

Some Thoughts on Art in Mexico from the 1990s and 2000s[\[1\]](#)

Written by Irmgard Emmelhainz

In the past decade or so, an alliance between the state, corporations, private initiatives and art market was consolidated in Mexican cultural production. The proliferation, internationalization, and attainment of global relevance of Mexican contemporary art, had been tied to the global spread of an aesthetic language grounded on the heritage of conceptual and minimal art from the 1960s and 1970s, to the violent changes and social turmoil brought about by neoliberal politics, and to global socio-economic processes inherent to the new world order, including a social turn and a post-political sensibility. In the past 25 years, borders became extremely porous when it came to cultural exchange. In the 1990s, Mexican art began to be disseminated and is now being produced and exhibited everywhere in the world. This rootlessness is a sign of the “post-conceptual” condition of contemporary art. For Peter Osborne, the “contemporary” implies an emptying-out of the concept of postmodernity as a critical and temporal category and its replacement with a singular, complexly internally differentiated global modernity, which implies the spatialization of historical temporality.[\[2\]](#) In this regard, we could think of contemporary art as a site in which constructed conceptualized narratives from all over the world are confronted simultaneously to deliver an attempt to understand the present, by means of a temporal bracketing and spatial condensing.[\[3\]](#)

In other words, contemporary art projects a fictional unity into a variety of ideas about time and space providing an illusory common platform that precisely

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evidences the lack of global time and space and sharp

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socio-economic differentiation. A concept that goes

hand in hand with “contemporary art” is

semiocapitalism (or cultural capitalism), the current

stage of capitalism embedded in the liberation and

financialization of markets, in which creativity and

cognitive work are at the core of the production of

surplus value, while digital communication has been

fully integrated to our everyday lives. Under this

light, we must consider two characteristics in

contemporary art: first, the de-differentiation of

media or what Rosalind Krauss calls the “post-medium”

condition in art, which implies that art as a

medium-specific enterprise has disappeared, opening up

to mixed-media combinations and to de-skilling in

artistic production. As a consequence, artists’

practices tend to be plural and with lack of thematic

and formal coherence from one body of work to the

next. Second, as Frederic Jameson has pointed out, the

museum has been transformed into a popular and

mass-cultural space that advertises exhibitions as

commercial attractions; the hostility with which

modern vanguardist artworks were met has disappeared

and art has taken a kind of populist turn. This is

also due to a change in the structure of aesthetic

perception: art has become a unique event or

experience in which we consume an idea configured by

the conjunction of elements in the work rather than a

sensory presence.[\[4\]](#) Furthermore, the prominence of

contemporary art in and from Mexico is linked to notions of

betterment and development, culture being seen as a tool to

achieve them, and to the institutionalization and marketization

of the *rupture* model. In other words, in the past 25 years,

a different way of making, exhibiting and circulating art

in Mexico joined the globalized economy with the aid of

private and public funds. Taking these points into account,

it could be argued that art in Mexico of the 1990s and

2000s encompasses a transition from a reflection on the

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broken promises of modernity from a peripheral point of
view and a challenge to the shallow image of *Mexicanidad* and its
institutionalization, to what is termed the “contemporary.”



To begin a consideration of recent Mexican art, after a new historical period was inaugurated in 1989 by the demise of the Soviet Union, we could consider *Un banquete en Tetlapayac* (2000), a film by Olivier Debroyse which debatably sums up the concerns and sensibilities of the Mexican art scene in the 1990s. The film takes up as a starting point Sergei Eisenstein's *séjour* at the Tetlapayac hacienda during an unexpected delay in the filming of *¡Qué viva México!* in 1931. Eisenstein's film was key in the elaboration of *Mexicanidad* or Mexican cultural identity in the 20th Century, based on the filmmaker's references to imagery by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jean Charlot, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and José Guadalupe Posada as well as to Mexican folklore. Oliver Debroyse's film is an experimental reenactment of Eisenstein's Tetlapayac episode, when his team spent days drinking, eating and debating at the hacienda. Debroyse asked local and international artists, intellectuals, critics and curators (Laureana Toledo, Javier de la Garza, Roberto Turnbull, Thierry Jeannot, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Silvia Gruner, Dmitri Leninovich, Lutz Becker, Melanie Smith, Sarah Minter, James Oles, Enrique Ortiga, Andrea Fraser, Serge Gilbert, Sally Stein, etc.) to play the parts of their modern analogues, and discuss modernity,

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politics, the construction of *Mexicanidad*, Eisenstein's work, the
demise of communism, aesthetics and history. The discussions are tied
to the central questions that informed art of the 1990s, including:
what would an aesthetic-political project look like in face of the
demise of socialism as a container for progressive politics - with
Cuba as a very close example - the 1980s 1990s witnessed influx of an
array of Cuban artists and intellectuals -, the Zapatista
insurrection, the ratification of NAFTA and the liberalization of
markets? Parallel to these concerns, a search for alternatives to
state sponsorship in order to avoid the instrumentalization of culture
took place, resulting in the emergence of fertile alternative
exhibitions and spaces for dialogue led by a network of artists and
critics (Salón des Aztecas, La Panadería, Curare, La Quiñonera,
Temístocles 44, Torre de los vientos, ZONA, Art Deposit, CANAIA), in
which explorations of new post-national, post-communist,
neo-conceptual sensibilities flourished.



These explorations were led by multitasking cultural producers
and by radically experimental curators such as Guillermo
Santamarina, who directed the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual and El Eco
Musems or Pip Day, who bred an entire generation of young
intrepid curators through her workshop Teratoma. In the face of

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the changes brought about by neoliberal policies, modern

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~~“nationhood” narratives became inadequate and irrelevant, and~~
Mexico began to be bereaved of cultural specificity. Market freedom came hand in hand with the liberalization of identity, historical constructions, and a postmodern pastiche-like mestizo hybridity - which were nonetheless explored in Rubén Ortiz Torres’ pieces embodying “cultural misunderstandings”, or Silvia Gruner’s video *Don’t Fuck with the Past, You Might Get Pregnant* (1995), in which the artist approaches memory through corporal contact, dislocating historical constructs by establishing an eschatological, erotic relationship to it.[\[5\]](#)



Bearing in mind that modern art and the modern world had been tied to industrial capitalism, disciplinary societies, a vanguardist sensibility (perceived as an exhausted strategy), revolution and a communist alternative (both conceived as obsolete), protectionist states including State sponsorship of the arts (in the process of dismantlement), the massification of culture, the ideologies of progress and universality, etc., it could be said that art in Mexico in the 1990s sought to come to terms with this modernity, whose realization in the Third World came to be thought of as extremely limited, for many even failed. This led to a vein in art production that delved into the precarious conditions of working from the fringes of modernity with cheap materials, simple poetic gestures and ephemeral works. Instances that come to mind here are, Damián Ortega’s sculpture *Building Module with Tortillas II* (1998), Gabriel Orozco’s photograph *Sand on Table* (1992-93), Francis Alÿs’ performance *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1998), or Silvia Gruner’s photograph *Reparar* (1999), all imbued with

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conceptual, situationist or formal concerns. What also comes
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to mind here is Pedro Reyes' reinterpretation of modern
architecture, or rather, his revitalization of functionalism
translated into the new forms of collectivity brought about
precisely through a revision of modernity's social, political
and architectural premises, in *Sombrero colectivo* (2004), *Cápuas*
(2002) or *Zikzak* (2003).[\[6\]](#)



Examples of the aesthetic sensibility of the times, are also those that explored the peripheral conditions of their own making by addressing the implications of lack of direct access to canonical works of art from North America and Europe from the 1960s and 1970s – which would be unthinkable today, due to digital technologies and the global profusion of platforms for the dissemination of globalized art, theory, criticism and history. This circumstance, inspired reenactments or remakes that were not parodies, but rather efforts to come to terms with the center by means of copies in order to neatly mark difference and distance[\[7\]](#). *Portable Broken Obelisk (For Outdoor Markets)* (1991–1993) by Eduardo Abaroa after Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* (1967) outside the Rothko Chapel in Houston, and Daniel Guzmán and Luis Felipe Ortega's video-performances *Remake* (1994–2003), for which they remade key performances from the history of art by artists like Bruce Nauman or Paul McCarthy based on images from art history books, are emblematic in this regard. There are also works that denoted their own “peripheralness” or the “thirdworldness” of Mexico, for example, Yoshua Okón's video series *Oríllese a la orilla* [Side to the Side] (1999–2000), in which the artist paid policemen money to let him make videos of

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them doing various actions (dancing, telling jokes, waving a
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nightstick/grabbing his crotch). The videos raise a not
unproblematic cynical tension between race, class and power abuse
(to the policemen by white male privilege), and the fickleness of
authority figures as a cultural trait denoting cultural
backwardness, yet a sign of the absence of a social contract in
Mexico. Another example is the work by SEMEFO, the collective to
which Teresa Margolles was a founding member, which worked with
materials obtained with or without permission from morgues. Through
a coveted catholic, eschatological logic of sacralization of the
traces of human remains by transforming them into relics/art,
SEMEFO's work alluded to the impunity, administrative corruption
and indolence prevailing in law reinforcement in Mexico, as well as
to the socio-cultural implications of bodies, especially of those
who died violent deaths.[\[8\]](#)



A group of artists working in the early 1990s associated with
the *Taller de los viernes* [Friday's Workshop], responded to
the debates on *Mexicanismo* and official art in radically
experimental ways. The group included Gabriel Orozco, *Dr. Lakra*,
Damián Ortega, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Gabriel Kuri, who met once
a week for nearly five years to discuss common concerns and to
experiment and exchange ideas. Seeking exhibition alternatives,
they became prototypes for a new, anti-institution, globalized
practice: Gabriel Orozco's *Shoe Box* at the Venice Biennale in 1993 had
defied the very notion of "peripheral artist." In 1999, they exhibited
their work through the Kurimanzutto Gallery (among other international
artists) at the Medellín market in the Roma neighborhood, embedded in
fruits and vegetable stands. The show was titled "Market Economics,"
pointing at a new paradigm of taste marked by the artists'
explorations and experiments and positing a new figure of a global

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artist who lives off his or her work. Although the work of the members
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~~of the Taller de los viernes is extremely diverse, they share some~~
formal and conceptual concerns such as construction, assemblage, the
materiality of organic and industrially produced or found objects and
more classic formal sculptural concerns (equilibrium, form, spatial
relations), and the fact that their works sometimes result in visual
puns or political commentary.

All together, narratives about the broken promises of
modernity along with the experience of political
uncertainty and the turmoil of globalization, gave leeway
to small gestures or *détournements* of the everyday through an
array of media. Artists explored the workings of Mexico City's
underground economy and forms of labor, the precariousness of
urban working class, their building materials and simple
solutions, the qualities of popular craftsmanship, etc., which
could be interpreted as statements about the social and political
situation materialized in the dislocation of objects from one
context to another. These alterations of reality had a critical
purport, politicizing urban, social, linguistic, visual and
phenomenological space. We could talk about a spatialization in
art, which includes a questioning of everyday practices, the
imagination of possible spatial worlds, material manifestations
of the social or the collective imaginary and a performative
actualization of different spatial orders and regimes in a
historicizing actual temporality. In this regard, spatialization
also implies a struggle over the meaning of places and
destabilization of cultural values and social meanings, which
were woven into subjective yet transient points of view. Perhaps
these two verses from Mónica de la Torre's poem *Crush* sum up the
subjectivization of space characteristic of what I call spatialization
in art:

A point of interest is a chamber of echoes

A place is a container of places [\[9\]](#)

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And:
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What's inside if it's all exterior. Ever notice how the private never crushes the public? But how it distorts it.[\[10\]](#)

It could be said that spatialization in art went hand in hand with the dismantling of modern, universalist ideologies: the spatiality of the city, or rather a sense of *site* began to gain relevance, a site that was indeterminate, dislocated and experienced subjectively. The city's potential as epistemic space and thus a rich carrier of sensible knowledge was exploited, and the capital city of Mexico D.F. became key in the imaginary of contemporary art, a metaphor or allegory of the shifting geopolitical borders, with urban structures seen from subjective points of view and ephemeral eloquent gestures drawing imaginary or transient social and historical realities. Examples of artworks in this vein are, Gabriel Orozco's photograph *Island within an Island* (1993) or his documented action *Until I Find Another Yellow Schwalbe* (1995) (although neither work was made in Mexico City), Silvia Gruner's video installation *Atravesar las grandes aguas ;Ventura!* (1999), Santiago Sierra's performance *Obstruction of a Freeway with a Truck's Trailer* (1998), Melanie Smith's films, *Spiral City* (2002), *Tianguis II* (2003) or *Parres Trilogy* (2004) or even Pablo Vargas Lugo's installation-sculpture *Visión antiderrapante* (2002). There is also Thomas Glassford's intervention with lights at Tlatelolco University Cultural Center, *Xipe-Totec* (2010).

Due to its prominence in art, Mexico City underwent a brief moment of exoticization in 2002, when two international exhibitions took place: *Zebra Crossing* curated by Magalí Arriola (Berlin) and *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* (New York and Berlin) curated by Klaus Biesenbach, which posited life in the city as a sensationalist metaphor illustrating the consequences of market liberalization: violence, chaos, insecurity, a deepening of inequality. In these two exhibitions, however, Mexican art got confused with Mexico,

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and as Daniel Montero put it: none of these two shows was able to
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~~escape the enunciation from center to periphery, imposing this~~
narrative in the works[111]. Later on, Mexico ceased to be peripheral
and instead, came to occupy the lead not only as a laboratory for
understanding the socio-political outcomes of neoliberalization, but
of aesthetic and literary vanguard. Amongst efforts to promote
international relations to attract foreign investment, Mexico had
implemented a policy in the 1990s to fund the education of a new class
of cognitive workers who became versatile in the lingua franca of
global art, design and architecture and who furnished the new enclaves
of sophistication and wealth throughout the country. While it is one
of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, Mexico
is one of the best places for cultural producers. Under Mexican
ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, CONACULTA and FONCA were
established in 1992 to finance cultural projects, and thus the state
became a direct sponsor of culture (in increasing partnership with the
corporate sector, especially since 2000) crafting an upper middle
class of cultural producers allowing intellectuals, writers, artists,
architects, scholars, etc. to live comfortably and to share their work
all over the world.



By the beginning of the 2000s, the global arts scene had
exploded when nomadism and “post-studio” practices became a
condition for aesthetic production. Francis Alÿs’ *Turista* (1994)
and *Gringo* (2004) or Gabriel Orozco’s *Turista maluco* (1991)
illustrate this. Moreover, the forms of knowledge that can be
derived from interventions in spatial givens with critical or
political potential were the premise for InSite, a binational
exhibition initiative that took place at the border between
Tijuana and San Diego, which had five editions that took place

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between 1992 and 2005. The border became a fertile site for
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~~exploring the changes and challenges brought about by the~~

neoliberal economy of sweatshop work and displaced bodies, the new hybridization in popular culture brought about by the flood of foreign immaterial and material merchandise, imaginaries[\[12\]](#) and identities. InSite posited the city as a laboratory to trace the complexity of global shifts through subtle reconfigurations or interventions in urban space or social structures, conceiving the border zone as a combative, troubled and politicized site, the allegory of global power relations and the cradle for global politics. Emblematic works produced under this frame are: Silvia Gruner's installation *The Middle of the Road* (1994) and video *Narrow Slot/Sueño Paradójico* (2001), Javier Téllez's performance *One Flew Over the Void* (2005), Marco Erre's *Trojan Horse* (1997), Gustavo Artigas' performance *The Rules of the Game* (2000), Judy Wertheim's *Brinco*, 2005 or Krystoff Wodiczko's *Tijuana Projection*, 2001. Debatably, a model of aesthetic intervention in public spaces was disseminated by InSite and establishing a platform for other biennials in cities across the world. The platform consisted in inviting artists from elsewhere to do site-specific interventions, thus playing a key role in the transmigration of contemporary art. As soon as the dark outcome of globalization came into light (massive displacement and inequality, war and violence, hunger, financial crisis, environmental devastation), this model reached its limit. Because this model implies having artists foreign to local situations intervene to implement more or less emancipatory or symbolic apparatuses in conflict zones, the interventions had begun to appear more and more like palliatives or evanescent solutions to the devastation brought about by neoliberal globalization. The limitations of this proto-political model of intervention are cynically exposed in Renzo Martens' film *Enjoy Poverty III* (2006) and in his project to bring cognitive work to Congo, *The Institute of Human Activities* (2012-ongoing) [\[13\]](#) and articulated by writer Leslie Jamison, when she describes the ethical implications of being a foreigner walking around Tijuana in 2010 at the peak of the violence:

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*I think maybe if I walk the streets where someone was afraid,
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~~where an entire city was afraid, I'll maybe understand the fear~~
a little better. This is the grand fiction of tourism, that
bringing our bodies somewhere draws that place close to us, or
we to it. It's a quick fix of empathy. We take it like a shot
of tequila, or a bump of coke from the key to a stranger's
home. We want the inebriation of presence to dissolve the fact
of difference. Sometimes the city fucks on the first date, and
sometimes it doesn't. But always, always, we wake up in the
morning and we find we didn't know it at all.*[\[14\]](#)

By the 1990s, the colonial distinction between center and periphery had become irrelevant: cultural production and capital began to celebrate decentralization, rendering the distinction between first and third worlds obsolete, at a moment in which the Other had been rendered transparent by art, ethnography and journalism. The globalized market, with its ability to go beyond national divisions integrated first and third worlds, forcing certain areas of the third world to “develop,” creating pockets of wealth and cultural sophistication within the third world, and areas of destitution and misery within the first. The demise of communism in 1989 and the discourses on development brought about by globalization, made the “Third World” disappear as an aesthetic-political category, which was substituted by a temporally equivalent yet being “elsewhere” (from our here). The border (or other formerly peripheral cities and areas) are the “elsewhere,” which is always a site of urgent intervention and imminent danger, epistemically and symbolically rich, and yet seldom a site of contestation, where the *underclass*, the excluded from global processes survive in precarious conditions (favelas or misery belts, zones disconnected from the economy, neglected by States, war zones

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before “pacification”, etc.). In this context, Francis Alÿs’ *Reel aasd* ~~*Unreel* (2012) filmed and shown in Kabul in a cinema in ruins, is a~~ sign that contemporary art in Kabul (as a branch of Documenta 13 in 2012), arrived before the fire stopped and transnational subcontractors and corporations came to reconstruct, evidencing how art has become a palliative tool as well as harbinger and inseparable companion to neoliberal socio-economic processes.



Alternatives to the homogenizing cartography drawn by Empire -

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the decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that has
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progressively incorporated the entire global realm within its
open, expanding frontiers[15] - were sought by instances such as
“Conceptualisms of the South Network,” a plural platform for
cultural mediators for challenging and proposing more equitable
forms of producing and sharing knowledge at a transnational
scale, under the premise that “Southern” knowledge processes come
from subordinate places, bodies and aesthetics that can challenge
Empire[16]. Another effort to draw an alternative cartography to
Empire is Pablo Helguera’s *School of Panamerican Unrest*, a public art
project initiated in 2003, which alludes to the Panamerican ideals of
the 19th Century of American integration, through a voyage by car,
from Anchorage to Tierra del Fuego in 2006. At each stop and in a wide
array of venues, a portable school was set up to discuss and to house
performances around Panamericanism.



Half into the first decade of the 2000s, discourses about
globalization had advocated the overcoming of geographic divisions,
linguistic barriers and ethnic differences, undermining the
modernist concepts of Nation and the modernist ideals of ethnical
and formal purity. Within this discourse, “Mexico” became instead
of a geographical area, a concept defined outside of its own
territory by means of global economic exchanges (immigrants,
cultural capital abroad, exported goods like culture).
Paradoxically, the all-encompassing power of globalization caused
the proliferous homogenization of some aspects of modernism: to

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English and conceptual art as the lingua franca of cultural
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exchange, can be added suburban or alternative urban lifestyles,
generic consumable ethnic identities, and other lifestyle and
cultural traits disseminated by the global mass media (Starbucks,
Apple computers), democracy, neo-modernist architecture or even the
discourse of human rights. In this regard, Miguel Ventura's work
from the 1990s set up a critique of the globalization of Western
modernism, specifically, the utopian aspects of fascism,
capitalism, psychoanalysis and abstraction, their spreading
throughout the world, and their colonializing effects in the face
of market liberalization. Through a fictitious institution, the
"New Interterritorial Language Committee" (NILC), Ventura set up an
ideological project with proto-fascist traits and a system of
inversions thematizing the production of new subjects enabled and
encouraged to contain and to produce their own "universal" language
as a cure from alienation and colonial feelings of inferiority.
NILC is a parody of society's primal sources of repression
(language and educational institutions, as well as cultural spaces
and social rituals) that uncannily mirrors some of the aspects of
globalized Western modernity normalized in our lives. His video, *How
Can I Love You, My New Little One?* (2000), part of
his 2001 Carrillo Gil Museum exhibition, "The PMS
Dilemma," depicts a NILC transformation ritual that
enables a subject to become the producer of "his own
private language." This echoes Frederic Jameson's
assertion that modern fragmentation had begun to
splinter society as private languages came to be
developed by each (ethnic, economic) group to the
point that each individual became a kind of
linguistic island.[\[17\]](#) Accordingly, Ventura's "PMS Dilemma" is
a critique of the normalization of Western modernism and
English as the *linguae francae* of globalization, expressed through the
incessant creation of private languages and idiosyncratic
self-expressions through a homogenization of the codes of modernity
and the fragmentation of national, communitarian and familial ties.

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Working from the diaspora in California, Guillermo

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Gómez-Peña's work in the 1980s and 1990s was aligned with identity politics and aesthetics in the US. Later on, Gómez-Peña's performative works began to question the inequalities of the current global order and to celebrate: immigration, nomadism, hybridized identities and practices, to transmit urgency for new strategies for political dissent, to denounce xenophobia, precarious labor conditions and to invent strategies to revitalize communities, through new technologies, virtual reality and cybernetics, to elucidate the withering of national consciousness, etc. In his video-performance reciting a poem, *Declaration of Poetic Disobedience* (2005), and despite its liberal disclaimer condemning terrorism, Gómez-Peña carves out a discursive position to contest and resist the homogenizing and devastating power of globalization by reconfiguring the notions of "us" and "them," highlighting how cultural differences and contestatory positions from subalterns had become commodities.



Taking up visual culture as a site for politicization along the lines of feminist video and performance artists in the 1970s, the work of three women: Ximena Cuevas, Lorena Wolffer and Minerva Cuevas has a common concern in elucidating how the media and corporate marketing construct imaginaries that become entrenched in cultural assumptions and how they can be contested or overturned. For example, Ximena Cuevas' videos can be described as visual culture satires filtered through personal idiosyncrasies, distancing the viewer from the melodramatic spirit of Mexican culture. For her part, Lorena Wolffer's work operates at the

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intersection of art and activism addressing the cultural
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~~fabrication of gender, and has included pedagogical platforms for~~
collective development to counter gender violence and to give women
their voice. Her iconic series *Soy totalmente de hierro* [I am
Totally Steel], consists of 10 billboards scattered throughout
the city in 2000, parodying a department store's marketing
campaign that capitalizes stereotypes about white upper-class
women consuming and posing, posited as the female ideal. Minerva
Cuevas founded in 2000 *Mejor Vida Corp.* [Better Life. Corp] a
multimedia project embodied in a corporation geared at
identifying and solving poor residents of Mexico City. There is
also Daniela Rossell's series *Ricas y Famosas* [Rich and Famous] of
almost 100 photographs depicting women members of the Mexican
oligarchy. Rossell's photographs can be described as ethnographic
studies of the ruling class's decadent fantasies embodied in the
women's poses and their home interiors. The images express a
contradiction between the home as a "private" space vs. the "public"
concerns of the (gender and class) politics at stake. By providing her
subjects the opportunity to construct their own visual
images/subjectivities, the women enact fantasies of
self-objectification and sexualization, merging with the kitsch yet
luxurious décor of their homes, painstakingly maintained by the
servants who sometimes appear in the images.



Rossell was associated, along with artists like Miguel
Calderón, Yoshua Okón, Carlos Amoraes, Artemio, Pablo
Helguera, Minerva Cuevas, Claudia Fernández, Gustavo Artigas,
Daniel Guzmán, Richard Moszka, Luis Felipe Ortega, Sofía
Tabóas, Diego Toledo, Jonathan Hernández, Pedro Reyes and
Vicente Razo to the "Generation XX". They showed at La
Panadería (founded in 1994 by Calderón and Okón), [\[18\]](#) and

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Pablo Helguera characterized their work as a hybrid between

~~Mexican modernity and global pop and art historical~~

references.^[19] For instance, Miguel Calderón used the camera to create a one-step removed subjectivism, manipulating his own image as a front for the unstable contemporary Mexican cultural/social and political identity. Debatably, Calderón shared with Okón and Amoraless a cynical stance toward the fatal outcome of globalization, which early on in Mexico, came to be synonymous with the sweatshop economy and thus with the denigration of laborer's living and working conditions. There is, for example, Calderón's 1998 series of photographs in which workers (janitors, guards) from the MUNAL (National Museum) pose emulating paintings from the museum, evidencing the working class' estrangement from "high culture" obliquely addressing race issues. In Carlos Amoraless' *Flames Maquiladora* (2001-02), viewers were invited to cut cherry red vinyl to manufacture Mexican *luchadores* [wrestling] boots, which were sold afterward as art objects (the installation included ads with the following advertisement: "Work for fun! Work for me!"). For *All Employees* (2002), Yoshua Okón visited Carl's Jr.'s restaurants in LA with the purpose of filming short videos in which each of the employees introduces him/herself behind the counter as if to a customer. Then, Okón spliced all the videos together transforming image and sound into an abstract mass projected behind a real counter at a real scale. What these works have in common is that they underscore the relevance of new or older forms labor in sustaining the global economy while making invisible the conditions of labor under neoliberalism. In the same cynical vein, the work of Santiago Sierra simultaneously underscores and invisibilizes labor by juxtaposing bodies that are worn out more than other bodies, which have been uprooted or dispossessed with more privileged bodies in "confrontations" in museums, galleries or biennials (*Workers Who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, 2000 or *Wall Enclosing a Space*, 2003). In Sierra's work, paid labor is exploited at three levels: by the machinery that wears out their vitality, as it is put at the service of the artist's own cynicism and for the aesthetic enjoyment of the

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privileged class. The cynicism and ambivalence that characterizes
this vein of work could be ascribed to the “post-communist
condition,” in which a formalization of revolutionary
disillusionment is brought about by the demise of the Modernist
communist utopia. According to this narrative underlying
vanguardist art, workers would be emancipated from the tyranny of
work and the bourgeoisie; this possible future however, was
truncated by the fact that communism took place as an event in
actual history failing as ideology as well as in practice. With
contemporary cynical art, in turn, the alienation purported by
consumer society does not appear to be something problematic and
neither does the deepening of inequality and unemployment, as the
proliferation of vulnerable subjects becomes normalized. Another
sensibility that we could describe as “post-communist,” is present
in work based in futile, grand gestures that lead to nothing.
Silvia Gruner’s *500 of Impotence or Possibility* (1995) and *Away from
You* (2001) are based on Sisyphean tasks condemned to eternally repeat
themselves – dipping with a crane a 500 Kg necklace at the San Diego
Bay and swimming in one direction in a loop – leading only to
frustration. There are also Enrique Ježik’s powerless aggressions
such as *A Kilometer* (2004) or *Untitled (Damage and Reparation)*
(2005), which involve heavy machinery, and Francis Alÿs’
ambivalent *Paradoxes of Praxis*: a series of poetic actions in
which the artist performs seemingly futile tasks or labors
which may or not become commentaries on the socio-political
situation. For the most recent one, *Paradox # 5: Sometimes We Dream as
We Live, and Sometimes We Live as We Dream* (2014), Alÿs kicks a ball
of fire in the destroyed urban and social tissue of Ciudad Juárez.
These works operate in a perpetual present evoking a waiting stance to
which nothing will ever follow.

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Artists like Edgar Orlaineta and Carla Herrera-Pratts, associated with Art Deposit, the space founded in 1996 by Steffan Bruggeman, Iñiqui Bonillas and Ulises Mora, reinterpret modern, conceptual and minimal art strategies to address socio-political concerns (Carla Herrera-Pratts's *Remesas-Sending Money Back*, 2003-), personal preoccupations (Iñiqui Bonillas, *J.R. Plaza Archive*, 2003) or to produce institutionally-critical conceptual statements, as in Bruggeman's work (*Naked Girl*, 2003 or *Show Titles*, 2000-). There are also Diego Teo's translations of the readymade to visual metaphors and spatial markers (*Untitled*, 2003), Antonio Vega Macotella's or Claudia Fernández's transposition of site-specificity to community-based work (*Time Exchange*, 2006-2010), Julieta Aranda's exploration of the components of capitalism: politics, territory, time and exchange the components of capitalism through conceptual strategies (*You Had No Ninth of May*, 2008), or Mariana Castillo-Deball's archaeological research on the role objects have in how we understand history, and how they can deliver new connections and meanings (*Stelae Storage*, 2013). Some artists belonging to this generation reworked the 1990s concern with public space and the spatialization of art by blurring the interior or exterior quality of the publicness inherent to artistic production. In other words, art came to reflect upon sites located temporally, highlighting how their status as public or private was no longer relevant in the face of the rampant privatization of everything. For instance, Héctor Zamora's intervention on the façade of the Carrillo Gil Museum, *Paracaidista*, Av. Revolución 1608 Bis (2004), for which the artist erected a precarious housing unit with self-construction techniques popularly used in

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building shanty-towns. The ambivalent status of the

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~~private or public character of the space was made explicit~~

by the artist taking up residence for three months in the space, pointing also at the incipient privatization of funding for the arts.^[20] Marcela Armas' *Un día de trabajo* [A Day of Work], 2007, is a performance in which the artist asked ten medical assistants at the IMSS [The Mexican Institute for Social Health] to perform their daily tasks by wearing an enormous uniform that kept all of them bound together. In the performance, private interest, collective desires and the need to negotiate all of them for the sake of efficiency come into tension, connecting societal exteriority with the inside of the bureaucratic workings of the institution. Moreover, Diego Berruecos' visual investigative archive, *La solución somos todos* [We are All the Solution] (2011) delves into the visual history of the PRI [Institutional Revolution Party], evoking the politics inherent to the language, landscape, collective memory and PRIísta architecture, interrogating how these sensible manifestations have become part of Mexican culture. Their material and sensible omnipresence are the grounds for taste and an ideological unconscious sensibility.



Within the vein of institutional critique, the museum became the medium of the work of art, submitted to the modernist tradition of reflexivity. For instance, Pablo Helguera posited the institution of art (comprised of social relations, discourses, a physical space

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framework) as a means and as a theme in his work in the 2002
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symposium he organized *The Museum as Medium*, which
examined the legacy of institutional critique, in his book
Contemporary Art Style Manual (2007), the *Artoons*, 2 volumes of
artworld cartoons (2009) or his advice blog *The Estheticist* (2010-11).
Mario García Torres's work also comes to mind, based on hidden stories
or rumors from the history of art or film, which he translates to
videos, books, exhibitions, vitrines or postcards.



Analyzing art historical lineage and paternity, García Torres has revisited artists like Robert Barry, Alighiero Boetti, or Dr. Atl, to investigate the mechanisms that make possible that their works become art, exploring the system that supports their narratives. There has been further institutional critique work by Adriana Lara *Art Film I: Ever Present, Yet Ignored* (2006) and *Banana Peel* (2008), by the collective Tercerunquinto, and Débora Delmar. These instances of institutional critique seem conservative when compared to Miguel Ventura's *Cantos cívicos* 2008-2009, a *Gestammt*-installation that inaugurated MUAC, or the National University's Museum of Contemporary Art. Ventura's kamikaze-vanguardist exhibition drew an analogy between 1929 and 2008 as years that mark both the beginning of the financial crisis as well as an era of racism and xenophobia. Inside an enormous structure parodying contemporary museum *starchitecture*, Ventura staged NILC's transformation into a fascist regime. The structure included a collection of Nazi paraphernalia, a vivarium for rats, tunnels and a gigantic collage that included swastikas interlaced with dollar signs, portraits of U.S. soldiers fallen in the war of Iraq, heterosexual and gay porn,

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images of fecal matter, a collection of ethnic dolls hung

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~~hierarchically (white on top, brown and black at the bottom), all~~
presided by Milton Friedman being fed shit flowing from a silver spoon. Ventura's installation drew an analogy between 1930s Nazism as a sensible, cultural and social apparatus that existed to legitimate the extermination of its racial and ideological Other, and contemporary art's ties to the global neoliberal oligarchy as their means to legitimize and/or obscure the ongoing processes of dispossession, environmental destruction, extermination and deepening of inequality.



The constant transmigration of artists across the globe with Mexico City as epicenter, attests to the fact that Mexico has been consolidated as a crucial field for the production and circulation of global contemporary art. The field has expanded its operations transcending the divisions between institutional and alternative spaces, private and public, as new spaces and agents keep on emerging in the context of a blooming art market, exhibition, production and education spaces. This has been achieved through a mix of State and corporate funding and specific policies to support and export cultural production. For instance, the State's collaboration with the art market investing in the Zona MACO art fair - not only buying but also covering travel for international museum directors, curators and gallerists - and in general implementing an official program to guide the symbolic development

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to satisfy the demand for cultural, creative assets and the
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appetite for luxury goods.[\[21\]](#)

The search for alternative exhibition and dialogue spaces which was a concern in the 1990s, had become by the mid 2000s legitimization work, achieved through rupture or contestation of discourses and practices, through marketing strategies, and by weaving networks with certain discourses within the institution of art and by creating alternative spaces or practices. An example is the major exhibition that took place in 2007, *The Age of Discrepancy: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968-1997* at the MUCA UNAM (the Museum of Science and Art at Mexico's National Autonomous University). From the point of view of academic and historical legitimization, the exhibition sought to build a narrative of the plastic of modern Mexico, positing a genealogy of contemporary art in which the modernist utopia is translated to a modernity that enters a crisis with the demands and repression of the student movement in 1968. In this narrative, 1968 inaugurates an era in the Mexican arts in which artists affirm their right to disagree with the canon dictated by institutions, the market and conventional taste promoted by cultural industries. The exhibition posited "discrepancy" as a healthy and non-violent option to authoritarianism and art as the proper field in which societies can analyze, question and correct itself to undo "authoritarian temptations." In this narrative, the crisis of Modernity was followed by mourning the failure of modernization in Mexico in the 1990s preceding a new neoliberal "democratic" era, in which cultural institutions are consolidated as containers of dissidence bestowing to art (of increasing corporate sensibility) a function of disagreement, revelation, shock or normalizing cynicism. In that regard, the UNAM became the sentinel of the heritage of contemporary art - especially as the host of the University's Contemporary Art Museum (or MUAC), inaugurated in 2008 holding a collection of dissident art since 1968. The University has therefore become the last standing bastion of the rapidly waning education system in

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Mexico and the official container of (middle class, but not
indigenous) symbolic discontent sponsored by corporate
interests. The increasing corporatization of art, through
sponsorship of symposia, projects, exhibitions, grants,
publications and the presence of board members in public
museums representing corporate power and interests, has given
leeway to the slow transfer of cultural capital to the
corporate sector. Furthermore, in the past 10-15 years, an
emerging creative class has been giving life to certain areas
in the Mexico City where galleries, gourmet bakeries, boutique
hotels, design shops, architecture offices, visual artists'
studios, etc. have proliferated. Highlighting the ties between
the real estate economy and the art market, this cultural
transformation has been also marked by two philanthropists who
have erected museums in an old car manufacturing area in Mexico
City known as Nuevo Polanco, populated by skyscrapers lodging
transnational corporate headquarters, luxury housing and
offices. The Soumaya Museum's populist philanthropy is
reflected in the mediocre quality of its universalizing art
collection, while the Jumex Museum embodies corporate high
culture with a holding of international contemporary art, from
Minimalism to young global art. Both museums reflect company
interests - the recent cancellation of the Hermann Nitsch show
at the Jumex Museum attests to this -, [\[22\]](#) as well as their owner's
tastes, and serve as public relations and marketing instruments while
they seek to contribute to the country's "human capital."

In this panorama, it seems difficult to think about a horizon
of critical autonomy. Art in particular and culture in general
are not adjacent to the State, corporations and media but are
the central machinery for the administration of consensus and
the channeling of antagonism. Moreover, the Mexican context is
imbricated in global processes and is thus losing its logic of
specificity; as a consequence, we are facing problems and
challenges that are analogous in other countries that are not
necessarily in the South. What distinguishes contemporary from

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modern art is that nowadays, art and culture are at the thick
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of neoliberal processes: not only culture in general and contemporary art in particular are power's arms, but States and corporations are investing in them because they conceive them as sources of surplus value, economic growth and palliatives to the ravages caused by neoliberal policies in the social tissue. The real problem here has to do with the fact that art no longer designates a reproductive or representative realm but a field of social and economic production and power. Art's autonomy has therefore become a problem not because it legitimates anything as art or anyone as an artist but because it is a realm for the production of surplus value. Moreover, the *Artworld* is part of an economy of specialization and production of social relationships that materializes in exhibitions, conferences, residences, vernissages, homages, VIP parties and presentations. The links and the network created are more important than the works or projects themselves, therefore, the *Artworld* is a context and a social network of distribution. At the same time, contemporary art is an amusement park for the 1% with the function of embellishing capitalism. This is why contemporary art is inextricable from precarity, exploitation, dispossession, the war against organized crime and real estate bubbles. If contemporary art's ambition is to condense artistically the economic processes of globalization in an attempt to understand the present, then it will need to take into account an ideological critique as well as its inextricability from the processes of late capitalist cultural production.

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*sensibility and common sense embedded in urban planning, work and
life, culture, social movements, mourning and women's struggle.*

[11] This text is perhaps the beginning of a larger investigation; due to its scope and limitations, it had to be all-encompassing and yet reductive. I would like to thank Jimena Acosta, Tatiana Cuevas, Pip Day, Silvia Gruner, Damián Ortega, and Miguel Ventura for their generous readings and comments of earlier versions of this text.

[12] Ibid., p. 19. Akin to what Nicolas Borriaud termed the “Altermodern” in his *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

[13] Miwon Kwon, “Questionnaire on the Contemporary October 130 (Fall 2009), p. 17.

[14] Frederic Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity” *New Left Review* 92 (March-April 2015).

[15] Cuauhtémoc Medina,
“Irony, Barbary,
Sacrilege” (1997) trans.
Ellen Camus, available
online: <http://v1.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/zironia2.html>

[16] Tatiana Cuevas, interview with Pedro Reyes, *Bomb* 94 (Winter 2006), available
online: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2779/pedro-reyes>

[17] Olivier Debroyse, *La era de la discrepancia arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997* (México D.F., MUAC, 2007), p. 406.

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[8] Ana Romandía, "Semefo 1990-" *Artes e historia de México* (Octubre 2011), available online: http://www.arts-history.mx/pieza_mes/index.php?id_pieza=30092011170758

[9] Ibid., p. 28.

[10] Mónica de la Torre, "Crush," *Public Domain* (New York: Roof Books, 2008), p. 28.

[11] Daniel Montero, *El cubo de Rubik, arte mexicano en los años 90* (México DF: Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, 2013), p. 217.

[12] As the creative and visual dimension of the social world.

[13] See: <http://www.renzomartens.com/news>

[14] Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*, (New York: Graywolf Press, 2014), p. 59.

[15] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xii.

[16] Joaquín Barriendos, et al, "Micropolitics of the Archive - Part I: Southern Conceptualisms Network and the Political Possibilities or Microhistories" *Field Notes* 02, available online: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/FieldNotes/Details/1208>

[17] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* Hal Foster, Ed. (New York: The New Press, 1983) p. 136.

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[18] See: Jimena Acosta Romero, "La Panadería, 1994-1996: un fenómeno sociológico, ~~aas~~ético y generacional". Tesis de licenciatura en Historia del Arte, Universidad Iberoamericana, México, D.F., 1999.

[19] Pablo Helguera, "La generación XX y su doble encrucijada" *Exit Mexico* ed. Rosa Olivares (2005), p. 72.

[20] See: Edgar Alejandro Hernández e Inbal Miller Gurfinkel, eds., *Sin Límites: Arte Contemporáneo en la ciudad de México 2000-2010* (México D.F.: Promotora Cubo Blanco A.C., 2013)

[21] See: Blanca González Rosas, "Arte: Zona MACO y los invitados de CONACULTA" *Proceso* April 19, 2012, available online: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=304846> and also: Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Art and the Cultural Turn: Farewell to Committed, Autonomous Art?" *e-flux journal* #42 (February 2013) available online: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-and-the-cultural-turn-farewell-to-committed-autonomous-art/>

[22] See Victoria Burnett, "Museo Jumex Cancels a Hermann Nitsch Show" *New York Times*

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/25/arts/design/museo-jumex-cancels-a-hermann-nitsch-show.html?_r=0