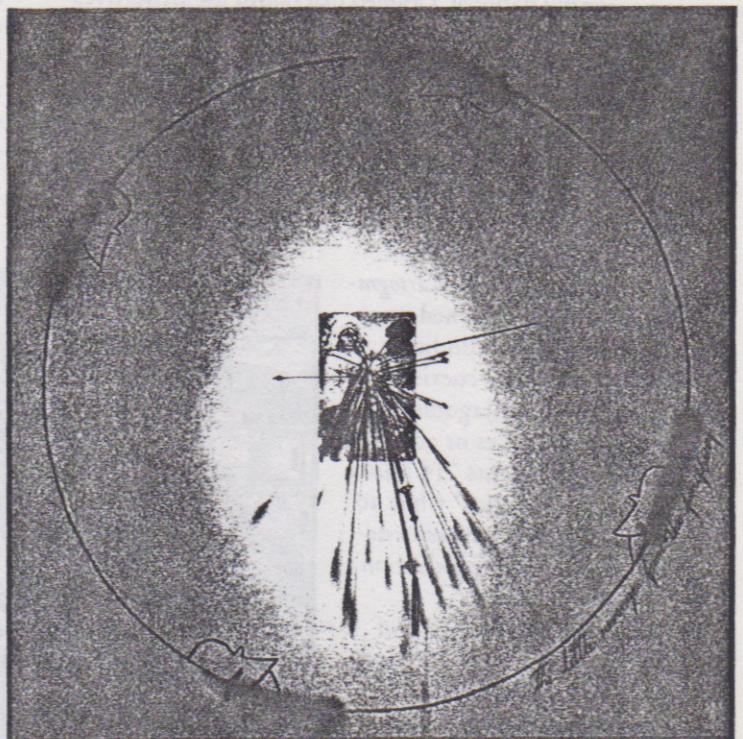
Cartographies: 14 artists from Latin America

BY ADRIANO PEDROSA

THESE ARE THE DAYS of multiculturalism (a North American invention). In what might be regarded as a sign of exhaustion, in the past decade the institution of contemporary art has been attempting to encompass *other* artists into its strictly bounded arena. From a Northern Hemispheric perspective, the Latin American might represent the closest *other*. After all, the Latin American speaks a European language, is Christian, mostly Euro-centred and largely heterosexual. This may well account for the current interest of European and North American museums in Latin American art.¹ An interest that is often expressed as a totalizing project of establishing—*mapping*—what this Latin American art in truth is.

The large majority of such exhibitions present a conceptual contradiction which precedes the selection of artists and installation of their works and which is associated with the flagrant contradiction of a certain postmodernism. If, on the one hand, one of the most notable contributions of postmodern thought and practice has been to subvert and collapse the modern categories that segmented the aesthetic languages (painting and sculpture in the visual arts, documentary and fiction in film, criticism and fiction in literature), on the other hand certain postmodernism theories establish an entire new range of categories we must submit to and find solidarity in: monolithic categories of gender, race, national origin and sexual preference. Behind so many exhibitions devoted to showing *other* productions is a desire to define and classify this *other*, an activity that reveals itself to be implacably authoritarian, systematizing and reductionist. Also, curators of truthful exhibitions seem to ignore that the map—the favoured metaphor of these projects—is itself a representation (of landscapes, of cityscapes) that may be scientific and technical, but still a representation. And as such it is filtered (through curatorial eyes), partial, mediated and biased. The search for truth is doomed to fail.

Cartographies—the first major exhibition of “artists from Latin America” organized by a Latin American curator for a Northern Hemispheric institution—is questioning the very activity of authoritarian curatorial map making. Organized and first hosted by the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the exhibition has travelled to Caracas, Bogotá and Ottawa, and will be in New York this fall. The cartographer is São Paulo-based



The Little Revenge from the Periphery.
José Bedia, 1993. Installation.

La Petite Revanche de la Périphérie.
José Bedia, 1993. Installation.

Ivo Mesquita, a Latin American travelling through his own continent. For the past few years he has been taking notes of the trips he makes, of what he perceives and, above all, of how he interprets it. In this sense, his activities may be linked to those of European travellers who attempted to record what they saw in their journeys through colonial and post-colonial Latin America.² Unlike his European counterparts, however, Mesquita is aware of the tricks that the eye can and does play on him, and he does not attempt to overcome them—awareness, in this case, being the only possible response to the problem. Here I make a distinction between map and cartography: Mesquita, the cartographer, is not *mapping* Latin American art, he is just presenting us his own personal travel notes, his cartography. An emblem for such a project is found in Guillermo Kuitca's map paintings. On my right as I entered the Winnipeg Art Gallery's installation of the exhibition, his paintings reveal what maps do not. If maps are traditionally void of any trace of human bodies, Kuitca's paintings are opposed to that—they reveal fear, passion and desire through the hand of the painter-cartographer.

In this sense, the title of the exhibition—the plural “Cartographies”—indicates the possibility of multiple paths, different cartographies. The subtitle “14 artists from Latin America” points towards a subtle difference between *being* Latin American and *being from* Latin America. The former is almost an inexorable, essential condition, and as such takes on the features of a fictional character. The latter is less rigid and suggests some sort of connection—I can't be sure which—

between the artist and the continent: possibly territorial, not necessarily national. I learned that one of the artists lives in Australia and another was born in Austria. "Another cartography of Latin American art, as proposed in this exhibition, is the attempt to de-territorialize art by dissociating artistic boundaries from geographic borders," says the exhibition folder. It is not by chance that the curator has deliberately chosen not to inform us where the artists come from, nor in what contexts they are working—I looked in vain for the information on the exhibition labels. *Cartographies* is thus condemned to schizophrenia—a condition resulting from the coexistence of disparate or antagonistic qualities, identities or activities—for it presents "14 artists from Latin America" while at the same time it wishes to de-territorialize their production.

What is left to the visitor of such an exhibition is nothing but to travel through this cartography, to engage in a process of choice and selection of what is being presented. An attentive visitor, him- or herself a traveller through the gallery spaces, might draw a cartography of this *Cartographies* in a trajectory that leads us from art (that happens to come from Latin America) to curatorial practice, and from that to the visitor's recording of his/her own tour—in other words, a "metacartography."

While dealing with *other* languages, there is one activity that becomes central, fundamental, a precondition for the establishment of any multicultural debate: the activity of translation. Not simply the translation from one idiom to the other—a challenge that readers of foreign literature and spectators of foreign films have long been hopelessly struggling to overcome—but the translation of cultural codes, a much more complex, intricate and diffuse enterprise. And there is no dictionary, no instrument of verification, to guide us through this venture.³ Here, the distinctions (or similarities) between the artist's cultural context and that of the viewer play an important role in an exhibition of artists from Latin America hosted by a Canadian museum. Which public is being addressed here? Through which codes? In the days of multiculturalism, these have become major issues in art mak-

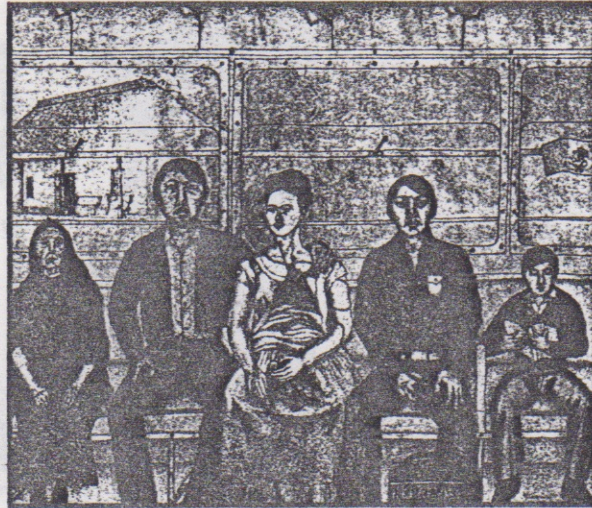
ing, art exhibiting and art writing. María Fernanda Cardoso acknowledges that. Originally from Bogotá but now living and working between San Francisco and Los Angeles, she is very much aware of how disparate the readings of her work may be regarding the material she uses—Colombian guava candy, cattle bones, dead frogs; she does not propose a solution, but rather a play on this disparateness. José Bedia, a Cuban living in Mexico City, has made an installation especially for the show and for an English-speaking audience.

In it, arrows and a sword are stabbed into the face of a conquistador and the English writing on the outer edge of the work reads "the little revenge from the periphery." I wondered how the work would be translated when displayed in Bogotá and Caracas. On the other hand, *Yo soy el sendero, bésame mucho*, 1993, by Chilean artist Gonzalo Díaz, is a work that needs some contextualization for the viewer not acquainted with the recent news about Peru's guerrilla group Shining Path. It may be too obscure for the North American traveller, but in the days of multiculturalism, an artist is no longer required to address

North American audiences, let alone to do so through their languages. What then leads an artist such as Leonilson to use not only Portuguese text in his work but English, as also does Bedia? A rather clumsy English, as a matter of fact (in *Mr. One Night Stand*, 1991, for instance). His embroidered writings do not wish to speak a North American language, nor to specifically address an English-speaking audience. For him, English is an *other* language through which he can express himself while being detached from his native Portuguese.

What does *Cartographies* tell us after all? No truth about Latin America, its people or its culture. The exhibition not only presents samples of art from Latin America, but also a curatorial methodology that rejects truth and recognizes "the arbitrariness of the act of selecting."⁴ In the end, these journeys do not go through the artists' countries, but through their artwork, which does not represent strictly their cultural background, but rather their personal experiences of it. All filtered by the arbitrary eyes of the curator. ■

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Con todo Respecto (With All Due Respect). Nahum B. Zenil, 1983. Mixed media on paper, 31 x 42 cm.

Con todo Respecto (Sauf votre respect). Nahum B. Zenil, 1983. Œuvre multimédia sur papier, 31 x 42 cm.

ITINERARY

1993: MARCH 19-JUNE 6, WINNIPEG ART GALLERY; AUGUST 12-SEPTEMBER 19, MUSEO DE ARTES VISUALES ALEJANDRO OTERO, CARACAS, VENEZUELA; OCTOBER 26-DECEMBER 12, BIBLIOTECA LUIS ANGEL ARANGO, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA.

1994: FEBRUARY 18-MAY 1, NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA; OCTOBER 6-JANUARY 22, 1995, THE BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS, NEW YORK.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Art of the Fantastic in Latin America* (Indianapolis, 1988), *The Latin American Spirit* (New York, 1988), *Latin American Art* (London, 1989), and *Latin American Artists of the XXth Century* (Cologne, Paris, Seville and New York, 1992-93) are but a few examples of these exhibitions.
2. From nineteenth-century Dutch artist Maurice Rugendas to contemporary French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.
3. Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).
4. Ivo Mesquita, *Cartographies* exhibition catalogue, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1993, p. 53.