12 2016

A common place is not my place: artistic relations between Mexico and the United States in a globalised world

Daniel Montero Fayad

Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas de la UNAM.

Transalated: Daniel Montero Fayad and George Hutton

ABSTRACT: The positioning of Mexico as a country of transit, since the end of the 1980s, particularly in relation to the United States, allows us to take into account its geopolitical condition as a place of global delocalisation and relocalisation. At the same time, we can therefore consider the effects of this situation on both countries. In this condition of transit, the narrative possibilities of a historical discourse both to and from Mexico and the United States have changed considerably, modifying thus the ways of understanding artistic production. In this sense, we must understand the correlations not as an inside and an outside, but rather in terms of flow and porosity. This article shows how narratives and practices within contemporary Mexican art have changed based on the bilateral relations with the Unites States, and it also elaborates on some particular cases in which local artistic production has transformed in the last 20 years due to the flows relative to the Mexican territory.

KEYWORDS: Mexico, United States, contemporary art, flows, transit, delocalisation, relocalisation

ISSN:2173-0040

1. Flow as a starting point

In 2013, the book *ZeroZeroZero* by Roberto Saviano was published. It suggests, among other things, that it is the drug industry and its structure that moves, to a certain extent, the global economic system. Saviano claims that without the cocaine trade, the financial structure of the world, both legal and illegal, would collapse. Regardless of whether this hypothesis is true or not, what interests me is the way the book pieces together his argument regarding this trafficking. Interestingly, Saviano does not begin by focusing on cocaine-producing countries - Colombia, Peru, Bolivia - but rather in

Mexico, as the country of transit for goods and money. According to the writer, the structure of this business is based on the privileges generated by globalisation in which the organisations that make such transit possible, as well as the flow and the deterritorialisation, are who now have the power over territorialised producers. Mexico is a privileged country of transit due to its geographical, political, economic and social characteristics. It also has an active traffic that depends on its sharing a border with the largest consumer of drugs in the world, the United States.

A few years earlier, in 2011, Frederic Martel published *Mainstream Culture*, a book that describes the way globalised cultural trade works. In addition to identifying the U.S as the leading producer in the global cultural industry, he depicts Mexico as one of the preferred places for cultural localisation and delocalisation. This country is an important stop-off for many of the cultural products that come from Latin America before arriving to Miami, the Latino capital of the United States: if the product is successful in that country, it might gain access to the global market via the United States.

Clearly, the argument I am trying to set forth here is not a coincidence. The positioning of Mexico as a country of transit since the late 80s, particularly in relation to the United States, is significant because it allows us to consider its geopolitical condition as a place of delocalisation and global relocalisation. At the same time, we can thus think about the effects that this situation has on the two countries. In this condition of transit, the narrative possibilities of a historical discourse from and towards Mexico and the United States have changed significantly, modifying the ways of understanding artistic production. In that sense, we should understand the correlations not as an inside and an outside, but rather in terms of flow and porosity.

ISSN:2173-0040

The nationalisation of Mexican art

Firstly, to understand the deregulation and flow of and within Mexican art and the new considerations of territory and time, it is necessary to identify what has been transformed and how. From my perspective, what was called into question was the founding mythological time from particular stories based on the notion of the everyday. I am interested in showing that questioning the hegemonic narrative of Mexican art highlights the ways in which modern art has been considered in the country. By challenging artistic modernity, a question about time and space came up within artistic mediums, one which simultaneously enquired about the conditions of both the national and artistic subject. In Mexico, what is at stake is the possibility of thinking about the tension between mythical and historical times, which to a large extent defines the conception of identity as described by Stuart Hall (2003) and Andreas Huyssen (2003).

It is important to note that there are at least two factors that influenced the appearance of such tensions. On the one hand there are the ways in which art, culture and education were considered together under the administration of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in over 70 years of government from 1929 to 2000; these ways were mainly related to the conceptions of painting and the singling out of those artistic media that had to do with ideologised narrative forms. On the other hand there is the constant tension with the hegemonic forms that came from outside, particularly from the United States and Europe (the artistic centres), and also those with which Mexico did have a connection. All of this was combined with new ways of making art that no longer accepted a local genealogy as an explanation for their appearance and operation.

With regard to the first issue, I would like to point out three forms of narratives and management that, despite not being the only ones, show the configuration, in Mexico, of ways of being in art that could not be detached from the correlation between the national and the Mexican. Such narratives are rooted in the conceptions of what might be the modern in Mexico(1).

Firstly, it is important to highlight the role played by the figure of José Vasconcelos regarding Mexican muralism. Vasconcelos, who was the Secretary of Education in the government of Álvaro Obregón from 1921 to 1924, was the first to establish the relationship between art, education and culture in a country that was seeking an identity that would bring the population together after the revolution. Vasconcelos was the first to promote mural painting, an art form that effectively (and dramatically) related the national history that they wanted to show in the murals as a way of promoting education through images. As Betzabé Arreola (2009) states:

Vasconcelos considered that educating the masses was the way to make them into “Mexicans”, into “new citizens”; these ideals were clearly expressed in his most important philosophical thesis, which postulated that all energetic acts of the spirit could be resolved in an aesthetic act; and culture would thus be set forth as a key factor of his politics, to give the nation an aesthetic reality. Hence the great impulse he gave to muralist painting, to vernacular music and literature as expressions of a national Mexican culture, or in Vasconcelos’s own terms, a “genuine nationality”; whose clear political-nationalist roots sought to legitimise the post-revolutionary regime. (p.5)

Thus, Mexican painting was incorporated into a national project from which it could no longer escape, and it was used by the PRI governments throughout the twentieth century. It is worth noting that muralism was only considered Mexican if it could explicitly demonstrate “Mexican-ness” within these illustrated narratives.

Secondly, I would like to mention Octavio Paz and his relation with the figure of Rufino Tamayo around 1950. Paz identified in Tamayo the possibility of a “rupture” with muralism, because for him Tamayo’s painting was “pure”, as opposed to muralism which was more akin to ideological forms that tried to impose a government-linked discourse.
In addition, the purity of Tamayo’s painting established a relationship outside of the borders of Mexico because it was directly linked to international modern painting (Braque, Motherwell). Tamayo was a modern painter as well as Mexican, and he was able to stay in touch with his “roots” precisely due to how modernity was circumscribed in his work. He was undoubtedly a “universal Mexican” (p.269). As a result, and given the fact that Tamayo is a modern painter, he can refer to the origins of Mexican culture using this notion of purity that allows him to capture the essence of the forms (2).

Finally I would like to refer to Fernando Gamboa and the device he designed to exhibit Mexican art both inside and outside the country. Gamboa was one of the founders of the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) and in 1947 he was appointed Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts and later, from 1947 to 1952, he served as Deputy Director General of the INBA. As Carlos Molina indicated (2005), “Fernando Gamboa implemented a framework that basically proposed a historical continuum of art, a national spirit of Mexico, over several centuries. In its form, it put emphasis on the ensemble, however it sought to articulate the exhibit around specific pieces, masterpieces that served as evidence of a wider argument” (118). Precisely from his relationship with the government through the INBA, Gamboa developed a general narrative of the history of Mexican art and his exhibiting format was very effective because it allowed for the recording of a great continuity of local art, starting from pre-Hispanic art.

Therefore, the stances of Vasconcelos, Paz and Gamboa would be followed as guidelines for exhibiting Mexican art throughout the twentieth century. For example, the exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries,* which was shown in

ARTÍCULO
ISSN:2173-0040

1990 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, followed precisely these principles. Furthermore, these narratives were produced and managed by the State (the State managed culture without the intervention of private initiatives), as a way of self-regulating the history based on mythological forms that showed the country as “always culture”(3).

Despite this, if the great Mexican narratives tried to link time and space based on the notion of the national, the historical narratives in the United States produced a different way of putting forward Mexican art. First, it was deemed crucial in the history of international art, but then, since the 50s, Mexican art was expelled from these narratives when American art became hegemonic in the world. This can be understood particularly by the way in which the United States perceived Mexican and American modernity, which were initially linked, but then, following World War II, the former came to be subordinated to the latter. As shown by Gabriela Piñero (2013), the designs made by Alfred H. Barr Jr. in 1933 and 1941, that conceptualize the MoMA of New York, showed that integration between American and Mexican art was still possible because there was a reciprocal identification with the transformative power of art in a social context in both places. Nevertheless, after 1946 this enterprise was almost unthinkable as a result of the ideology that depicted Mexican muralism as a narrative and figurative art, linked to local and revolutionary ideas. This went against a pure, universal and free abstract art that showed the values of the United States.

Once Mexican art had been excluded from hegemonic art, i.e. from the narrative that defined Western art at that time, it would not be allowed back in as something significant - rather, it would be treated as derivative, or lesser art. In short, my point is that while Mexican art was becoming increasingly wrapped up in its own logic and mythological forms of expression, it was gradually being pushed out of the canon. In the same vein, Mexican art was not only getting trapped in its own territory but also in its own time, under pressure from these international tensions.

A process of denationalisation

The question that remains, after thinking about this alienation of Mexican art that happened during most of the twentieth century, is what happened to Mexican art in order for it to enter the aforementioned dynamics of flow. From a general perspective, what happened was a deregulation at different levels (historical, economic, social and symbolic) that affected not only the territory but also its temporality and also the great narratives, making visible other events that had historically been fundamental and foundational but were not deemed suitable to be representational. The interesting part of this deregulation is that it came about due to both internal and external factors that allowed for the appearance of new forms of production, new forms of representation and in general new ways of conceiving culture.

I have described in the past some of the consequences of the different apertures of Mexico in the 90s. Above all, in *Rubik’s Cube: Mexican Art in the 90s*, published in 2014, I showed in detail how the institutional transformation of the country since the late 80s, in terms of politics and economics, allowed symbolic flows to and from Mexico that shifted the centre of art production. In general, I argued that there was a paradigm shift in the national culture as a consequence of globalisation, which in Mexico began as trade liberalisation in the 80s and was definitively cemented by the coming into force of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Mexico and Canada, in 1994. The reasons for the aperture of those years are fundamental for Mexican art, for at least two reasons: firstly a “North American” form of cultural administration, involving the private sector, was instated in a country in which this activity was formerly controlled by the State, as in the French tradition that did not permit such investment. Secondly, culture began to be treated like a cultural industry as in the United States, a situation that produced an unprecedented symbolic exchange.

ISSN:2173-0040

However, this hypothesis has been read in a deterministic way, in which the economic process modified artistic practices. Despite the fact that, in many ways, this connection might be true (for example in the relation between the value of the art works and the art market), this time I would like to make reference to the way in which the dominant narratives of art entered into a crisis caused by the artistic practices themselves. Instead of referring to historical facts arranged chronologically, I would like to show some situations in which the emergence of certain discontinuities strained the narratives of Mexican art.

Alexis Salas notes in her text *On the Dematerializing and Rematerializing of art in the Mexican Nineties*, of 2015, that there are practices in the Mexican art of the 90s that dematerialize and rematerialize. Following the famous text of 1968 by Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler: *Six years: The dematerialization of the art object*, Salas explains that Dematerialization is not, in fact, deconstruction, which is based no a dismantling of binary relationships. Rather, the conceptual utility of dematerialization is the productive friction it generates between object and artwork, rendering them no longer one and the same, but rather able to exist without one another and no longer in collusion with the ideas of document and relic. To consider the artist`s presence with the artwork not only at the same time that is being made but also at various sites and moments as it is being (un)made is to re-imagine it.(p. 47)

One of the examples given by Salas is *The Exterminator* (1993) by Luis Felipe Ortega, a video in which the artist wears fumigating equipment on his back and a protective mask, and he then proceeds to fumigate the fungus on the wall of a house. The work refers to the book *The Exterminator* by William Burroughs as a clear exercise of comprehension (study) of the writer's work but by other means - according to Peter Weibel (2013), it can be considered as a rewrite (p. 20).

Salas's reading shows how artists from different traditions can coexist within the work of one artist. Thinking that art and the artwork may exist separately, for Salas "Ortega offers an alternative story, a second option, that rethinks and proceeds in a different way to the first" (p. 47). But she does not say why. Essentially, Ortega offers a different story but not because there is a dematerialization. The interesting thing about this piece is that the established narrative of Burroughs can be broken down by the "everyday" involved in Ortega's piece: by performing a simple action such as fumigating a house, Ortega literally places Burroughs's piece in context, as something also local. Burroughs's work is "what it can be" in the production of Ortega's work. As Nikos Papastergiadis (2010) has said, "when art challenges the boundaries by which we understand the aesthetics of the everyday, and combines this experience with a new understanding of connection to our surrounding world, then it could be argued to have expanded the sphere of politics" (p.19). The everyday appears as a critique of tradition, but not only of the hegemonic tradition that comes from outside, but also of the tradition that had been produced in this country in terms of what Mexican art should be. Instead of calling upon the national grandure which is founded on myth, pieces such as *The Exterminator* move away from the local (mythical) tradition to place themselves in an ineludible present. What becomes evident is that the "other" as described by Stuart Hall (2010) was also inside the territory, but it could not be stated unless it empowered and differentiated itself through that other tradition.

Coincidences

In 2009, Mexico participated in the Venice Biennale with a project by Teresa Margolles and curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina called *What else could we talk about?* This has been one of the most controversial exhibitions in recent Mexican art because it displayed the crisis of the local art system while showing the situation of violence in the country during the

ARTÍCULO
ISSN:2173-0040

year when President Felipe Calderon declared war against drug trafficking. Margolles's exhibition was made up of several pieces that took parts and fragments of Mexican territory to Venice: *Recovered Blood* (2009), an installation of mud-covered fabrics that were used to clean murder scenes in Mexico, and *Embassy* (2009), an intervention in the United States pavilion at the same biennial, that lined the windows on the building's façade with fabric covered in the blood of people killed on the northern border between Mexico and the United States.

These pieces literally carry parts of the national territory to another country, in the form of mud and blood, materials obtained through the action of violence circumscribed to a specific space. The fabric is no longer a support for the representation (as in a painting) and neither is it the limit where signs are contained, but rather it is a medium that unites the spaces in the form of pieces of evidence. In addition, the intervention made in front of the American pavilion produces an additional dislocation by stating how those fluids trapped in fabrics are also part of the binational relationship partly brought about by the US interventions in Mexican territory and the ineffective control policies in their own country.

What these pieces elucidate is the relationship between the flow of contemporary art in its biennalized format, the flows in the form of blood and mud and the flows that pass through the country that manifest themselves in forms of violence. The idea of the everyday appears again, this time converted into territorial violence in a reciprocal relationship in which the causes are never entirely clear. The issue becomes even more substantial upon reading *The Pharmacological Crusade: 20 years later* (2009). This text, written by Antonio Escohotado, identifies the transformation of drug use in the United States as a growing phenomenon linked with inoperative policies, a situation that has undoubtedly affected Mexico.

The exhibition *What else could we talk about?* offers a unique criticism of the ways in which culture and art have been understood in the country, because instead of referring to its mythical past, there is a correlation between what is shown on display and what is happening in Mexico. This event makes explicit that contemporary art was going beyond the state administration's ways of understanding culture. The national art that was once contained in "Mexican-ness" and pure national representations had now found an escape route by means of presenting the "current reality."

This particular exhibition would not have been possible without the administrative crisis of the National Action Party (PAN) - which came to power in 2002 with Vicente Fox, and which stayed in power for six further years, under Felipe Calderon, until 2012 – that failed to set a clear route for managing culture in the country. Although the project for the biennial was funded by the state, Mexican bureaucrats had not realized what was going to be exhibited until the project was already confirmed4. Calderon's government was defined by its ungovernability, in various ways. The clearest example was how they dealt with drug trafficking, a situation that led to an open battle with the drug cartels5. Cartels that, in turn, took advantage of the new socio-economic conditions of the country for the smuggling of drugs. Furthermore, that same government failed to generate cultural administration policies consistent with the reality of the country, i.e. the crises of the narrative that linked art, culture and nation, as left behind by the PRI, nor the management of contemporary art, nor consistency with the cultural industries. Precisely what the PAN governments did not understand was how to manage flows, but rather they tried to control them using the forms of enunciation as created by the PRI in the last century. Forms that were, by that time, somewhat obsolete. What Margolles's exhibition highlights is that the flow-relations in contemporary art could not be thought in management terms. Therefore, contemporary art followed its own particular path, in which it was managed not by the state but from the autonomy of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) with the inauguration of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), from the interests of private groups (like Jumex and Coppel collections) and from the gaps left by the public administration.

ARTÍCULO
ISSN:2173-0040

A misplaced modern sculpture

In 2016 the Mexican artist Cristobal Gracia made the project *Where's the beef?* in which he used Herbert Bayer's *Articulated Wall*, an urban monumental sculpture made as part of 1968's *Ruta de la Amistad*, which was a set of concrete sculptures built for the Olympic Games in Mexico that year. Through the patronage of the *Ruta de la Amistad*, this piece, that was in a deplorable condition, was dismantled, relocated and restored. So, there on the original site of the *Articulated Wall* in Mexico City, he placed a scaffold which was the same height as the original sculpture and at the top of the support he installed a sign asking *Where's the beef?*, alluding to the colloquial American expression used to ask about "the substance". Additionally, as a result of the research into the history of the piece, Gracia discovered that there is a twin sculpture in Denver, Colorado, built in 1985. Opposite that sculpture in the US, he organised a competition for the "fastest eater of french fries", alluding to the similarity of Bayer's sculpture with a pile of potato fries.

Gracia's work makes clear that globalization has profoundly questioned modernity (in this case modern abstract sculpture), and that contemporary art can be installed on top of its ruins. Furthermore, it is significant that this situation reveals the simultaneity of times, subjects and spaces, in a constant shifting of meaning (Barriendos, 2010). Gracia's scaffold looks more like a billboard than a sculpture, and he no longer needs to stick so closely to the strategies of American art, something that was so prevalent in the Mexican art of the 90s. At the same time he refers to the spectre of the "original" sculpture by Bayer, made in '68, and which recalls a tragic event in the history of the country: the Tlatelolco massacre.

The mobility of Cristobal's artwork, achieved by assimilating the concepts of site specificity and the everyday, allows us to think about new global relations associated with the breakdown of historical marginalisation, but also in terms of the consequences of the aperture and flow that puts territory in such a fragile position that it can be negotiated but also violently siezed. Indeed, the everyday operates on the two interventions in the form of scaffolding and competition, yet at the same time these two ephemeral actions point to a specific place in the landmark created by Bayer's sculpture. In this sense, modern American sculpture has become a pretext that allows Gracia to bring together two traditions and two different places, albeit for a specific and limited time period.

As I see it, in the last 25 years Mexican art has undergone a substantial transformation. Because of the way art practices began to dialogue and introduce other stories and memories in a global context, and insomuch that the everyday became a fundamental element when thinking about context and time, new subjects and subjectivities have come to light, namely ones that did not previously have any representation because they were subsumed by mythical characterisations. If there was an interruption of the Mexican national narrative in the 90s, via works that used the American art tradition, then in this new millennium practices are torn between specific and global contexts – they are understood as the present and they want to have an impact there, without forgetting leaving out other microhistories. As the representation of context is no longer final, at times it focuses on works that engage with the immediate reality. Contemporary art in Mexico is the evidence that this is a flow-territory, because once it isreleased from the self-marginalisation of history, and from the great narratives, it can take up its place as part of everyday life within public spaces.

ARTÍCULO
ISSN:2173-0040

Notes

1. For further details, see Eder, Rita (Ed.). (2001). *El arte en México: autores, temas y problemas.* Mexico City, Mexico: Conaculta.

2. For further details, see Paz, Octavio. (2006). *Los privilegios de la vista II*. Mexico City, Mexico: FCE.

3. As can be clearly seen in the book *1988-2012 Culture and Transition*, Mexican presidents, regardless of whether they are from the PRI or the PAN, have always used culture, exalting its continuity over time and making it clear that cultural policies should enjoy the same continuity in the future. For further detail, see Cruz. E y Lara.C. (Ed). 1988-2012 *Cultura y Transición*. Monterrey, Mexico: UANL.

4. At that time, several articles appeared in newspapers and magazines that made this situation clear. For further details, see Minera, M. (2009, 31st August). Confusión y censura. *Letras Libres*. From http://www.letraslibres.com among other.

5. To see the problems of governability in Calderon's government, see

Alvarado, A. Serrano M (Ed.). *Los grandes problemas de México. Seguridad Nacional y seguridad interior.* Mexico City, Mexico: Colmex.

Bibliography

Alvarado, A. Serrano, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Los grandes problemas de México. Seguridad Nacional y seguridad interior*. Mexico City, Mexico: Colmex.

Arriola, B. (2010). Vasconcelos: el caudillo de la nación. *Casa del tiempo*, IV (25),4-10.

Barriendos J. (2010). "Decolonizing western geographical thinking mobility, internationalism, global art", in Parcerisas, P. Barriendos, J. (Eds.), *Global circuits. The geography of art and new configurations of critical thought* (pp. 93-103). Barcelona, Spain: CONCA.

Cruz. E and Lara.C. (Ed). *1988-2012 Cultura y Transición*. Monterrey, Mexico: UANL.

Montero, D. *El cubo de Rubik. Arte mexicano en los años 90.* Mexico City, Mexico: Jumex-RM.

Eder, Rita (Ed.). (2001). *El arte en México: autores, temas y problemas*. Mexico City, Mexico: Conaculta-FCE.

Escohotao, A. (2009). "The pharmacological crusade: twenty years later" in C. Medina (Ed.), *¿De que otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (pp 115-129). Mexico City, Mexico: RM.

Hall, S. (2003). "Pensando en la diáspora: en casa desde el extranjero" in C. Jáuregui, J. Dabove (Ed.), H*eterotopías: narrativas de identidad y alteridad Latinoamericana* (pp. 477-500) Pittsburg, PA: Instituto internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana.

ISSN:2173-0040

Hall, S. (2010). “El espectáculo del ‘Otro’” in S. Hall, Sin garantías. *Trayectorias y problemáticas en estudios culturales* (pp. 419-446). Popayán-Lima-Quito: Envión Editores-IEP- Instituto Pensar-Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.

Huyssen, A. (2003). “Diaspora and nation: migration into other pasts”. *New German Critique*,(88), 147-164.

Martel, F. (2011). *Cultura Mainstream: cómo nacen los fenómenos de masas.* Barcelona, Spain: Taurus.

Minera, M. (2009, 31 de agosto). Confusión y censura. *Letras Libres*. From http://www.letraslibres.com.

Molina, C. (2005). “Fernando Gamboa y su particular versión de México” in *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*. (87),117-143.

Papastergiadis, N. (2010). *Spatial Aesthetics, Art, Place, and the Everyday*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Institute of Network Cultures.

Paz, O. (2006). *Los privilegios de la vista II*. Mexico City, Mexico: FCE.

Piñero, G. (2013). *Tradiciones de escritura. Discursos críticos sobre el arte América Latina desde América Latina* (Doctoral thesis). UNAM, Mexico City.

Saviano, R. (2014). *CeroCeroCero: cómo la cocaína gobierna el mundo*. Barcelona, Spain: Anagrama.

Salas, A. (2015). “On dematerializing and dematerializing of art in the mexican nineties”, in Ed Johnson, K (Ed.), *Strange Currencies: art and action in mexico city* 1990-2000 (pp. 44-50). Philadelphia, USA.: The galleries at Moore.

Weibel, P. (2013). “Globalization and contemporary art”, in P. Weibel, A. Buddensieg, H, Hans Belting (Eds.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (pp 20-27). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

ISSN:2173-0040