

L A T I N A M E R I C A N A R T I S T S
O F T H E T W E N T I E T H C E N T U R Y



T H E M U S E U M O F M O D E R N A R T , N E W Y O R K

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century,
organized by Waldo Rasmussen, Director, International
Program, The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
June 6–September 7, 1993

This exhibition is made possible by grants from
Mr. and Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros; Banco Mercantil (Venezuela);
Mr. and Mrs. Eugenio Mendoza; Agnes Gund; The
Rockefeller Foundation; Mrs. Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat;
Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller; the National Endowment for
the Arts; The International Council of The Museum of
Modern Art; Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y Galería de
Arte Nacional, Venezuela; and WXTV-Channel 41/Univision
Television Group, Inc.

The exhibition was commissioned by the Comisaría de la
Ciudad de Sevilla para 1992 and organized by The Museum
of Modern Art under the auspices of its International Council.

Produced by the Department of Publications
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Osa Brown, Director of Publications
Project editor: Harriet Schoenholz Bee
Editors: Christopher Lyon, Susan Weiley,
Jessica Altholz, and Barbara Einzig
Designed by Phillip Unetic, Lawrenceville, N.J.
Production by Vicki Drake
Composition by U.S. Lithograph, typographers, New York, N.Y.
Printed by Litho Specialties, Inc., St. Paul, Minn.
Bound by Midwest Editions, Inc., Minneapolis, Minn.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-078095
ISBN: 0-87070-431-1 (MoMA, TH, cloth)
ISBN: 0-87070-424-9 (MoMA, paper)
ISBN: 0-8109-6121-0 (Abrams, cloth)

Published by The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019

Clothbound edition distributed in the United States and Canada by
Harry N. Abrams, Inc., A Times Mirror Company

Clothbound edition distributed outside the United States and
Canada by Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London

Cover: Tarsila do Amaral. *Urutu*. 1928. Oil on canvas, 24 x 28³/₈" (60 x 72 cm). Collection
Gilberto Chateaubriand, Rio de Janeiro

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**BLUEPRINT CIRCUITS:
CONCEPTUAL ART AND
POLITICS IN LATIN
AMERICA**

—
Mari Carmen Ramírez

Circuit . . . a course around a periphery . . . space enclosed within a circumference . . . a system for two-way communication.¹

In 1972, taking stock of the status of Conceptual art in Western countries, the Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz observed the beginnings of a tendency toward “ideological conceptualism” emerging in peripheral societies such as Argentina and Spain.² This version of Conceptual art came on the heels of the controversial propositions about the nature of art and artistic practice introduced in the mid-1960s by the North Americans Robert Barry, Mel Bochner, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner, as well as by the British group Art & Language. These artists investigated the nature of the art object as well as the institutional mechanisms that support it, and their results tended to deemphasize or eliminate the art object in favor of the process or ideas underlying it. North American Conceptual artists also questioned the role of museums and galleries in the promotion of art, its market status, and its relationship with the audience. Their exposure of the functions of art in both social and cultural circuits has significantly redefined contemporary artistic practice over the last thirty years.

For Marchán Fiz, the distinguishing feature of the Spanish and Argentine forms of Conceptualism was extending the North American critique of the institutions and practices of art to an analysis of political and social issues. At the time when he made these observations, the radical edge of North American Conceptual art’s critique was obscured by the generalizing, reductive posture of Kosuth’s “art-as-idea-as-idea.”³ In Kosuth’s model the artwork as conceptual proposition is reduced to a tautological or self-reflexive statement. He insisted that art consists of nothing other than the artist’s idea of it, and that art can claim no meaning outside itself. Marchán Fiz contrasted the rigidity of this self-referential, analytical model with the potential of “ideological conceptualism” to reveal political and social realities. For artists, he saw in this hybrid version of conceptualism the possibility of an exit from the tautological impasse which, in his view, had deadlocked the practice of Conceptual art by 1972.

In Latin America Marchán Fiz was referring specifically to the Argentine Grupo de los Trece, but the version of Conceptual art he described has flourished not only in Argentina but in Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil since the mid-1960s.⁴ As with any movement originating in the periphery, the work of Latin American political-conceptual artists—in its relationship with the mainstream source—engages in a pattern of mutual influence and response. It is both grounded in and distant from the legacy of North American Conceptualism in that it represents a transformation of it and also anticipated in many ways the forms of ideological conceptualism developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by feminist and other politically engaged artists in North America and Europe.⁵ To investigate the reasons for this complex interaction is to delve into the ways in which the peripheral situation and socio-historical dynamic of Latin America imprinted a new logic onto the most radical achievements of center-based Conceptual art.

Marchán Fiz’s insight can illuminate the development of Conceptual art in Latin America. Two generations of political-conceptual artists are discussed in this essay: the first—exemplified by the Argentine Víctor Grippo, the Uruguayan Luis Camnitzer, the Brazilian Cildo Meireles, and the Chileans Eugenio Dittborn and Gonzalo Díaz—witnessed the emergence of Conceptual art and the political

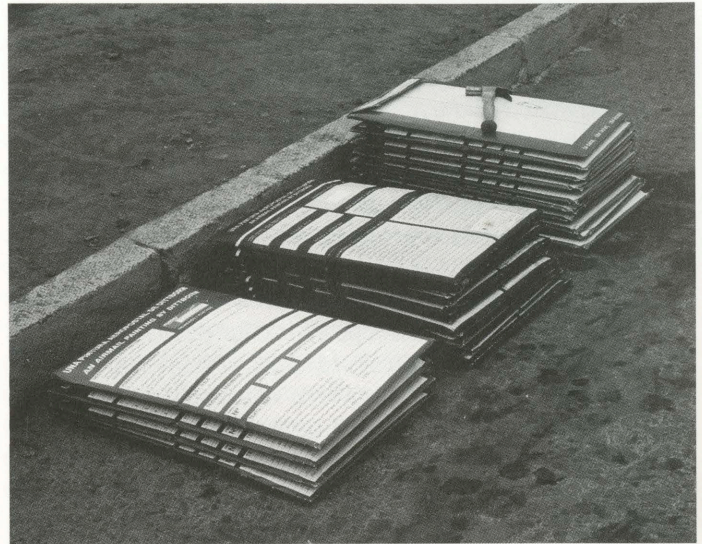
upheavals of the 1960s in the United States and Latin America; the second group—which includes the Chilean Alfredo Jaar and the Brazilian Jac Leirner—emerged in the 1980s and experienced the demise and aftermath of the political dictatorships whose rise to power the previous generation had seen.⁶ Taken as a whole, the work of both groups embodies a series of systematic inversions of important propositions of North American Conceptual art, “counter-propositions” that function as “exits” from the ideological impasse seen by Marchán Fiz.

Strategic Circuits: Unfolding Politics

In a recent interview with the critic Sean Cubitt, Eugenio Dittborn described the function of his *Pinturas Aeropostales* (Airmail Paintings) as a means of *traveling* “to negotiate the possibility of making visible the invisible: *the distance*.” Traveling “to negotiate a meaning,” he added, is the political element of his work; more precisely, it is “*the unfolding of that politics*.”⁷ A preoccupation with bridging distances, crossing borders, and violating limits is also evident in Alfredo Jaar’s description of his photo-light-box installations as a body of production that deals with “the extraordinary, widening gap between Us and Them, that striking distance that is, after all, only a mental one.”⁸ Each of Jaar’s installations features evidence of his travels to remote sites in order to research and document a theme. Understood conceptually, “traveling,” in the work of Dittborn and Jaar, as in that of Camnitzer, Díaz, Grippo, Leirner, and Meireles, establishes an “inverted route” that reverses the cultural polarity of “South” and “North” that has persistently subordinated Latin America to Europe and North America.

The closing of the gap between “center” and “periphery,” between “first” and “third” worlds—constructs that convey the disparities between highly industrialized and still-developing nations—has been at the heart of Latin American concerns since the colonial period. Geography and colonialism dictated a history based on cycles of journeys and displacements, circulation and exchange, between the metropolitan centers of Europe and the colonies of Latin America and the Caribbean. Forced into cultural and political subordination, the practices of art were locked in endless rounds of copy/repetition, adaptation/transformation, and resisting or confronting the dominant powers. With this background, the history of modern art in Latin America since the 1920s can be seen as a constant search to open a space for change amid the web of economic and cultural circuits that continues to determine the experience of artists in this region.⁹

The political-conceptual artists considered here are distinguished by their deliberate assumption of the peripheral condition as the starting point of their work. For instance, Dittborn’s Airmail Paintings (plate 61) are emblems of the search to bridge the gap between the two worlds and also ironic vehicles to expose the precariousness of artistic practice in the periphery.¹⁰ They consist of large sheets of brown wrapping paper or synthetic nonwoven fabric folded and then inserted into mailing envelopes (figures 1 and 2). Disguising a painting as a letter calls into question the relevance of the medium of painting, both in and for the nations on the periphery. At the same time, the works offer “a material option and artistic cunning” as means to break out of the isolation and confinement imposed by the periphery.¹¹ A number of artists have adopted similar strategies, utilizing their



1. Eugenio Dittborn. Twenty-four mailing envelopes, at the curb of a street in Santiago, each stack containing one Airmail Painting: *To Travel*, 1990–92; *The 6th History of the Human Face*, 1989–92; and *The 13th History of the Human Face*, 1992

2. Eugenio Dittborn unfolding Airmail Painting Number 96: *Liquid Ashes*. 1992. Paint, stitching, and photo-silkscreen on twelve panels of nonwoven fabric, dimensions variable. Installation in progress, Documenta 9, Kassel, 1992



peripheral condition as a tactic to exit outmoded circuits, whether artistic or ideological, that are marked by the legacy of colonialism.

Assuming the peripheral condition characterizes a generation of artists caught in the traumatic political and economic developments of the last thirty years in Latin America. Coming of age in the midst of the postwar development effort known as *desarrollismo*, which significantly reorganized the socioeconomic structures of major Latin American countries,¹² this group also lived through the promise of liberation from the political and economic stranglehold of the United States. Employing “dependency theory” to analyze their situation, they envisioned an emancipated role for Latin America in the “first world” order. Such optimism coincided with the shift of the art world’s center from Paris to New York, reducing the distance—at least geographically—between that center and the Latin American periphery. The artistic environment of New York would play a pivotal role in the emergence of Conceptual and other experimental tendencies in Latin America by offering the large number of Latin American artists who arrived there in the 1960s freedom from the official conservatism of artistic institutions in their native countries.¹³ It is important to note that unlike Brazil, where the early work of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark had anticipated many experimental trends, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay had little artistic experience to support the emergence of the radical practice of Conceptual art.¹⁴ By contrast, the openly irreverent postures of such New York artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris offered a context in which to engage openly in artistic experimentation. In general, the work of these North American artists offered a critique of formalism and a recovery of the iconoclastic legacy of Marcel Duchamp, both of which would strongly appeal to Latin American artists. Being in New York also placed in perspective both the social and artistic problems of Latin American countries.¹⁵

The generation that rode the optimism of the 1960s, however, experienced frustration of its hopes for Latin America. Between 1964 and 1976, six major countries in South America fell under military rule, including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, where authoritarian regimes not only abolished the rights and privileges of democracy but also institutionalized torture, repression, and censorship.¹⁶ The critic Nelly Richard has analyzed how the fall of Chile’s president, Salvador Allende, in 1973, coupled with General Augusto Pinochet’s seizure of power, shattered the existing framework of social and political experiences linked to democracy. This abrupt transformation of social structures brought about a “crisis of intelligibility,” as Richard calls it. Subjected to strict rules of censorship, artists concerned with the production of art relevant to the country’s recent history had no recourse but “to seek alternative ways to recover the meaning of that history, which had been replaced by the Grand History of the Victors.”¹⁷ Richard’s description can be extended to countries like Argentina and Uruguay, which, until the mid-1960s, had known some degree of democracy.

All of the artists discussed here experienced authoritarianism, in its psychological and material forms, either as internal or external exiles.¹⁸ Translating this experience artistically in a significant way could proceed only from giving new sense to the artist’s role as an active intervener in political and ideological structures. Meireles, who produced art during the most repressive years of the Brazilian military regime, defined his practice early on as one of *inserção* (insertion) or

transgressão (transgression) of the real, whether the real is understood as an ideological representation or actual space.¹⁹ On the other hand, Dittborn’s Airmail Paintings originated in the pressing need to “salvage memory” in a social and political context that erased virtually every trace of it.²⁰ Grippo’s concern with exploring the relations between art and science is based on his deliberate assumption of the role of artist as integrator and catalyst of experiences amid the fragmentation that characterizes life in marginal conditions.²¹ For other artists, the dislocation that accompanied exile reinforced their commitment to a form of art based on ethical choice. For Camnitzer, “Every aesthetic act is an ethical act. . . . As soon as I do something in the universe, even if nothing else than a mark, I am exercising power.”²² Camnitzer’s production has involved a long meditation on the “alienating myth of being an artist” in late capitalist society. This posture has led him to search for a form of art that can reveal the mechanisms of power in all their manifestations.²³ The belief that every aesthetic act or choice is a moral one also informs Jaar’s commitment as an artist: “My dilemma as an artist is how to make art out of information that most of us would rather ignore. How do you actually make art when the world is in such a state?”²⁴ In Jaar’s case, the sphere of his investigations extends beyond Latin America to call into question the hierarchies that separate the first and third worlds.

The renewal of artistic roles undertaken by these artists implied altering the function of art with respect to the crucial issue of Latin American identity. Authoritarianism and its aftermath—large foreign debt, inoperative economies, and marginalization from the dynamics of global politics and development—underlined the failure of the nationalist model that had operated in most countries since the 1920s. The new crisis led artists and intellectuals to investigate issues of representation and simultaneously to look for nonofficial models to articulate the identities of their places of origin. Many artists, feeling alienated from ineffective political structures, came to feel peripheral not only in relation to the first world but inside their own countries.²⁵ In this situation, identity could no longer be articulated with the emblems of the period of national consolidation. Likewise, an updated form of political and activist art had to disengage itself from the legacy of the Mexican Mural Movement, which had become not only an instrument of institutionalized power but a marketable stereotype of Latin American identity.

The dilemma confronting these artists was effectively expressed by the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica in the statement that accompanied his contribution to the exhibition *Information*, which was presented at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970. Oiticica declared: “i am not here representing brazil; or representing anythingelse: the ideas of representing-representation-etc. are over.”²⁶ For Camnitzer, Díaz, Dittborn, Grippo, Jaar, Leirner, and Meireles Conceptual art provided the means to discover, in Dittborn’s words, “another way of looking at ourselves, multiple, polytheistic, and affordable.”²⁷ The appeal Conceptual art held for these artists rested on two factors: first, its equation of art with knowledge that transcends the aesthetic realm, which enabled them to explore problems and issues linked to concrete social and political situations; second, its critique of the traditional institutions and agents of art, which opened the way for an elaboration of a form of art suited to the political and economic precariousness of Latin America.²⁸ Instead of serving as vehicles to dissect the commodification of art under capi-

talism, the fundamental propositions of Conceptual art became elements of a strategy for exposing the limits of art and life under conditions of marginalization and, in some cases, repression. Hence, these artists developed a series of strategic inversions of the North American conceptual model, thereby determining the political character of their art.

Bargaining Circuits: Negotiating Meanings

If M. DUCHAMP intervened at the level of Art (logic of phenomena), . . . what is done today, on the contrary, tends to be closer to Culture than to Art, and that is necessarily a political interference. That is to say, if aesthetics grounds Art, politics grounds Culture.—Cildo Meireles²⁹

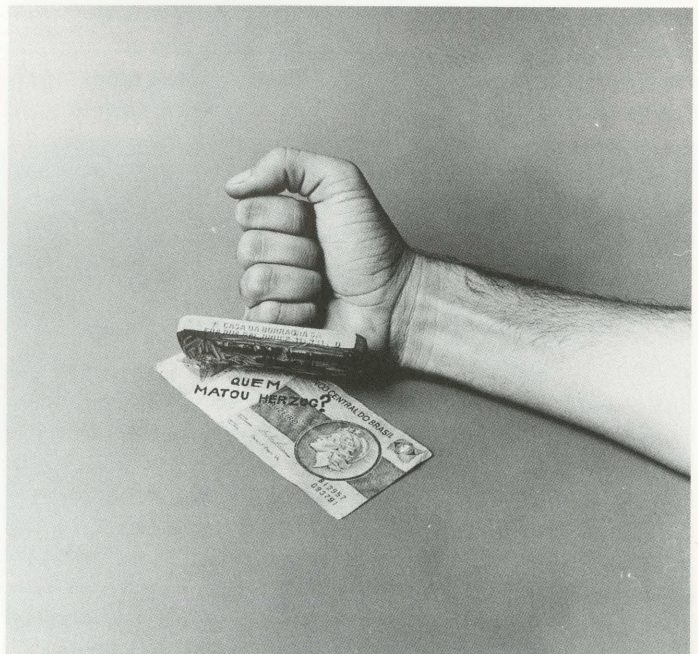
In the work of most of the Conceptual artists under consideration, the aims of bridging distance to negotiate meaning evolved into a deliberate tactic of *insertion* into prevailing artistic and ideological circuits. This was done in order to expose mechanisms of repression and disrupt the status of Latin American identity as a commodity exchanged along the axis between center and periphery. The development of such a conceptual strategic language, however, eventually situated the work of these artists in a paradoxical relation to a fundamental principle of European and North American Conceptual art: the dematerialization of the discrete object of art and its replacement by a linguistic or analytical proposition. Latin American artists inverted this principle through a recovery of the object, in the form of the mass-produced Duchampian Readymade, which is the vehicle of their conceptual program.³⁰ Meireles's Coca-Cola bottles, bank notes, and leather boxes; Grippo's potatoes; Dittborn's found photographs and Airmail Paintings; Camnitzer's text/object combinations; Díaz's found objects and appropriated emblems of the advertising world; Jaar's light-boxes, mirrors, and frames; and Leirner's accumulations of "trash" provide us with curious twists of the Duchampian idea. Such objects are visual counterparts to the thought processes suggested by conceptual propositions. Following Duchamp, the artists were concerned not so much with the production of artistic objects but with the appropriation of already existing objects or forms as part of broad strategies of signification.³¹

The inversion of North American Conceptual art's analytic proposition can be attributed to these artists' explorations of the implications of Duchamp's legacy, which had already been investigated, with different results, by both Conceptual and Pop art. As Benjamin Buchloh has argued, with regard to analytic Conceptual art, the revival of the Readymade led to an analysis of the self-reflexive or self-referential qualities of the object. This analysis originated in a narrow reading of Duchamp's original intention; the significance of the Readymade was reduced to the act that created it: "It's art because I say so."³² On the other hand, in the case of such Pop artists as Andy Warhol, appropriation of the idea of the Readymade led to the exaltation of marketable commodities, represented by the Coca-Cola bottle or Campbell's soup can, as icons of a market-driven culture.³³ Both approaches to the Readymade can be seen as grounded in a passive attitude toward the prevailing system, which this group of political-conceptual artists aimed to subvert. Thus, in the Latin American work, the ready-made object is always charged with meanings

related to its functions within a larger social circuit. That is the Latin American conceptual proposition. In most cases the infusion of broader meanings is achieved by removing the object from circulation, physically transforming it, and, in the case of Meireles, reintroducing it into an everyday circuit. Through such acts as silkscreening messages onto actual Coca-Cola bottles and bank notes (Meireles); sewing and stitching together large quantities of trash (Leirner); enlarging, cropping, and juxtaposing found photographs (Dittborn); or wrapping and staining commercial cardboard boxes with a red dye that simulates blood (Camnitzer), the artist reinscribes meaning into the commodity object. In this way, the ready-made, as these artists employ it, goes beyond Pop art's fetishization of the object, turning it into a conveyor of political meanings within a specific social context. Once transformed, the object is inserted into a proposition where it operates through the following linguistic mechanisms: explicit message, metaphor, and analogy.

Meireles's *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: 1. Projeto Coca-Cola* [*Insertions into Ideological Circuits: 1. Coca-Cola Project*] of 1970 (plate 120) and *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Bank Note Project (Who Killed Herzog?)*, of the same year (figure 3), are conceptual propositions based on the direct intervention or transgression of a circuit in order to relay information.³⁴ The works consisted, respectively, of removing Coca-Cola bottles and cruzeiro bills from circulation, inscribing political messages on them, and putting them back into circulation. In retrospect, these "projects" can be seen as having introduced several ideas that would be important for political-conceptual art, principally those of isolating a circuit, using a ready-made object to "package" a message, and designating the public at large as recipient of the message. In the early 1970s, during the most repressive years of the Brazilian military dictatorship, the strategy of insertion at the level of immediate reality deliberately aimed to transform the passive viewer into an active participant in the information circuit.³⁵

3. Cildo Meireles. *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Bank Note Project (Who Killed Herzog?)*. 1970. Rubber stamp and bank note. Collection the artist



While Warhol created serial, silkscreened representations of Coca-Cola bottles, Meireles printed anti-imperialist messages on real bottles, which he reintroduced into the bottle-deposit system of Brazil.

In contrast to Meireles's hybrid ready-mades, the works of Camnitzer, Dittborn, and Grippo convey political messages through the veiled mechanisms of metaphor and analogy. Their "deceptive" strategies are the kind developed by Conceptual artists operating in conditions where repression and censorship prevail.³⁶ Both mechanisms function to release information suppressed by the system: in metaphor, what is shown is equivalent to something that cannot be said, which thus remains ambiguous; analogy, on the other hand, sets up a framework for comparison of two formal systems, playing upon their correspondences to create a third system. Therefore, both depend on a "viewer-turned-accomplice" to decipher meanings. These artists extend Duchamp's Ready-made into the equivalent of a fragment of reality. As such, it becomes a condensed site for the production of meaning. The significance of this proposition for political-conceptual art is that it allows the social referent to be conveyed in the very structure of the work.

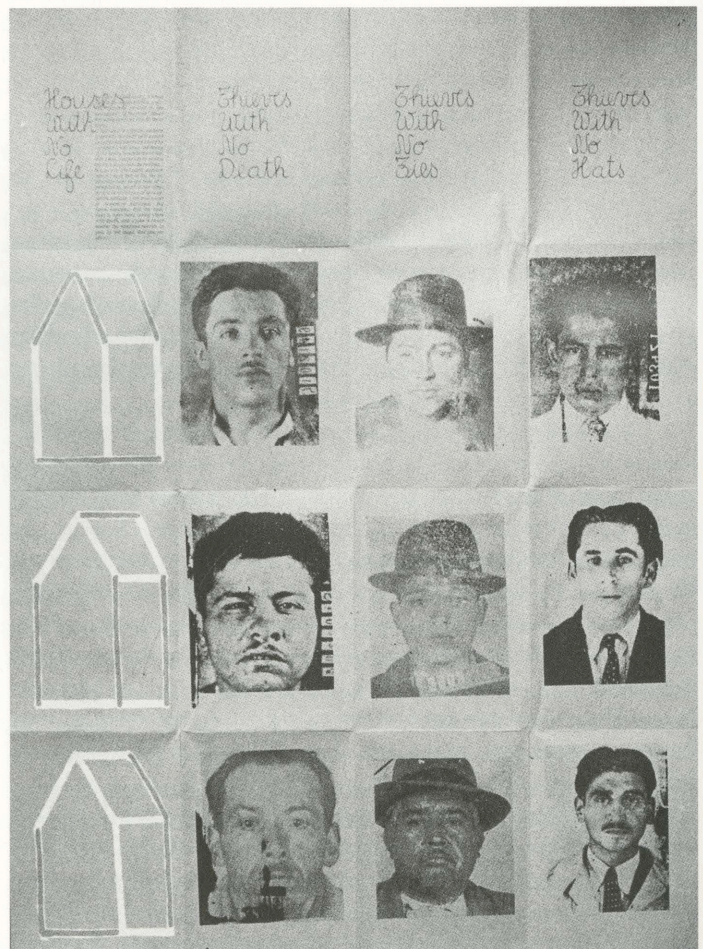
Dittborn's "anti-paintings" are among the most complex instances of the metaphoric ready-made. Here it takes the form of found photographs of the faces of anonymous individuals, frequently mug shots, which the artist collects from old journals, diaries, police files, and newspapers. Dittborn's photographic gallery of the indigenous inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, petty criminals, athletes, and beauty queens—who appear in many of his Airmail Paintings—may have been seen previously in a different context, perhaps by a large audience (figure 4). The value of such found photographs lies in their capacity to tap meanings already fixed in social memory; each photograph represents a lost identity, a repressed story whose meaning awaits unfolding by the viewer. The artist's tactic consists of transposing the identities of the photographed individuals from the past to the present, so as to exploit their signifying potential. He achieves this dislocation by detaching the image from its source through enlarging and cropping, and then by juxtaposing the images in series using a photo-silkscreen process. In this way the photograph is made contemporary with the viewer, turning him or her into an accomplice in the production of meaning. The act of viewing reveals subtle indicators of class, race, and social power, enabling recognition of what was regarded as anonymous; identity unfolds from this process.

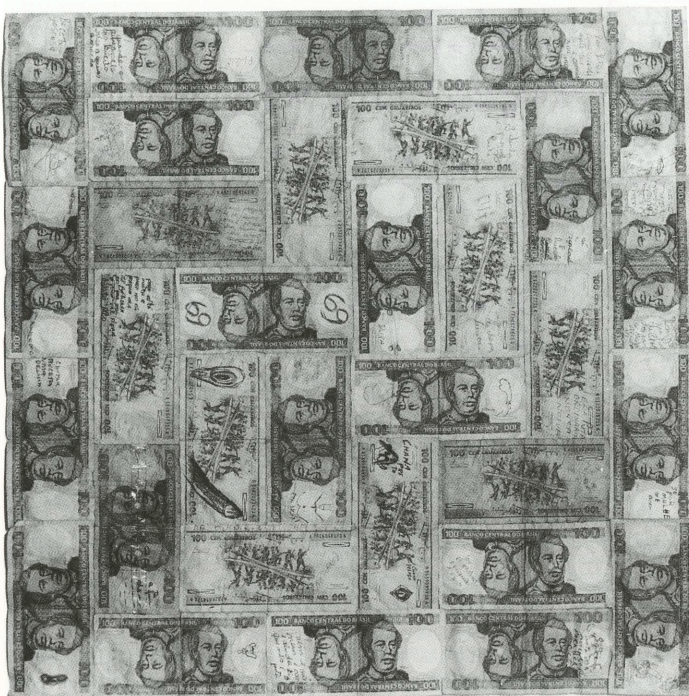
Dittborn also manipulates the mechanical photograph by adding marks or objects, including handwritten texts, stains, feathers, and thread, as well as a child's (his daughter's) drawings.³⁷ Such methods call attention to the artificial nature of representational painting and turn the painting's surface into a complex field of signs, which act as vehicles for the metaphoric content of the work. The effectiveness of these elements depends on ambiguity, on evoking several levels of meaning. At one level they stand for forgotten citizens thrown into captivity, misfits whose lost histories are disinterred by Dittborn through the act of representing them. In the context of Chile's military dictatorship, these anonymous images can be taken as a metaphor for that nation's thousands of *desaparecidos*, persons regarded as political opponents of the regime who were "disappeared" and presumably killed by its security forces. Such an artwork becomes a "search for [an] entombed memory," in the words of Richard, and a catalyst for the living.³⁸

A similar metaphoric process is at work in Camnitzer's *Leftovers*, 1970 (plate 38), a piece consisting of eighty tightly stacked standard, mass-produced boxes. Reworking Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes of 1964, Camnitzer wrapped his boxes with gauze, stained with a red dye that resembles blood, and stenciled each with the word "LEFT-OVER" and a Roman numeral. The meaning of these elements is open to interpretation: they may allude to intervention by the United States in Latin American affairs, shipments of arms intended to repress liberation movements, containers for dismembered bodies, dangerous waste shipped from the first to the third world, and so on.³⁹ All of these interpretations coalesce around the work's function as a metaphor for the network of oppression that articulates relations between the first and third worlds.

Metaphor operates differently in Jac Leirner's work.⁴⁰ Here the tactic of insertion is played back upon itself. It effects a circular movement through the recycling of trash, including empty cigarette packs, devalued bank notes, used shopping bags, and waste paper. Though these materials may have originated in some form of economic or symbolic exchange, they were out of circulation, so Leirner retrieved them, hoarding them over long periods of time. Then she set out to transform them through flattening, sewing and stitching, punching holes through them, or, in some cases, tearing them apart.⁴¹ In *Pul-*

4. Eugenio Dittborn. *To Clothe*. 1986–87. Photo-silkscreen on paper. Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin





5. Jac Leirner. *The One Hundreds: Eroticism and Pornography*. 1986. Bank notes with anonymous graffiti and buckram, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Collection Luiz Buarque de Hollanda, Rio de Janeiro

mão [Lung] of 1987 (plate 108), the foil paper, cellophane tabs, and cellophane wrappers of twelve hundred packages of cigarettes smoked by Leirner during a three-year period were torn apart, turned into sculptural objects, and juxtaposed with such items as X-ray photographs of the artist's lungs. In Brazil these X-rays carry with them strong social connotations, since every citizen must present them in order to be considered for a job. Leirner's use of such socially charged icons situates the reading of the work in a "public" space. Thus the series emerges as a visual indictment of the tobacco industry.

Recycling produces an objective intervention in the system, an actual presence. The individual objects that constitute that presence represent not only themselves but are assembled by Leirner in structures that convey an additional level of meaning. For example, *The One Hundreds* of 1985–87 (figure 5) is a series of sculptures fabricated from seventy thousand one-hundred-cruzeiro notes, which had lost much of their value because of inflation, sewn together in quilt-like forms or shaped into lines and circles (plate 107). This process of assemblage positions the notes within a continuous, syntagmatic chain of meaning; the resultant language-like structure is both a new *corpo*, or bodily presence, and an embodiment of new values. By creating an artwork out of devalued currency, the artist, ironically, "commodified currency itself and reinvested it with [artistic] value."⁴² Undertaken in a period of deep economic crisis, characterized by the pressures of a large foreign debt and increasingly inequitable conditions for many sectors of Brazilian society, Leirner's assemblages are a powerful metaphor for a consumer-oriented society caught in the devaluation of its social and moral standards.

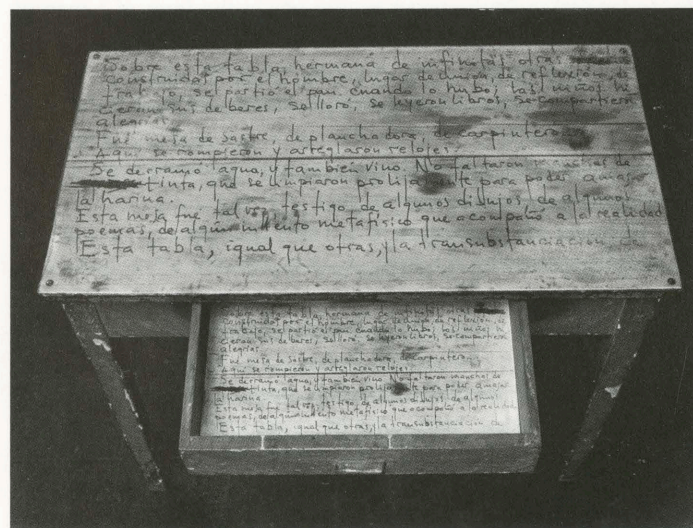
In Víctor Grippo's art analogy replaces metaphor to convey meanings related to contemporary social conditions. His art functions through the introduction of ordinary objects of everyday use and

consumption (such as a table or a potato) into analogical propositions that explore relations between art and science.⁴³ Despite their modest status, these objects are linked to social systems that endow them with meaning. *Table* of 1978 (figure 6), for instance, is an old table with a text written on its surface and on the bottom of its single drawer. The table leads us to consider the many symbolic functions and class or occupational referents of a common object within a social structure; it is a place to eat, think, do homework, make bread, fix clocks, write poems, and so on. As sites for the evocation of human activity, such reference-charged objects can be seen as means to blur the line between art and life.

For another work Grippo used potatoes, transforming them under conditions that resemble those of scientific experiments. In the conceptual program the potato's effectiveness depends on the network of cultural references it evokes. The potato produces energy by a chemical process that is also intrinsic to man, whose body converts energy into consciousness. The potato is indigenous to South America; transported to Europe, it significantly altered the eating habits of Old World societies.⁴⁴ In each case the potato stands for change, for transformation of internal and external structures. This function is further revealed in the *Analogies* series of the 1970s, in which potatoes are connected in order to demonstrate their capacity to produce energy. For *Analogía I* [*Analogy I*] of 1971 (plate 73), Grippo embedded copper and zinc electrodes in forty potatoes and connected them to an electric voltmeter. In other instances he employed electricity to effect metamorphoses in the vegetable. In each case, an analogical relation is established between the alterations effected in or by the vegetable and the process of transformation of human consciousness.

When used as an element within a larger structure of meaning, the ready-made allowed artists to extend the analysis of the audience, which had been undertaken by Conceptual artists within the sphere of the institution of art in the first world, to the vernacular, public matrix in which the object circulates in Latin America. Many of these artists' tactics originated in popular traditions. For instance, the idea of isolating circuits developed by Meireles finds a source in the chain-letter networks still operating in most Latin American

6. Víctor Grippo. *Table*. 1978. Ink on wood table and plexiglass, 21 x 39 x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection Ricardo Martin-Crosa

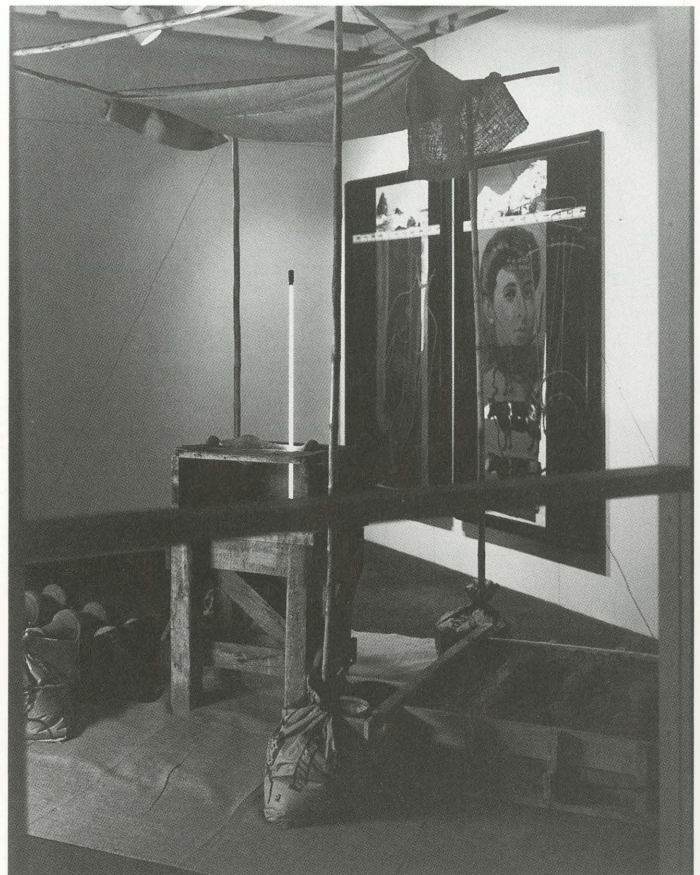


countries, whereby anonymous individuals pass on devotional religious promises.⁴⁵ Dittborn's Airmail Paintings recall the broadsides called *pliegos sueltos* (folded sheets) that were sold on the streets to be read aloud in the cities and countryside of Latin America in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁶ The rudimentary utensils used by Grippo in some works refer to the working-class immigrant culture of Argentina. In other examples, a reference to popular culture is implied by the ready-made because it has circulated extensively among large numbers of people before the artist appropriated it. Leirner's recycled objects bear the traces of their circulation in the graffiti-like inscriptions, tears, or marks from being handled, which the artist accepts as part of the work.⁴⁷ In such works the communicative potential of the ready-made, as a reservoir of signifiers important to a specific community, is fully exploited.

As has been suggested, the capacity of the ready-made to convey political concerns in ways that are not literal or illustrative was extended in the work of Camnitzer, Díaz, Jaar, and Meireles to the installation format. For these artists, setting up an installation reversed the process of insertion described above. In an installation, objects are taken out of circulation and concentrated in a given space. The act of positioning objects, which is the essence of installation work, is an opportunity to alter the conventions of a given space in order to transform it into a cultural matrix where meanings are decoded and given new forms. Here space does not exist autonomously; it is the result of a conceptual proposition, or program, set up by the artist. The installation thus becomes a space of confrontation and negotiation of meaning. In the work of these artists, the confrontation is never intimidating; instead, a game-playing strategy informs the propositions, inviting the participation of the viewer.

Investigation of the abstract characteristics of a given space, by means of verbal propositions, was a fundamental strategy of North American Conceptual artists probing the conventions of art. The approach of Camnitzer, Díaz, Jaar, and Meireles, however, has been to regard the installation space as an object-filled proposition whose meanings refer beyond the space itself. This inversion of the abstract notion of space can be seen in Meireles's *Physical Art: Cords/30 km of Extended String* of 1969 (Collection Luiz Buarque, Rio de Janeiro), a Duchampian leather box in the form of a map of the state of Rio de Janeiro and a bundle of string thirty kilometers long, which had been stretched along the state's coast. While the North American or European Conceptual artist might restrict reference to the immediate object (as the title would lead one to expect), Meireles's work encourages the viewer to reflect on the arbitrariness of cartographic boundaries.

The conception of space as a matrix for "objectified" thought is exemplified best by Gonzalo Díaz's installations.⁴⁸ Exhibiting a complex use of the ready-made, these consist of three-dimensional objects, such as balusters, canopies, and toy horses, and paintings of appropriated images. The images derive mainly from such sources as labels and advertisements for consumer products; Díaz photographs, crops, and silkscreens them onto the support.⁴⁹ He then situates them in a space so that they will interact with three-dimensional objects. In this work the ready-made plays a double role: it synthesizes in three-dimensional form the various metaphoric levels (per-



7. Gonzalo Díaz. *Testing Bench/Frame*. 1986–89. Mixed-medium installation, dimensions variable. Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin

sonal, social, national) of the work, and it emphasizes the recycled aspect of the objects Díaz employs.

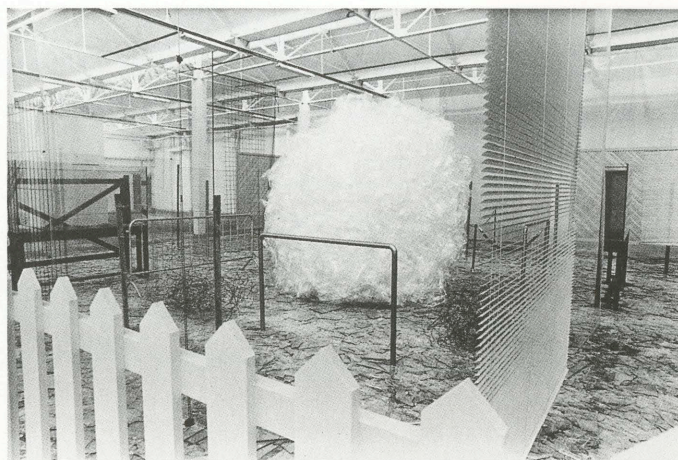
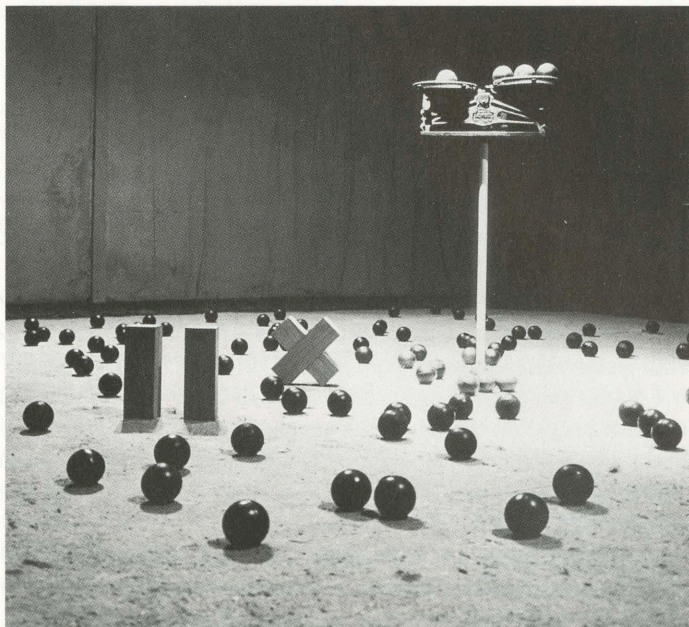
For the viewer, Díaz's installations are an active field; the challenge to "play" must first be accepted, and the viewer then proceeds to decipher the relations between objects and images.⁵⁰ An example of Díaz's "objectified space" is provided by *Testing Bench/Frame* of 1986–89 (figure 7), an installation grounded in the artist's experience of Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. The central piece of the work is a bench for modeling and inspecting balusters. It also incorporates a neon light, a canopy, and two rectangular open boxes on the floor, one for casting and one for drying the balusters. The balusters are from a neoclassical building, whose style is associated with the birth of the Chilean republic and its political institutions. As a consumer laboratory tests commercial items, the state apparatus tests its citizens, represented here by the posts that support the balustrade's handrail. The ensemble is complemented by two paintings that serve as backdrops to the installation. In the paintings, images of the Chilean landscape, with symbols of national industries, are juxtaposed with full-length images of two women whose lives exemplify Chile's recent history. The modeling/testing bench, the assembly line incorporating it and the casting and drying boxes, and the pictorial elements all represent limits, boundaries, confinement. As described by the artist, the entire ensemble is intended to convey the "Chilean cartography of pain,"⁵¹ and it thus relates to the central theme of

Díaz's work: "the occupation of the Chilean territory and its conceptualization as a 'cultural landscape.'" ⁵²

For Camnitzer, Jaar, and Meireles, the installation depends on activating the subject/object relationship in a given space by creating a sensorial environment where the viewer is systematically tested by perceptual mechanisms. Meireles's *To Be Curved with the Eyes* of 1970, a signature multiple work intended by the artist to be included in all his exhibitions, objectifies the subject/object interaction. The work, which reflects his interest in physics and geometry, is a box, containing two bars, on which is written "two iron bars, equal and curved." Meireles is thereby suggesting a relationship between vision and physical force, which should lead the viewer to carry out the action implicit in the title. *Virtual Spaces: Corners*, a 1967–68 series of forty-four projects that represents an early exploration of viewer interaction with an installation, was based on investigations of perception and virtuality. It consisted of a Euclidean model of space (three planes) transferred to a simulated house corner.

Meireles further developed these investigations by incorporating auditory impressions and tactile sensations into the installation. In *Eureka/Blindhotland* of 1970–75 (figure 8), he introduced sound as a supplement to the visual experience. The installation consisted of two hundred rubber balls strewn on the floor. Once inside, the viewer found that even though the balls looked exactly the same, each was different in weight. An antique scale in the middle of the space could be used to confirm the weight of a ball. Nine tape recordings of dropped balls hitting the floor were heard, reinforcing the differences in weight among the balls and establishing sound as an alternative to the tactile experience of the work. Meireles's exploitation of visual and perceptual ambiguity was forcefully realized in *Through* of 1983–89, one of his most ambitious installations. *Through* consisted of a series of ready-made barriers in the form of fences (trellis, picket,

8. Cildo Meireles. *Eureka/Blindhotland*. 1970–75. Two hundred black rubber balls of different weights, wood, felt, nylon netting, eight plates for newspaper insertions, and sound track of balls falling on floor, dimensions variable. Installation view, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 1975

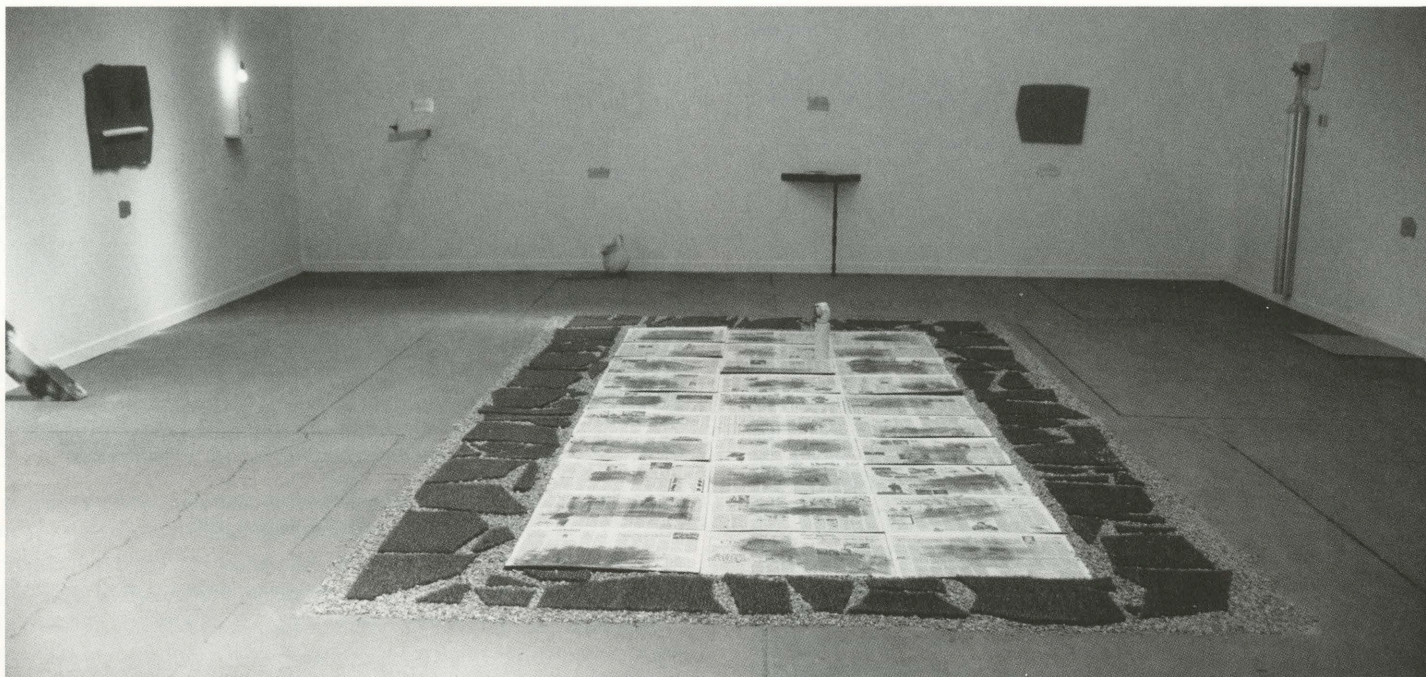


9. Cildo Meireles. *Through*. 1983–89. Mixed-medium installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Belgium, 1989

cyclone), prison bars, mirrors, glass, windows, even curtains, arranged in rectangles around a monumental ball of cellophane, and over eight tons of broken glass (figure 9). The piece played on dichotomies: open/closed, exposed/covered, and so on.⁵³ These oppositions confronted the viewer at every turn, encouraging reflection on the notion of transgressing limits, whether visual or conceptual.

Luis Camnitzer's installations extend his investigations of both visual and conceptual displacements operating in the relations among objects, images, and language. He first achieved the inversion, described above, of Conceptual art's investigation of the abstract characteristics of a given space in early works such as *Massacre of Puerto Montt* of 1969, where he treated space as a reference-charged field. This installation was one of three done in the late 1960s that consisted of words on strips of white tape pasted on the floor. In this work, he achieved a "re-semanticization" of space through a strategic use of the words on tape, which "reenacted" the event to which the title alludes: the 1969 killing of peasants who occupied unworked land in the village of Puerto Montt, Chile, during the presidency of Eduardo Frei. Words indicated portholes, the soldiers manning them, and the arms used in the operation. By following a series of dotted lines painted on the floor, the viewer was able to recreate the trajectory of the bullets. *The Archaeology of a Spell* of 1979, represents a further step in this process. It combined handwritten texts, images, and objects to produce complex relationships: the texts reiterated the images, while the latter evocatively expanded the texts.

The formal key that allowed Camnitzer to extend his explorations of displacement to a form of political art, using installation as a medium, was the notion of the conceptual matrix, which he terms "the argument." The argument reflects an underlying narrative that provided the internal logic for the arrangements of texts and objects. While implicitly present, the argument was never completely revealed, allowing the viewer to compose his or her own. Camnitzer's installations thus became semantic, connotative fields where the artist's function was reduced to "designing the rules of the game," that is, to constructing the conditions for the presentation of the argument, which in turn would allow the viewer to produce the piece.⁵⁴



10. Luis Camnitzer. *Torture*. 1986–87. Mixed-medium installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Venice Biennale, 1988

Torture of 1986–87 (figure 10), an installation presented at the 1988 Venice Biennale, articulated space using a format with “stations” recalling the Stations of the Cross in a Catholic church: a sequence of combinations of texts and objects placed against the wall, surrounding a central area made up of artificial grass, newspapers, and printed images. The entire space evoked a prisoner’s cell and a narrative into which the viewer was drawn. It concerned a tortured prisoner who imagines he is free and then realizes his actual situation; the viewer experienced it within a “hopsotch” framework that allowed for multiple interpretations of the implied narrative, among them the conclusion that confinement is itself a form of torture. As in an earlier series of color photo-etchings titled *From the Uruguayan Torture* (1983–84), this work’s montage of images, objects, and texts employed perceptual dislocations to evoke for a viewer the experience of imprisonment; banal ready-made objects conveyed the quotidian aspects of torture. Some examples, juxtaposed with texts, are a board with an image of the sky printed over it (“He had to create his own window”); a dish with resin (“He organized things as he saw them”); a ceramic pitcher with bricks inside (“He learned how to believe”); and finally, the omnipresent eye (“He lived imprisoned by the echo of his stare”). The viewer comes to realize the kind of torture that has taken place by “reading” in the gap, or fissure, between what is conveyed by the texts and by the objects or images. The ambiguity of the argument allows for a number of interpretations.⁵⁵

Alfredo Jaar achieves an impressive synthesis of manipulated perception and the game-playing strategy we have seen Díaz and Camnitzer employ. In Jaar’s work, space, viewer, and image are enmeshed in a structural relationship through the interplay of light-boxes, frames, and mirrors. Illuminated photographs are used as ideograms. They function as vehicles of social perception through which Jaar displaces subjects from remote locales, inserting them into

the exhibition space. Through strategies of visual displacement, carried out largely through the use of mirrors and frames, Jaar addresses the inadequacy of the viewer’s perception and also his or her position in the mental and spatial divisions that separate “us” from “them.” Enlarged, cropped, and illuminated, the photographs are used by Jaar to map the relationship between subjects and viewers in the context of his installations. *(Un)Framed* of 1987–91 (Collection the artist), for instance, presents a large-scale photographic image of seven miners from Serra Pelada, a North Brazilian mining enclave. The miners seem to engage the viewer’s gaze directly. Seven tall frames holding mirrors and sheets of glass arbitrarily obscure sections of the image and, as the viewer moves past them, also momentarily reflect the viewer’s image. The effect is to enmesh the viewer in what Jaar has called “‘an infernal triangle’ . . . [where] we watch ourselves watching them watch us.”⁵⁶

Jaar’s approach to the installation format ultimately involves the orchestration of a *mise-en-scène* through the manipulation of space and objects, using techniques and vocabulary akin to those of cinematic editing. Here, as in Meireles’s installations, the spectator is confronted by the fact that there is no single “correct” point from which to look at or experience the work. After the initial self-conscious encounter, the viewer must deliberately choose how to see it. *Untitled (Water)* of 1990 (Collection the artist), a piece that deals with Vietnamese refugees (“boat people”) in Hong Kong, consists of five double-sided light-boxes with pictures of water on one side and the boat people on the other. The images on the backs of the light-boxes are seen only in a row of twenty-five mirrors suspended on the wall behind the boxes. As the spectator moves past the piece, the images also appear to move, as in the cinema.

The installations of Camnitzer, Díaz, Jaar, and Meireles turn public space, whether institutional or commercial, into a matrix of signifiers, which illuminates the border between art and politics.

There is a gamelike aspect of the work in that each artist establishes a system of rules that invites participation by the viewer, who is led to transgress limits while acting out relations between victim and exploiter, self and other. By establishing a *mise-en-scène* and manipulating perceptual mechanisms, these installations displace the viewer mentally, encouraging new forms of awareness that destabilize previous understandings.

Exiting Circuits: "Recycled Contexts"

In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists one; one kills language because it betrays one. . . . Now any refusal of language is a death. Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world.—Roland Barthes⁵⁷

The political logic of the Latin American version of Conceptual art described thus far rests on two factors. On the one hand, it posits the recovery of the object and its insertion into a conceptual proposition or a physical space. This trait can be interpreted as anachronous to the extent that it runs counter to the general trend of mainstream Conceptual art, which moved toward the abolition of the art object. The constant presence of the object in the work of the artists discussed suggests that the reasons for the difference have to do with the demands of the Latin American context. The grounding of artistic languages in extra-artistic concerns has indeed been a constant of the avant-garde in Latin America since the 1920s. It was not only an intrinsic part of the process of tearing apart or recycling forms transmitted from cultural and political centers but a logical step in the act of constructing a tradition with the copy as its starting point. On the other hand, Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that the obsession with "facticity" of North American Conceptual art practices can derive only from the concept of an "administered society" typical of "late" capitalism.⁵⁸ The absence in Latin America of the social conditions supporting an administered society makes it an unsuitable model, perhaps even antithetical to a Latin American context. The elaboration of a Conceptual art practice aimed at exposing Latin American political and social realities thus involved a series of inversions of the mainstream model of Conceptual art. Along with the examples already discussed, the differences between the two can be summarized by the following oppositions:

<i>Latin American</i>	<i>North American</i>
contextualization	self-reflexivity
referentiality	tautology
activism	passivity
mediation	immediacy.

One could argue that if Duchamp's propositions found a fertile ground in Latin America, it was because a refusal to abandon the specificity and communicative potential of the aesthetic object was deeply embedded in the modern art tradition initiated by the Mexican Mural Movement and later embraced by the group of political-conceptual artists. However, Duchamp's radical subversion of art as institution, implicit in the provocative creation of the Readymade, is reenacted in these artists' works as an ironic tactic aimed at exposing a precarious activity: that of artistic practice in the frequently inoper-

ative conditions of Latin America. Therefore, utilizing the ready-made as a "package to communicate ideas,"⁵⁹ as Camnitzer has called it, ultimately points to an underlying concern with "devaluation," the loss of the object's symbolic value as a result of an economic or ideological process of exchange (as opposed to the North American artists' preoccupation with the process of commodification). Thus, the acts of "reinsertion" carried out by these artists are intended to reinvest objects with social meaning. The ready-made, then, becomes an instrument for the artists' critical intervention in the real, a stratagem by which patterns of understanding may be altered, or a site established for reinvesting reality with meaning. The ready-made also turns into a vehicle by which aesthetic activity may be integrated with all the systems of reference used in everyday life.⁶⁰

Such a reintegration could proceed only from rejecting the idea that the sphere of art is autonomous, thereby recovering the ethical dimension of artistic practice. The ultimate aim of this form of art can be seen as the elaboration of a system of signs, symbols, and actions through which the artist can intervene in what Jaar has called "the process of production and reproduction of meaning and consciousness."⁶¹ Unlike previous models of Latin American political art that relied on the content of the art's "message," the politics of this art requires "unfolding": deconstructing linguistic and visual codes, subverting meanings, and activating space in order to impress on the viewer the effects of the mechanisms of power and ideology. By presenting the work itself as a space (whether physical or metaphoric), this art recovers the notion of the audience. That is to say, it regains for the artist the possibility of engaging in active communication through the artistic object or installation. In these circumstances, the viewer, as a socially constituted recipient, becomes an integral part of the conceptual proposition of the artist.

For these artists the act of replacing tautology with meaning is grounded in the larger project of exiting exhausted political and ideological circuits through the revitalizing of contexts—artistic, geographic, economic—in which they practice their art. This project, in turn, reveals a complex understanding of the realities of Latin America in relation to those of the first world. The deep goal of the work lies in the way it manages "to place in crisis the history of its own culture without forgoing a commitment to that same culture."⁶² No longer confined, however, to national boundaries, or split between national and international forces, center and periphery, first and third worlds, it exposes the relations among these constructs, their interdependence. To achieve this aim requires an active negotiation of meaning between them. The Latin American "inverted" model of Conceptual art thus reveals a practice which not only is inscribed in a different framework of development but responds to the misalignment of global politics. Through its capacity to blend central and peripheral sources in the structure and function of a work, it challenges the authority of the "center" as originator of artistic forms.

The practice of a revisionist Conceptual art, seen in the work of this select group of Latin American artists, represents the recovery of an emancipatory project. At a time when the "logic" of "late" capitalism has annihilated the goals of the historic avant-garde, and when most forms of contemporary art have run up the blind alley of self-referentiality, the range and possibilities of such an enterprise should not be overlooked in the United States, where the original propositions of Conceptual art were born.

Notes

1. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1981), p. 408.
2. Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto: Las artes plásticas desde 1960* (1972; reprint ed., Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1988), pp. 268–71. This book provides one of the first comprehensive discussions to appear in Spanish of the Conceptual art movements in Europe and North America.
3. A number of authors in recent years have criticized the apolitical reductiveness of Conceptual art, both in its original versions and in recent revivals. For instance, Hal Foster, in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), p. 103, has noted that the practices of Conceptual artists that focus on general assumptions governing the institution of art in "late" capitalism are compromised by "present[ing] the exhibitional limits of art as socially indiscriminate and sexually indifferent." Benjamin Buchloh has offered a detailed analysis and critique of those practices in "Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–43. Other recent critics who have commented on these issues include Robert C. Morgan, "The Situation of Conceptual Art," *Arts* 63 (February 1989), pp. 40–43. Of the artists being considered in the present essay, Alfredo Jaar has offered the most cogent critique of this aspect of Conceptual art practice in the following statement: "Conceptual art's greatest failure was definitely its provincialism, . . . in the sense that Tzvetan Todorov has used the term, . . . a failure to recognize that many provinces and capitals do exist. . . . All the dominant assumptions about art were challenged, but this was done practically behind closed doors, in an extraordinary [sic] exclusive fashion, almost in an arrogant way, and blind to a number of political events that transformed the world. For the conceptualists, obviously, life was elsewhere." Alfredo Jaar, "Alfredo Jaar," *Flash Art International* 143 (November/December 1988), p. 117.
4. Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, pp. 269–70. The Grupo de los Trece was constituted in Buenos Aires in 1971 following a visit by the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. The group was based at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC), directed by Jorge Glusberg, and included the artists Jacques Bedel, Luis F. Bénédict, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Ginzburg, Víctor Grippo, Vicente Marotta, Jorge González Mir, Luis Pazos, Juan Carlos Romero, and Horacio Zabala. For a summary of the history and objectives of the group, and illustrations of works by its members, see "El Grupo de los Trece," in Gabriel Levinas, ed., *Arte argentino contemporáneo* (Madrid: Editorial Ameris, 1979), pp. 197–201.
5. A glance at the catalogues that accompanied two of the most influential surveys of Conceptual art ever mounted, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form, Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1969), and Kynaston L. McShine, ed., *Information* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), reveals an almost complete absence of political concerns, though these would emerge later in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke, and in that of feminist artists. Even then, excepting the later work of Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Martha Rosler, political or ideological issues were limited to critiques of the institutions of art and rarely addressed politics.
6. Other important artists who contributed to the consolidation of this form of art in Latin America include, in Brazil, Anna Bella Geiger, Rubens Gerchman, Mario Ishikawa, and Regina Vater; in Argentina, León Ferrari and the group Tucumán Arde; in Uruguay, Clemente Padín and Nelbia Romero; in Chile, Virginia Errazuriz, Carlos Leppe, Catalina Parra, and the CADA group, which included Juan Castillo, Lotty Rosenfeld, and others; and in Colombia, Antonio Caro. Also important were Felipe Ehrenberg and the numerous artistic collaboratives of the 1970s in Mexico. See Jorge Glusberg, *Arte en la Argentina: Del pop-art a la nueva imagen* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985); Nelly Richard, "Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973," *Art and Text* 21 (May–July 1986), pp. 17–114; Aracy Amaral, *Arte para quê? A preocupação social na arte brasileira, 1930–1970* (São Paulo: Nobel, 1984); Walter Zanini, *Circunambulatío* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1973); *6 jovens arte contemporânea* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972); *8 jovens arte contemporânea* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 1974); Shifra M. Goldman, "Elite Artists and Audiences: Can They Mix? The Mexican Front of Cultural Workers," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 4 (1985), pp. 139–54; *De los grupos los individuos: Artistas plásticos de los grupos metropolitanos* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1985).
7. Sean Cubitt and Eugenio Dittborn, "An Airmail Interview," in Guy Brett and Sean Cubitt, *Camino Way: The Airmail Paintings of Eugenio Dittborn* (Santiago: Eugenio Dittborn, 1991), p. 28.
8. Alfredo Jaar, "La géographie ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre (Geography=War)," *Contemporânea* 2 (June 1989), inside cover.
9. This point is argued by Charles Merewether in "The Migration of Images: Inscriptions of Land and Body in Latin America," in *America: Bride of the Sun* (Antwerp: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1992), pp. 197–222.
10. Dittborn has explained, "Como todo trabajo de arte que quiere dar cuenta de la periferia en la que se produce y circula, mi obra se ha propuesto asumir creativamente el irrecuperable atraso, así como la multiestratificación de esta periferia (As with any work of art that wants to take into account the periphery in which it is produced and circulated, my work has proposed to creatively assume the irreparable backwardness as well as the multiple stratifications of this periphery)."—"Chile vive (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 1987), p. 282.
11. Cubitt and Dittborn, "Airmail Interview," p. 28. Between 1984 and 1991 Dittborn produced and circulated approximately ninety Airmail Paintings to more than thirty destinations around the world.
12. See Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1989), pp. 65–93.
13. Of the artists considered in this essay, Camnitzer has lived in the New York area continuously since 1964, and Meireles resided in New York in 1970 and 1971. Reflecting on why he moved there, Camnitzer has stated, "New York seemed fascinating: the center of the empire. The measuring stick for success was set by the empire and not in the colonies."—Cited in Carla Stellweg, "'Magnet—New York': Conceptual, Performance, Environmental, and Installation Art by Latin American Artists in New York," in Luis Cancel et al., *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970* (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts and Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 285. For an overview of other Latin American Conceptual artists active in New York during this period, see Stellweg, "'Magnet—New York,'" pp. 284–311; and Jacqueline Barnitz, Florencia Bazzano Nelson, and Janis Bergman Carton, *Latin American Artists in New York since 1970* (Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, 1987), pp. 13–19.
14. For details see Jacqueline Barnitz, "Conceptual Art and Latin America: A Natural Alliance," in *Encounters/Displacements: Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Cildo Meireles* (Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, 1992), pp. 35–48.
15. Several Latin American artists in New York created experimental work under the auspices of the New York Graphic Workshop, which was established by Camnitzer, Liliana Porter, and José Guillermo Castillo in 1964 and was dissolved in 1970 (author's telephone interview with Luis Camnitzer, September 24, 1992). The workshop was founded on a form of political activism that rejected the commodity status of art, seeking instead to make it accessible to a mass audience through prints. The workshop launched the idea of serial graphics in which a single element could be assembled in many ways, a concept described by the acronym FANDSO (Free Assemblage, Nonfunctional, Disposable, Serial Object). See Luis Camnitzer, *Art in Editions: New Approaches* (New York: Pratt Center for Contemporary Printmaking and New York University, 1968). Shifra M. Goldman has analyzed the activities of the N.Y.G.W. in "Presencias y ausencias: Liliana Porter en Nueva York, 1964–1974," in *Liliana Porter: Obra gráfica, 1964–1990* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1991), pp. 1–22.
16. The constitutional government of Brazil was overthrown by a military coup in 1964, and the nation was subsequently ruled by military dictators until 1985; Uruguay was ruled by a de facto military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985; Argentina experienced a succession of military governments after the coup of 1966; and Chile was governed from 1973 until 1989 by the dictator General Augusto Pinochet. Peru was under military rule from 1968 to 1980, Bolivia from 1971 to 1982, and Ecuador from 1972 to 1980. See Beverly Adams, "The Subject of Torture: The Art of Camnitzer, Nuñez, Parra, and Romero," Master's thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1992, pp. 21–38.
17. Richard, "Margins and Institutions," p. 17.
18. Camnitzer was in New York when Uruguay's democratic government fell in 1973. Even though he did not return, the event indelibly marked his life and experience in the United States. Dittborn and Díaz remained in Chile throughout the military regime of Pinochet. Jaar lived through the fall of Allende and left Chile for New York in 1982; Meireles remained in Brazil for the duration of the military dictatorship, with the exception of the two years he spent in New York; Grippo lived through the black years in Argentina; Leirner has lived through the return of democracy to Brazil and the subsequent period of deep economic and social crisis.
19. "Insertion" does not exactly translate the word *inserção*. In Brazilian usage it refers to the act of introducing or fitting something into a reduced space or into a new system so as to alter its rules. Likewise, *transgressão* has a sense somewhat different than "transgression." It refers to the act of breaking established rules and patterns in order to introduce new values. See statements by Meireles in Ronaldo Brito and Eudoro Augusto Macieira de Sousa, *Cildo Meireles* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição FUNARTE, 1981), p. 24.

Although the military dictatorship was established in Brazil in 1964, freedom of expression was further stifled in 1968 by the establishment of censorship that affected all the arts. It was during this time that Meireles executed the works discussed in this essay.

20. Dittborn, in *Chile vive*, p. 282.

21. Grippo has stated: "El artista debiera tomar, como punto de partida, una intención ética y de progreso verdadero, transformándose en integrador de múltiples experiencias (en oposición a la continua fragmentación a que nos somete nuestra sociedad), para contribuir a la concepción de un hombre más completo (An artist should take as his point of departure an ethical and truly progressive intention, transforming himself into an integrator of multiple experiences [in opposition to the continual fragmentation to which we are subjected by our society], in order to contribute to the conception of a more complete man)." See Jorge Glusberg, *Victor Grippo* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación, 1980), n.p.

22. He continues: "That may give my work a political aura, . . . political in the sense of wanting to change society." See "A veces es una locura quedarse, a veces es una locura irse: Un reportaje de Carla Stellweg a Luis Camnitzer," *Arte en Colombia* 13 (October 1980), pp. 50–55; cited by Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Moral Imperatives: Politics as Art in Luis Camnitzer," in Luis Camnitzer, Gerardo Mosquera, and Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Luis Camnitzer: Retrospective Exhibition, 1966–1990* (New York: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1991), p. 5.

23. See Camnitzer's articles "Access to the Mainstream" and "Wonderbread and Spanglish Art," reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 41–47. The theme of exile is also the subject of the artist's essay "Screaming in a Room Full of Jello," presented at the Mountain Lake Symposium in 1990.

24. Jaar, "Alfredo Jaar," p. 117.

25. This point has been made by the Chilean critic Adriana Valdés in "From Another Periphery: 17 Air Mail Paintings," in her *Eugenio Dittborn* (Melbourne: George Paton Gallery, 1985), p. 6.

26. Hélio Oiticica, in McShine, *Information*, p. 103. The implications of Oiticica's position for most of the artists under consideration are the subject of Guy Brett, *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* (London and New York: Verso; Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1990).

27. Cubitt and Dittborn, "Airmail Interview," p. 29.

28. The theme of art and torture in the work of Camnitzer, Dittborn, and other artists from South America has been analyzed by Beverly Adams in "The Subject of Torture" and by Charles Merewether in "El arte de la violencia: Un asunto de representación en el arte contemporáneo," *Art Nexus* 2 (October 1991), pp. 92–96, and 3 (January 1992), pp. 132–35.

29. "Se a interferência de M. DUCHAMP foi ao nível da Arte (lógica do fenómeno), . . . uma vez que o que se faz hoje tende a estar mais próximo da cultura do que da Arte, é necessariamente uma interfeirência política. Porque se a estética fundamenta a Arte, é a Política que fundamenta a Cultura."—Cildo Meireles, "Arte-Cultura," *Malasartes* 1 (September/October/November 1975), p. 15.

30. Conceptual artists do, of course, utilize objects in their work: photographs, video and audio tapes, drawings, maps, and diagrams, which function as "documents" that record the conceptual proposal.

31. Camnitzer, for instance, referred to form itself as being important only insofar as it could serve the purposes of content, and Meireles spoke of his attempts to develop a language of *inserção* rather than "style." See Luis Camnitzer, "Chronology," in Camnitzer, Mosquera, and Ramírez, *Camnitzer: Retrospective*, p. 52; and Meireles, in Brito and Macieira de Sousa, *Cildo Meireles*, p. 24.

32. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," pp. 124–27.

33. For analysis of the relationship of Meireles, Leirner, and other Brazilian artists to Warhol, see Paulo Herkenhoff, "Arte e money," *Revista galena* 24 (October 1989), pp. 60–67.

34. Vladimir Herzog was a well-known socialist journalist arrested and killed while in the custody of the Brazilian army. Public outrage over the crime and the military's efforts to hide the truth marked the beginning of effective opposition to the military in Brazil.

35. See statements by the artist in Brito and Macieira de Sousa, *Cildo Meireles*, p. 24.

36. On the Chilean artists' use of metaphor to contest censorship, see Richard, "Margins and Institutions," pp. 23–33.

37. See Ronald Kay, "N. N.: Autopsia (4 rudimentos teóricos para una visualidad marginal)," in *E. Dittborn* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación, 1979), n.p.

38. See Richard, "Margins and Institutions," pp. 31–32, 38–41.

39. Camnitzer has referred to the political significance of the work as "something about the possible interference of the United States in countries which presumably were independent. The invasion of Cambodia seemed a good moment to remind people of Latin American history." The boxes were first exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1971. On the gallery walls Camnitzer drew closets with partly open doors and shelves labeled with nomenclature intended to suggest weaponry supplied by the U.S. for repression of liberation movements. Facsimile letter to Beverly Adams, May 7, 1990, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery Archives, University of Texas, Austin.

40. See Mário Cesar Carvalho's interview with the artist, "Jac leva cinzeiros furtados à Documenta," *Folha de São Paulo* (January 19, 1992), p. 5.

41. For a description of Leirner's process of assembling her works, see Michael Corris, "Não exótico," *Artforum* 30 (December 1991), pp. 89–92.

42. David Elliott, "Art and Spit," in his *Jac Leirner* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), n.p.

43. For a detailed discussion of Grippo's work, see Glusberg, *Victor Grippo*; Glusberg, *Arte en la Argentina*, pp. 167–76; Brett, *Transcontinental*, pp. 81–87; and Ricardo Martín Crosta, "Victor Grippo," in Sally Baker, ed., *Art of the Americas: The Argentine Project / Arte de las Américas: El proyecto argentino* (Hudson, New York: Baker and Co., 1992), pp. 59–79.

44. For more on the meaning of the potato in Grippo's work, see Glusberg, *Victor Grippo*.

45. See statements by the artist in Brito and Macieira de Sousa, *Cildo Meireles*, p. 24.

46. Merewether, "Migration of Images," p. 202.

47. In *The One Hundreds*, Leirner sorted the bills according to the subject matter of the graffiti: love, sex, religion, politics, children's marks. She then proceeded to construct pieces on each of these themes.

48. The phrase *espacio objetualizado* has been used by the Chilean critic Justo Pastor Mellado in *Gonzalo Díaz: La declinación de los planos, instalación* (Santiago: Ediciones de la Cortina de Humo, 1991).

49. For an analysis of Díaz's early work with deconstructive techniques of painting, see Gaspar Galasz and Milan Ivelić, *Chile: Arte actual* (Valparaíso: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso and Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 1988), pp. 310–17.

50. Mellado, *Gonzalo Díaz*, n.p.

51. Gonzalo Díaz, unpublished text, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery Archives, University of Texas, Austin.

52. Gonzalo Díaz, unpublished text for *Banco/Marco de prueba*, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery Archives, University of Texas, Austin.

53. See Catherine David, "Da adversidade vivemos," in Guy Brett et al., *Tunga "Lezarts"/ Cildo Meireles "Through"* (Kortrijk, Belgium: Kanaal Art Foundation, 1989), n.p.

54. Luis Camnitzer, interview with the author, Great Neck, New York, September 1990. The philosophical distinctions between Camnitzer's conceptualism and that of the Wittgenstein-inspired school have been analyzed in Gerardo Mosquera, "El conceptualismo de Luis Camnitzer," *Casa de las Américas* 139 (July–August 1983), pp. 148–52.

55. Implicit references to other artists, in the form of appropriated images and motifs, such as René Magritte's clouds, Duchamp's pipe, etc., suggest a reading of the work in terms of the artist as master game player. See Ramírez, "Moral Imperatives," pp. 12–13.

56. Alice Yang, *1+1+1: Works by Alfredo Jaar* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), n.p.

57. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 152–53.

58. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art, 1962–1969," pp. 128–29.

59. Luis Camnitzer, "Contemporary Colonial Art," paper presented at the Annual International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 1970. Meireles also used the term *package* to refer to his conceptual propositions with ready-mades.

60. See Camnitzer, "Chronology," p. 53.

61. Jaar, "Alfredo Jaar," p. 117.

62. Merewether, "Migration of Images," p. 202.



59

GONZALO DÍAZ

Tratado del entendimiento humano
 [Treatise on Human Understanding]

1992

Mixed mediums (drawing, serigraph, offset,
 tracing, and paint) on canvas; two of six panels,
 both: 8' 2½" x 10' 8" (250 x 320 cm)

Collection the artist

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Bernard Chappard, New York
Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz
Gonzalo Fonseca
Guariqueen Inc., Puerto Rico and New York
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LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Edited by Waldo Rasmussen, with Fatima Bercht and Elizabeth Ferrer

This remarkable volume provides the first comprehensive account of the rise and spectacular flowering of modernism in the art of Latin America. In an introductory essay Edward J. Sullivan surveys the complex origins of the region's fascinating and diverse visual art. He is followed by thirteen scholars and critics whose essays reveal the continuities of Latin American art with such international modernist traditions as Cubism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, and show how those movements inspired new and independent developments, as artists reflected upon their individual and national identities and the diverse conditions of their world.

Instead of seeking to define Latin American art, this volume explores it, inclusively and openly. Nearly one hundred artists are represented in the stunning plate section, and additional works by them and many other artists are seen in extensive black-and-white illustrations. Biographies of the artists and a selected bibliography for further reading complete this unique reference work. The volume includes not only those artists born or residing in Latin America but also those who emigrated to Europe and North America or who spent substantial parts of their careers outside the

region, as well as Latino artists from the United States. Examined in depth are pioneering figures such as Tarsila do Amaral of Brazil and Joaquín Torres-García of Uruguay; the well-known Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros; artists like Xul Solar and Frida Kahlo, whose art was more private than that of the muralists; and individuals who have emerged in recent years, such as Ana Mendieta, Cildo Meireles, Guillermo Kuitca, Julio Galán, Frida Baranek, and Juan Sánchez, whose work has helped to shape current artistic developments.

This book has been published to accompany the exhibition *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the most extensive presentation of Latin American modern art ever assembled. Like the exhibition, this book avoids the exotic and the nationalistic, approaching its subject from an international point of view that permits a clear account of the fascinating exchange of styles and ideas that brought modernism to Latin America in the first place and that in recent years has made Latin American innovations a leading force in the rise of new art forms in Europe and North America.

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