TO BE POLITICAL IT HAS TO LOOK NICE
a project by Pablo León de la Barra (1) with Armando Andrade (2), Fernando Bryce (3), B-Lo (4), Erick Betrán (5), Stefan Brüggemann (6), Miguel Calderón (7), Capaçela (8), Otelo SP (9), Carolina Caycedo (10), El Chino Ediciones (11), Eduardo Consuegra (12), Galería Chilena (13), Mauricio Guíñez (14), Helena Producciones (15), Lamegú-Laguerre (16), M177 (17), Sebastián Ramírez (18), Pedro Reyes (19), Los Super Elegantes (20), Javier Téllez (21), and El Vicio (22) October 11 - November 8, 2003

HOW TO BE A PROPER LATIN AMERICAN ARTIST
(a non-alphabetical glossary for survival within the global cultural economy)
What follows is a series of notes for the exhibition “To Be Political it Has to Look Nice. The visitor/reader/participant is invited to complete the last and/or use it as a navigation tool for the exhibition.
IT’S ALL THE SAME SHIT!
Although apparently focusing on a specific geographical area, the exhibition “To Be Political it Has to Look Nice” does not intend to be an overview of contemporary art production in the geo-cultural area so-called Latin America. This is not a display of “art from Latin America” as such, but an investigation of the projects and a presentation of cultural articulations of the aesthetic, the political, the social and the everydayness taking place in, or manifesting its origins from the American sub-continent.
WE ARE SOUTH AMERICAN ROCKERS
I will use the term Latin America (whatever that means) in absence of a better term, understanding that the label has not only been inscribed from the outside but that it has become a fixed identity. How can an exhibition or text attempt to represent the social, economical, or political complexities of the area and its cultural articulations without reducing them to stereotypes (or in any case creating new ones)? If we are to deal with unprecedented situations, we also need to find new ways to name and articulate them. “We are South American Rockers” is the name of a song by cult Chilean rock band from the 80’s “Los Prisioneros,” part of the lyrics were: No nos acompañá, volver los vestidos, mientras rueda un gringo y se juega tango. (We are not ashamed of mixing up styles, as long as they smell of gringo and people can dance to them) They also performed a song called “Maldiva Sudaca” (something like “Fucking South American!”)

LA RAZA COSMICA
“The Cosmic Race” was a concept developed by philosopher José Vasconcelos in 1914 which announced the coming of a “fifth race” which in the unprepared land of the American continent would fuse through miscegenation (the interbreeding of different races or persons of different racial backgrounds) all the other races without distinction of number or color. “La Raza Cosmica” would create a new civilization in the borders of the Amazonas which would build a new city named “Universopolis” from where airplanes and armies would depart in their mission of converting all humanity into wisdom.

GLOBALIZATION INTERNATIONAL
If the process of globalization has connected the world in ways it has never been connected before, the reality is, there have never been as many barriers between territories as today. The free movement of goods, services and capital does not translate into the free movement of people or ideas. Try for example, getting a Visa to enter the USA. The connections between different nations are not equal and horizontal, but most of the time vertical and triangularized by the center. Latin America as a continuous unified territory exists as a myth, and the exchange existing between countries in the region is unequal and in some cases nonexistent.

AMERICA FOR THE AMERICANS
Is Latin America the trashcan and sweatshop of the United States?

Data Profiles:
United States of America
Population 2002: 288.4 million
Surface area (sq. km): 9.6 million
GNI per capita, 2002 (US$): 35,060.0

Latin America & Caribbean
Population 2002: 526.7 million
Surface area (sq. km): 20.4 million
GNI per capita, 2002 (US$): 3,280.0

“...the effort to unite the economies of the Western Hemisphere into a single free trade agreement began at the Summit of the Americas, which was held in December 1994 in Miami. The Heads of State and Government of the 34 democracies in the region agreed to construct a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in which barriers to trade and investment will be progressively eliminated, and to complete negotiations for the agreement by 2005.” (from http://www.ftaa-aica.org the official home page of the Free Trade Area of the Americas). See also http://www.stopftaa.org the official home page of “Stop the FTAA.”

FOREIGN DEBT
In the mid 1970s, Latin America’s foreign debt totaled $80 billion. By 1980, it was $204 billion, and by 1990, $443 billion. It is estimated that the amount will reach nearly $706 billion in 1999, requiring debt service payments of $123 billion. In payments to service the foreign debt alone, the region paid out $739 billion between 1982 and 1998—more than the entire accumulated debt. Under these circumstances, foreign debt has been and continues to be unpayable, illegitimate, and immoral.” From The Tempest Declaration. Yes to Life. No to Debt, Tuvalu, January 27, 1999.

FAILURE OF NEOLIBERALIZATION
Keywords: Tequila Effect, Carpincho Effect, Tango Effect. Neoliberal policies have been applied for almost 30 years in Latin America, in most of the cases due to IMF measures and regulations in order to neoplastic debt. During the 90s Latin American countries opened their borders to foreign investment and facilitated the transfer of public goods from state administration to private and transnational control in an attempt to deliver again the dream of belonging to the first world. The results: fragile democracies, continuous collapse of economies, social unrest and the perpetuation of inequality; a small elite continues to enjoy enormous wealth while 40% of the population in Latin American lives below the poverty line, and of these, 15% live in extreme poverty.

MODERNITY
Was there ever a Latin American modernity (with which I mean a modernity that was not derivative of European and North American models): Modernity in Latin America roughly the period between the 1920s and 1968—characterized by the expansion of capitalism,
The fascination of the artist and the curator with the aesthetics of poverty, the strategies of the informal and the structures of survival come from a genuine need to give visibility to these situations, but also from an inherited Roman Catholic guilt. The Latin American artist can easily differentiate poverty, injustice and inequality because in most cases he/she comes from a more privileged background. Confession, not art, is the vehicle for catharsis in which to solve this guilt.

Los ricos también lloran
If from adversity we live, life also continues to exist through daydreaming and evasion, music, soap operas (telenovelas) and football (soccer) provide the perfect anesthesia required to evade reality. If relationships between Latin American countries are characterized by fragmented connections, music, football and television have been a continuous link in the Latin American imaginary (although in most cases these relationships are triangulated via Miami). Life goes on like a tele novela, an episode per day, accepting tragedy and celebrating everyday life events as if there were no tomorrow, because tomorrow you don’t know what will happen. We have learned that in real life there are no happy endings. Every time you wake up from the dream there will only be a continuous hangover. As Y air, the Latin American singer from the 80’s who was a derivation of Madonna but sang Italian pop in Spanish, sang: Siempre vendrán temporadas mejores (Better times will always come). Is it possible to introduce change through apparently frivolous media?

Is el chez the answer to Latin America? Is (Hugo) Chavez the answer to Latin America? El Chavo is one of the TV characters created by Chapulín (actor, writer, comedian and songwriter Roberto Gómez Bolotin; the name comes from Shakespeare’s “Little Shakespeare”), who appeared in television from 1970 to 1995. His T.V program had the biggest audience of any T.V show in Latin America and Spain at the time and reruns are still transmitted daily in most of these countries. In “El Chavo Del Ocho” he played a stick who lived inside a beer barrel in a poor neighborhood, and in “El Chupín Colorado” he played an everyday super hero who hàd to save the population. In a series of soap operas, Chavo and Chapulín offered a caricatured reflection of reality. Constant rumors about the main character’s real power in Latin America or Chapulin’s and his Chapulín as they are known in Brazil) in plane crashes, earthquakes, hurricanes and disasters have produced major trauma among his followers. It is said that Che Guevara claimed that he modeled his self-effacing public persona after Cárdenas. Mexico’s cinematic king of comedy of the 50s – 60s. Is it possible that Chavo and Chapultepec are political models for the generation raised in the 70s?

The HAND of God
The HAND of God refers to the goal scored by Argentine captain Diego Maradona in the 53rd minute of the 1986 World Cup match against England. Miraculously, Maradona managed to guide the ball into England’s net. The slow-motion replay and a still picture taken after the goal show Maradona’s left hand had helped the ball enter the goal. “It was partly the hand of Maradona,” said the referee and partly the hand of God.” Later in the game Maradona scored a goal of unparalleled brilliance as Argentina won 2-1 and went on to win the World Cup.

Four years after the 1982 Falklands War, the victory of Argentina was seen by the nation and by fans as a way of setting the score even. More recently, Maradona fans in Rosario, Argentina, have set up “The Hand of God” church to worship their idol Maradona and celebrate their Christmas on his birthday. 400 members of the “First Maradonian Church” marked the footballer’s 42nd birthday on October 29, 2002 with a service. They believe he is football’s god, and that we live in the year 42AD, “AD” standing for After Diego. The followers call themselves Diagorean Brothers and have chosen his book, “I Am Diego,” as their bible. (www.gigiamaradoniana.com) Maradona’s hand of God reminds us that we are unable to combat Goliath directly, at the end, a little bit of cheating and God on our side will help us sort out inequity.

New eroticism
“New eroticism” substitutes the old eroticism of jungles, magical realism and prehispanic cultures for the urban drama of third-world present an apocalyptic territory plagued by chaos, overpopulation, poverty, drug trafficking, kidnapping and insanity. “New eroticism” makes survival accessible to European and North American audiences, measuring them of the safety of their own surroundings, but also offering them a manual of survival in case of extreme situations. “New eroticism” is exemplified in recent Latin American films such as “Amores Perros” and “Cidade de Deus” and recent exhibitions about contemporary artistic production from Mexico City, which has become “the art world’s new darling,” and which has transformed certain contemporary aesthetic propositions into fashion commodified. Art curators are already searching for the “new” Mexico City, and debating if it will be Bogota or Buenos Aires where art, survival, protest and daily drama are represented in artistic production. New eroticism should not be about maintaining the myth of foreign production as exotic, but about how to contribute to their consolidation in an ethical manner.

Tropicalia
Tropicalia is more than mambo and banana trees: It is the consciousness of not being conditioned by established structures, hence highly revolutionary in its entirety. Any conformity, be it intellectual, social, or existential, is contrary to its principle idea.” His influence on art and music in the 1960’s and 70’s was incalculable.

Who wants to be Latin America?
Between 10% and 15% of Latin Americans live outside of their country for economic, social, intellectual, political, or other reasons. This is a new trend where people seek self-fulfillment or self-expression, or to escape from the rigidities of the social structure. To become "an expatriate" is to leave behind all the external features that define one’s identity and to come to the realization that one’s true identity is independent of these. As a result, the expatriate, for all intents and purposes, is a citizen of nowhere. The expatriate is an amateur of life who has decided to exile himself from the confines of the home country. The expatriate is a second-class citizen of his own country and this is acceptable to him. The expatriate is a person who has decided to leave his country behind. The expatriate is a person who has decided to be a citizen of nowhere. The expatriate is a person who has decided to be a citizen of nowhere.

recent disarticulation of the cultural apparatus by the neoliberal policies has made the market the only available option. What happens when the market barely exists? The artist is then faced with two options: live as a second-class “citizen” in exile, or to stay and work together with others in the form of collectives and/or creating their own exhibition spaces.

Poetics/politics
Poetics is not about creating insignifiant art (art with apparently no meaning, making reference to itself or to Art only), but is about how the social and the political engage and affect everyday life, and about how individuals or collectives give visibility to that which affects them in order to help us understand and transform our world. When social reality is so excessive, has such a powerful presence, and is so traumatic, art cannot limit itself to art school strategies or art historical sources. It can’t be reduced to the mere production of aesthetic objects or to sociological documentation. Where do we go from here? When reality has much more presence than the attempts of the artist to represent it, it is not enough to simulate, replicate or give visibility to the forces of inequality and injustice. If there is any role to be played by art in the region, it consists on how to articulate and engage with the other players of society. The aesthetic act is needed in order to re-calibrate relations within a fragmented society. It is exactly that all stops being only aesthetically pleasant and uncover its potential as a tool for change and exchange. If you are an artist lucky enough to be born in the center, just do art, whatever. If you are from the periphery or the semi-periphery, your art must be not multicultural, at least semi-exotic, a bit poetic, a bit political (but not too much), be sure it doesn’t look much like anything from the center and still make it look like art that can be sold. And please, if it’s going to be political, at least make it look nice.

Pablo León de la Barra
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1 I use the word participation in Hélio Oiticica’s term: “My entire evolution, leading up to the formulation of the ‘Parangolé’ aims at the magical incorporation of the elements of the environment, in the whole life-experience of the spectator, whom I now call: ‘participant.’” From Hélio Oiticica, Notes on the ‘Parangolé’, 1972. Used with permission of the artist. Keywords: Parangolé Environmental System: Parangolé Total Experience.

2 The title of the exhibition “To be Political it has to Look Nice comes from a list of 31 possible show titles provided by artist Hélio Brüggemann for the show; other of the titles included were: Tropical Trash. Wtf, Hot, Hot, International Look, Reading History Update Down, 30 Risks of Curating, Used to Draw the Lines of a Football Field and Bartender and Curator at the Same Time.

3 From Hélio Oiticica, Notes on the ‘Parangolé’, 1972. Used with permission of the artist. Keywords: Parangolé Environmental System: Parangolé Total Experience.