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TO BE POLITICAL IT HAS TO LOOK NICE

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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/participant¹ is invited to complete the text 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 acompleja, revolver los estilos, mientras huelan a gringo y se puedan bailar.* (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 "Maldito Sudaca" (something like "Fucking South American").

LA RAZA COSMICA

"The Cosmic Race" was a concept developed by philosopher José Vasconcelos in 1948 which announced the coming of a "fifth race" which in the unprejudiced land of the American continent would fuse through miscegenation (the interbreeding of different races or of 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 Amazons 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 triangulated 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
 (from: www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata)

"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-alca.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 \$60 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 1996—more than the entire accumulated debt. Under these circumstances, foreign debt has been and continues to be unpayable, illegitimate, and immoral." (from The Tegucigalpa Declaration. *Yes to Life, No to Debt*, Tegucigalpa, January 27, 1999).

FAILURE OF NEOLIBERALIZATION

Keywords: Tequila Effect, Caipirinha 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 renegotiate 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 America 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,

industrialization and urban growth) is seen as a lost paradise. Neoliberalism's later attempt to recover the lost dream through fast track selective modernizing measures, demonstrated again its failure. Latin American modernity is about the failure, disfunctionality, and adaptations of the modern project. It is about survival within dis-utopia, not about the perfect state of things, but about its fissures, customizations and adaptations. It is a project open to be modified, transformed and intervened on; it is not about finished perfect moments.

COMIDAS CRIOLLAS

Modernity really started with the arrival of Europeans to the Western Hemisphere: Latin modernity is different from the Anglo-Saxon one in that it was not a *tabula rasa* inevitably eliminating the "other," but about the subversive incorporation of the "other." The integration of the European Latin with the Native American and the imported African is an unfinished project covered by national myths of miscegenation (*mestizaje*) which prevails in most of Latin America, and which is supported by a Criollo culture of privilege, favoritism and corruption, which has produced an unacknowledged culture of class segregation and apartheid. Creole (*Criollo*): person of (at least theoretically) pure European descent but born in the Americas.

TELE-FAVELAS

The division existing between the privileged and the excluded is made evident in the shanties, *favelas* and illegal settlements of the Latin American City, which in many cases occupy more than 50% of the built area and house more than 50% of the population. It is in these settlements where inequality is made physically manifest, but also where the strategies of resistance and survival of the population are spatialized. It is in the *favelas*, shanties and illegal settlements where the failures of modernization are made visible, but also where the "real modernization" of the region occurs: a bottom-up self-generating process where the construction of housing and provision of basic services and infrastructures is done by the inhabitants. Informal activities, including street selling, are part of the economic survival skills practiced in order to earn a living. But the fascination with the aesthetics and the self-generated and unregulated nature of the *favelas* and informality hide within it a series of inequalities and contradictions, the main one being the government's inability to provide the majority of its population with its basic rights, needs and services. If many recent contemporary aesthetic practices replicate, simulate or appropriate the strategies of exchange and survival, it is because of the urgent need to give visibility to desperate situations.

RECENT TRAUMA

If recent cultural production from Latin America has been freed from the postmodern/postcolonial/multicultural trauma of defining itself through national or regional identity and/or through its relationship with the center (but still dependent on the center for its validation) it is unthinkable to comprehend the cultural production of the region without understanding its relationship to the social, economical and political situation of the past three decades. There exists a common identification through a collective unconscious which is defined by a context of economic, political, social and personal tragedy.

GUILT

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 TAMBIEN LLORAN

If from adversity we live, life also continues to exist through day-dreaming 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 in a telenovela, an episode per day, accepting tragedy and celebrating everyday life events as if there was 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 Yuri, a Latin American singer from the 80's who was a derivation of Madonna but sang Italian pop in Spanish, sang: *Siempre vendrán tiempos mejores* (Better times will always come.) Is it possible to introduce change through apparently frivolous media?

IS EL CHE THE ANSWER TO LATIN AMERICA?

IS (HUGO) CHAVEZ THE ANSWER TO LATIN AMERICA?

IS EL CHAVO THE ANSWER TO LATIN AMERICA?

El Chavo is one of the TV characters created by *Chespirito* (actor, writer, comedian and songwriter Roberto Gómez Bolaños; the name comes from Shakespeare+ito, meaning "Little Shakespeare"), who appeared in television from 1970 to 1995. His T.V. program had the biggest audience in Latin America and Spain at the time and re-runs are still transmitted daily in most of these countries. In "El Chavo Del Ocho," he played a kid who lived inside a beer barrel in a poor neighborhood, and in "El Chapulin Colorado" he played an everyday super hero who had no real powers. Like the soap operas, Chavo and Chapulin offered a caricaturized reflection of reality. Constant rumors about the death of El Chavo and Chilindrina (or Chaves and Chiquinha as they are known in Brazil) in plane crashes, earthquakes 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 Cantinflas, México's cinematic king of comedy of the 50s - 60s. Is it possible that Chavo and Chapulin 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 52nd minute of the quarterfinal at 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 by a photographer showed that Maradona's left hand had helped the ball enter the goal. "It was partly the hand of Maradona," the Argentine said the next day, "and partly the hand of God." Later in the game Maradona scored a goal of unimpeachable 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 settling 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 Diegorian Brothers and have chosen his book, "I Am Diego," as their bible. (www.iglesiamaradoniana.com.) Maradona's hand of God reminds us that if 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 inequality.

NEW EXOTICISM

"New exoticism" substitutes the old exoticism of jungles, magical realism and prehispanic cultures for the urban drama of thirdworldness presenting an apocalyptic territory plagued by chaos, overpopulation, poverty, drug trafficking, kidnapping and insecurity. "New exoticism" makes survival accessible to European and North American audiences, reassuring them of the safety of their own surroundings, but also offering them a manual of survival in case of extreme situations. "New exoticism" is exemplified in recent Latin American films such as "Amores Perros" and "Ciidade de Deus" and recent exhibitions about contemporary artistic production from México City, which has become "the art world's new darling," and which have transformed certain contemporary aesthetic propositions into fashion commodities. Art curators are already searching for the "new" México City, and debating if it will be Bogotá or Buenos Aires where art, survival, protest and daily drama are represented in artistic production. New exoticism 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

"The myth of 'Tropicality' is much more than parrots 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." Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicalia*, March 4, 1968

WHO WANTS TO BE LATIN AMERICAN?

Between 10% and 15% of Latin Americans live outside of their country of origin. If emigration before was due to the oppression of the dictatorships and military governments, it is now mostly because of the economic situation. Emigration takes place at all social levels, and has created a void where whole generations of skilled workers have fled their countries due to the impossibility of sustaining themselves economically through their work. The idea of Latin America survives only as nostalgia in the exile. It is in exile where the cultural traits are maintained and/or where identity expands. It is in exile where the place of origin can be questioned with a distance and where new representations are created in order to be reimported. Finally, it is in exile where other Latin Americans break their national insularity and acquire consciousness of other Latin American voices. Latin America exists somewhere else. It is not contained by its geographical barriers. In a cultural context that has been regulated by the government and its system of salons, prizes and recognition, there was no other way for the artist to exist other than outside of the system; the more

recent disarticulation of the cultural apparatus by the neoliberal policies have made the market the only available option. What happens when the market barely exists? The artist is then faced with two options: to 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 insignificant 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, artwork can't 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 then that art stops being only aesthetically pleasant and uncovers 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 if 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. ²

Pablo León de la Barra
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¹ I use the word participator in Hélio Oiticica's terms: "My entire evolution, leading up to the formulation of the Parangolé, aims at this magical incorporation of the elements of the work as such, in the whole life-experience of the spectator, whom I now call 'participator'." From Hélio Oiticica, *Notes on the Parangolé*. Parangolé: slang, meaning animated situation and sudden confusion and/or agitation between people. 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 Stefan Brüggemann for the show; other of the titles included were: *Tropical Trash*, *Hot, Hot, Hot*, *International Look*, *Reading History Upside Down*, *30 Kilos of Cocaine Used to Draw the Lines of a Football Field* and *Bartender and Curator at the Same Time*.