New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias

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Back and Forward: Considerations about Artistic Relations between Mexico and the United States (1988–2014)

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The United States–Mexico War is remembered differently in the two countries. In the United States, almost no one remembers the war that Americans fought against Mexico more than 150 years ago. In Mexico, almost no one has forgotten. For some residents, the Mexicanization of the United States borderland is simply a reoccupation of territories that once belonged to Mexico—a peaceful *reconquista.*

— *Tim Weiner*

The Flow as Starting Point

In 2014, *CeroCeroCero*, the second book by Roberto Sabiano, was published in Mexico. The book, which has a bold hypothesis, suggests that the drug business and its structure moves the entire global economic system: without the cocaine trade, the world's financial system, legal or illegal, might collapse. Regardless of whether this hypothesis is true, what interests me is the way Sabiano builds his argument in relation to the matter of drug trafficking. Sabiano begins his argument not with an emphasis on countries that produce cocaine (Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia) but with Mexico, as a country of transit for goods and money. He also asserts that the Mexican cartels have relieved the Colombians.

According to the author, the structure of that business is based on the privileges that globalization has produced, in which the organizations that make the de-territorialization and flow of goods and money possible today have power over territorialized producers. Mexico is a country of transit precisely because of its privileged geographical, political, economic, and social characteristics and because it has an active traffic that depends on the largest consumer of drugs in the world, the United States. Thus, Saviano's narrative is based on the identification of forms of flow of these products, and the structure, legal and illegal, that supports it, rather than emphasizing how to produce such products.

A few years earlier, in 2011, Frédéic Martel published *Mainstream Culture,* a book describing how the globalized cultural trade works. He unequivocally identifies the U.S. as the leading producer in the global cultural industry. However, there is a section in the book dedicated to Mexico, described as a country where the culture flows in a double movement of localization and delocalization. Mexico is a major stop for many of Latin America's cultural products before entering Miami, the Latino capital of the United States: if the product is successful in Mexico, it could enter a global market via the United States. Martel exemplifies this situation with Shakira, the Colombian singer who, before entering the global market, had to succeed in Mexico and then in the United States.

Clearly, the relationship that I am trying to establish here is not casual, much less innocent. Mexico's position as a transit country since the late 1980s, particularly for transit to the United States, is significant because it allows us to consider its geopolitical status as a place for global delocalization and re-localization and, at the same time, think about the reciprocal effects that this situation has brought for these countries. Of course, I do not deny the historical power relations that have kept the United States aligned with Mexico (and this could be extended to all of Latin America) and I do not suggest that this situation has been one of equals.

However—and this is what I want to show—is that due to this traffic condition, the narrative possibilities of a historic speech to and from Mexico and the United States have changed significantly, allowing us to modify the ways of understanding the artistic production of these two countries. More than just considering the flow of drugs or pop culture, globalization makes it possible to rethink discursive relations (and also to consider how the subjectivities have been altered), considering new historical conditions, because this structure allows us to enunciate some phenomena in relatizon to certain forms of production. Likewise, it helps us to think about movements that site, literally, symbolic conditions that reformulate the condition of territory.

De-Nationalizing Mexico

On November 9, 2000, the First Symposium of Contemporary Art entitled *Insidioso gusto de lo global* took place at the Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UAP), coordinated by Cuauhtémoc Medina. According to Medina, the Symposium could take place because "there was a general interest of the community to examine what signifies the internationalization of recent Mexican art from the perspective of local practitioner and theorist." He goes on to say, "It was a passionate and sometimes intense meeting that, to everyone's surprise, focused on a historical comparison between the internationalization of the *Neomexicanismo* and the emergence of *Neo-conceptual* global scene."

This debate is important because it was one of the first public discussions in the artistic field that occurred as a result of the paradigm shift in the national culture caused by globalization. This paradigm shift began in Mexico as trade liberalization in the 1980s and was consolidated with the signing of NAFTA by the United States, Mexico, and Canada in 1992 and its application in 1994. This economic aperture is significant to Mexican art for at least two reasons: first, its cultural administration changed from one that was absolutely public, as in France, to a public-private administration as in the United States. Second, the cultural administration began treating culture as cultural industry as in the United States, a situation that produced an unprecedented symbolic exchange between these countries.

However, by 2000, the consequences of the process linking culture and market were not very well known, hence the relevance of the Symposium's purpose: to establish the historical difference between the international and global, characterized in this case by two types of art, *Neomexicanismo* and neo-conceptual. The tension can be identified with two different models of closure and opening: on the one hand, internationalization is still anchored in the national production model that depends on the notion of national identity as in *Neomexicanismo*; on the other, globalization is characterized as postnational form characterized by the production of cultural hybrids, identified with what Medina calls neo-conceptual art.

The intensity of the debate in Puebla has deep historical roots: since the second decade of the twentieth century, Mexico

has had a tradition linking education, art, culture, and identity. Institutionally, there is a relationship between culture and education that works as an ideological platform. This system was promoted by José Vasconcelos, secretary of public education during the government of President Alvaro Obregón in the post-revolutionary period. Indeed, the educational platform was configured to answer the question of what it means to be Mexican in the post-revolutionary period. This question not only permeated Mexican muralism but also guided the way in which Mexican culture was managed by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from 1929 to 2000.

What has been promoted as international Mexican culture, particularly in its art, has always been subsumed by the affirmative tension created by the local official discourse that enunciates what should be Mexican and the expectations of the "Mexicanness" from other countries. However, the logic that establishes that we are Mexicans as a nation due to identity is promoted by a culture that began cracking under the increasingly close link between economy and culture in the early 1980s, a slow breakage that continues through today. In that sense, *Neomexicanismo* is understood by Medina as the last feature of international Mexican art insofar as we still can see "some" of the Mexican identity that is embedded in the history of national art.

Similarly, so-called neo-conceptual art is linked to a global form of production that clearly puts in crisis the notion of a national art (one that is linked to national identity) and simultaneously brings movements of territorialization and de-territorialization into an aesthetic process that produces hybrids. Thus, culture and art have more to do with the economic processes that put in circulation capitals of all kinds (economic, symbolic, etc.) than with ways to manage culture by a national administration. Or, put another way, the public cultural administration is in a complex relationship with, and sometimes subsumed by, economic forms of capital flow.

Thus, there is a radical difference in the notion of identity seen in the 1980s and in the 1990s: if *Neomexicanismo* deconstructs and subverts national founding myths—the flag becomes a loincloth and the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes Marilyn Monroe—the art of the 1990s consciously denies these myths, excluding them and founding new ones, this time looking across the border to the United States.

Beyond the Appropriation: Remakes and Rewriting History

By the early 1990s, some remakes of American artworks were being created in Mexico. Luis Felipe Ortega and Daniel Guzman made *Remake* (1994), a video in which they literally remake works by Vito Aconcci, Bruce Nauman, and Paul McCarthy, works that they have never seen personally and reenact from documentary information. Damian Ortega remade the *Spiral Jetty* (Robert Smithson) with a work called *Do It Yourself, Spiral Jetty* (1993) and Eduardo Abaroa created a *Broken Obelisk for Street Markets* (1991–1993), making direct reference to Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*.

Each of these works significantly alters the original artwork and plays with its meaning by subtraction and addition: at the same time, the artists withdraw the solemn character of each work and add a local understanding of it. In this context, we could ask, as Luis Felipe Ortega once did, what does it mean to study American art in Mexico? The result of this study is not a mere appropriation but rather the separation of local tradition and, at the same time, joining in a contemporary global culture.

Clearly, making art works for which the references are not from local art has fundamental cultural implications. First, these new works criticize the local tradition using the occidental art canon. Second, the canon is updated outside its borders, but in an irregular shape that no longer corresponds to its own genealogy. Finally, what emerges dialectically is the notion of contemporary art produced here, with outside references, that doesn't belong to any of those sides. In this way, the definition of contemporary has to be understood as that of exception.

Nevertheless, the double reference of these remakes is impossible to understand without taking into account the sign/symbol circulation caused by globalization. These works not only refer to their American relatives, but significantly alter their meaning. The sense of these new works is a dispersed one: the contemporary Mexican art overflows as repetition. This is not to say that the tradition is outside, but rather is here as a sign of elsewhere. Linking to a genealogy of foreign art produces a crisis of historical representation within Mexican art because it is no longer national. Instead, it is art of territory, the place from which one can understand that production.

Hence, there is a crisis in the narratives of the local art history because we cannot generate a discourse that allows a sequential genealogical link. Instead, you can only think of time in relation to a delocalized time. Of course, this idea can be generalized and applied to all the "neo-conceptual" art produced in the 1990s. Incidentally, this does not mean that the notion of "Mexican art" has ended as a category. Rather, I mean that the concept of "Mexican art" comes to play a specific role in a multi-discourse game.

In a pragmatic sense, we can say that if this crisis of representation was generated by the open economy policy implemented by the PRI in the 1990s, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), the party of the democratic change in 2000, must have been the one to take advantage of that situation to promote culture. But neither the government of Vicente Fox, nor that of Felipe Calderon knew to manage this difference: if the PRI government promoted a form of national representation linked with the concept of identity, the PAN should be managing the transition from national culture to cultural industry in a globalized world. And of course, to enunciate culture in other terms, national culture seems to be one in a set of concepts—but not precisely the most important one. Of course, as we are experiencing with the return of the PRI to the government in 2012, after this transformation, it seems that no one knows how to manage culture in Mexico.

It is a curious phenomenon. In 2015, Mexico is a key place for global contemporary art. However, it seems that this condition was caused by forces related to the global art world and by economic and symbolic flows rather than local cultural policies. Or, put another way, the official cultural policy has to deal with the globalized art world, an unprecedented situation. The government's inability to understand that circumstance has made it impossible to redefine not only the cultural policies but the role of culture in Mexico in a globalized context.

As we know, Mexico is experiencing a general crisis caused by multiple factors, one that seems to have no immediate solution. Rather, the situation has worsened in the last three years. In this scenario, the local debate about contemporary art inquires about the possibility of abandoning the public and private culture administration and trying to make change from the outside. If art in the 1980s and 1990s saw a possibility for change

through incorporating private funding and other foundational myths to overcome the affirmation of the nation, then many current discourses pretend that there is an "outside" of the system instead of assuming the present status quo and the conditions of production of cultural phenomena are immutable and inescapable. It seems that in Mexico there can be only utopias.

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