

[rhead – r]Parallel Modernities

[rhead – v]Ticio Escobar

[article]Parallel Modernities. Notes on Artistic Modernity in the Southern Cone of Latin America: The Case of Paraguay

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[trans]Translated by Hilary Macartney

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[abs]Abstract

The author of this article is one of the most important intellectuals in the Latin American artistic scene. Focusing on the particular case of Paraguay, which was governed by the dictatorship of Alfred Stroessner from 1954 until 1989, Escobar traces the modernist impulse in Paraguay and traces its complicated and disturbed relationship with European and North American models and antecedents: Neo-Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Abstraction, and similar. While they reflect the particular political conditions under which the artists worked, the diverse and many-voiced Paraguayan responses also offer an exemplary set of responses that shed light on the development twentieth-century modernist art and visual culture across the broader South American continent.

[key]Keywords: Paraguay, Latin Americas, modern art, colonialism, post-colonialism, dictatorship, Mestizo, Creole, Hispano-Guarini, Martinfierrista Revolution, Arte Nuevo, Los Novísimos, postmodernism, utopia, re-figuration

[inta]Introduction by Gabriela Siracusano

[intx]In this article, Ticio Escobar, one of the most outstanding Latin American art critics, aims to put into discussion the several and disrupted ways modernity takes place in the Latin American artistic

scene, focusing on Paraguay. By rethinking the tension between central and peripheric models and the debate around the concepts of appropriation, transgression, copy, distortion, or infidelity, the author shows how modern artistic language in Paraguay found its way in order to create a different modernity. Escobar describes some significant moments of the development of Modern art in Paraguay named by him as: Modernidades (from 1950 to the first half of the 1980s), Desmodernidades (1985 to 1995), and Modernidades Paralelas (1995 to the present). The key to this classification is supported by an interaction between art and politics, which the author aims to explain in order to offer to the reader some indicators through which to understand the cultures in question. From an anthropological point of view and related to his position as art critic, Escobar analyzes present modernities in which urban and native-indigenous artists, artisans, and community groups find their way to creation between the local and the global, the popular and the modern. Finally, this text gives an original and significant view of how modernity in art must be conceived in the roots of cultural diversity, and how global art history and visual studies should consider its variety of forms and the ways in which this variety develops in peripheral art scenes.

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[artitle]Parallel Modernities. Notes on Artistic Modernity in the Southern Cone of Latin America: The Case of Paraguay.

[au]Ticio Escobar

[a]Introduction

[b]Distortions

[tx]The question of modernity, and particularly that of modernity on the periphery, has constituted a central theme in the debate on Latin American art from the beginning. This article uses this question as the nucleus from which to examine briefly three historical moments (not necessarily occurring sequentially) that are defined around it in the realm of artistic practice: the cycle of modernity affiliated to the avant-garde, critical postmodern positions, and popular modernities. These moments are considered in the light of the disruptions through which modern developments are produced: those that derive from hegemonic relationships at a global level (the asymmetries between the art of the metropolises and that of the peripheries) and those caused by the inevitable faults in the mechanisms of representation (the imbalances between the languages of art and the realities designated).

[txt]The first dislocation stems from the different positions that peripheral cultures occupy in relation to the figures proposed or imposed by central modernity. Even though hegemony is no longer exerted from geographical locations, nor enunciated in absolute terms, the different positions the centers assume with regard to its precepts or its siren songs continue to constitute a fundamental reference in Latin American art, defined largely by exchanges of glances that intersect with the center, by struggles over meaning. And thus, the tension between central models and appropriated forms, transgressed or copied by the peripheries, or imposed on them, constitutes a theme that remains current and requires continual reassessment.

This conflict occurred from the outset and, in a way, continues to occur. European colonization of Latin American territories was based on a systematic program of substitution of indigenous cultures with metropolitan ones. But the designs on domination can never be entirely realized. And this is the case not only because the strategies for power get out of control to a certain extent, but also because the areas of the symbol are essentially mistaken and cover a central vacuum that cannot be completely filled. Even the harshest processes

of cultural domination, the most ferocious cases of ethnocide, cannot cover the whole field of colonization and leave, to their regret, a vacant fringe. In this waste land difference operates: from there, first the indigenous peoples, and then the Mestizos and Creoles, sometimes produced particular (sub)versions, works that were able to seize some moment of truth of their own and, in this way, escape the spurious fate assigned to them by the colonial plan. In many cases, the indigenous people began meticulously to imitate Western patterns and ended up bending the meaning of the models. Likewise, in the course of the split time which then began, the best forms of Latin American art were (are) those that were able to affirm themselves in that brief void exposed by the disruption of power and the misplacements of the image, and to nourish themselves with the condensed energies that took refuge there.

The modernity of Latin American art develops out of the mistakes created by the central modern language in naming other histories or in being named by other subjects. Its best forms originate in equivocations and misunderstandings, involuntary wrongs and inevitable lapses. But they also arise out of the distortions produced by successive copies, out of the difficulties in adopting signs that assume different techniques, motives, and sensibilities and, of course, out of the conscious attempt to adulterate the meaning of the prototype. Thus, many works intended to constitute degraded transcriptions of metropolitan models recover their originality as, through error, inefficiency, or transgressive will, they betray the course of the first meaning. Faithful, at times, to their anticolonialist aspirations or to the rhythm of their own times; prisoners, at other times, of vain acts, blunders, and confusions, the Latin American avant-garde movements made dramatic alterations to the tenses, logic, and contexts of the modern proposals. This prolific violation of the central paradigms is observed not only in the reflective tendencies of modern art but also in its most irrational moments, the necessary counterparts of modernity. On the one hand, Latin American art does

not want, or is not able, to follow the plundered, analytical, and self-referential modern path. On being transplanted to Latin America, the rationalist movements are rapidly contaminated by the imperatives of a history that require the disengagement of the self-sufficient compass of language. On the other hand, in Latin America, even the forms that follow the most irrational directions incorporate organizing principles and formalist solutions that serve to underpin, if not to put in order, an image more threatened by obscure outbursts than by conceptual excesses.

The second disconnection (common in all forms of modern art) arises from the disjuncture between the signs of art and the reality that they pursue. Superimposed on the previous discrepancy, this redoubles the distortions of peripheral modernity and increases its waste lands. Perhaps the most important art of Latin America occurs in the open space exposed by these imbalances. This is because the works nourished by knots of conflict and grown in no-man's land toughen and temper their forms through the hard determination required to survive; the strongest Latin American artistic production is reinforced by its link with the raw nerves of history. Placed in extreme points of tension, courageously suspended in the void, artists manage to invert adversity, appealing to powerful figures, producing substantial works that signify not exactly the surmounting of conflict or expressions of their hidden reality, but charged and vigorous ciphers, capable of expounding in rhetorical code the great questions of the moment. These works show the impact of the distortions that cause the transfer of signs and accumulate the passage of history. It is not their role to correct them, but through them, art can relocate the positions from which meaning is disputed. Thus, paradoxically, the distortions caused by modern asymmetries enable certain productions of the peripheries fleetingly to achieve an unexpected, desperate clarity of focus that the models of the metropolis themselves, content with their advantages, absorbed by great commitments, or dimmed by postmodern apathies, take longer to achieve.

With these considerations as its starting point, this article seeks to emphasize some significant moments of the evolution of the modern art produced in the Southern Cone of Latin America. It does so by considering certain aspects of the history of the art of Paraguay, whose circumstances, questions, and responses can be schematically compared with those of the regional artistic production. On the other hand, this history, isolated for centuries and doubly peripheral, presents several basic problems in a clear and concentrated form that facilitates its analysis. Obviously, this work in no way claims to cover the whole spectrum of modern art in Paraguay: it refers strictly to some productions which serve to illustrate the concepts and support the arguments. Thus, many of the fundamental names of the history of this art are not mentioned and, by the same token, other, sometimes lesser, names appear, which serve to exemplify particular directions.

[b]Histories

[tx]Even though it often tries to cover its scars, the art produced in Paraguay is marked, like any other, by the accidents, fractures, and silences that jar and quell the successive undercurrents of its time. Given that all artistic production is considered within the sphere of the theory of representation and, therefore, becomes charged with the responsibility of giving clues about what is going on outside itself, the question is to determine the extent to which peripheral forms can do so. That is, up to what point can they take account of their own histories, forms colonized by other systems of representation, forms dependent on hegemonic models and, later, forms kept hidden by official history or directly suffocated by dictatorship? When we talk about “taking account,” we assume that the corresponding testimony will always be based on a biased and partial record, truly partisan; an obscure and coded way of saying what cannot be said, not so much because it is forbidden but because it has no name.

[txt]With regard to the antecedents of this complicated history, let us set aside the indigenous pre-Colombian worlds, not because they lack importance, but because they are resistant to being placed in the categories of Western history of art. Let us begin, then, by mentioning the Colony that signified a process of dismantling native cultures and of violent imposition of the imperial languages. And so, as far as a suitable position can be taken with regard to this situation (whether of resigned acceptance or angry rejection, complacent appropriation or calculated seizure), colonial art manages to define particular expressive forms. The so-called “Hispano-Guaraní art,” produced by the indigenous peoples in the Franciscan, and especially Jesuit, missions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, preserves in its origin the memory of brutal processes of ethnocide and resentment, of emptiness and persecution (Figure 1). [TS – Figure near here] But its forms do not faithfully translate these conflicts, and they certainly do not resolve them, either in reality or symbolically. They simply affirm, enlivened by their tensions, by the effort involved in confronting them, by the energies they release—perhaps.

Like the ancient, indigenous Guaranís who began submissively copying the baroque models and ended up dismantling the meaning of the prototypes, so too, many other forms are capable of twisting the course of the design imposed by the hegemonic direction. Popular art produced during the nineteenth century was strengthened despite, and by means of (and perhaps thanks to), grand foreign ideals and ferocious battles: engravings in the newspapers of the war¹ constitute a compendium of Creole-Guaraní humor, of rural sensibility and its perceptive sketches, of second-hand European portrait art, of romantic and neoclassical forms known through reproductions, of the great nationalist proclamations of Marshal López, etc. (Figure 2). [TS – Figure 2 near here] But their images escape the mere formulation in image code of what that tense and confusing reality would have been.

This is because the actions of art transcend the different forces that intervene in history. And, in this context, I would like the verb “transcend” not to be read in idealistic or dialectical code: to transcend signifies here simply to go beyond the edges supporting them; to penetrate beyond the concrete factors conditioning a creative act in order to gain an extended view simultaneously from the inside and the outside; to feed on the intimate forces of a situation in order to detach oneself to some extent from it and be able to name it fully, the image being contaminated with the details of memory, open to the desire of a moment that history cannot record because it does not yet exist.

Modern Paraguayan art coincides in its development with the long period of the military dictatorship of Alfred Stroessner (1954–89). This does not mean that the former was a consequence of the latter, but neither does it necessarily mean that it constituted the reverse. However, it is indisputable that the great figures of artistic modernity grew up in Paraguay endorsed by the characteristics of that dark period: they suffered the dictatorship, they expressed it, they faced its proposals, displayed its moments; perhaps in some way they legitimized others. All forms both validate and challenge history; this ambivalence allows other sides of things to be suggested. Present-day art in this country coincides with the disenchantment of a confused *Transition to Democracy* that is setting up an unprecedented scene of new public liberties at the same time as it is also preserving the scheme of power hatched under the dictatorship. But it also coincides with the banalizing expansion of the cultural industries, with experiences of regional integration whose implications elude us, with the emergence of new scenarios of corruption, violence, and misery, and even with stubborn hopes that are advancing in the opposite direction. The most solid artistic expressions will be those capable of naming this convulsed or too tepid present from the very depths of its complicated interior and out of the old and vain zeal to forget it or transform it. This is because everything that speaks from the

immediacy of the events and across the insurmountable distance of desire opens up a space from which to watch the situation and, in front of it, to imagine a form. A beautiful, obscure form that can give to history only coded clues that hint at the angle of the direction and, briefly, another path.

[b]Notes on Methods

[tx]In a necessarily simplified form, for reasons of length, this work takes modernity as its central theme and studies the different positions of the art of Paraguay with regard to its patterns, its traditions—such as it has—and the pompous display of its forms. The development of this theme is carried out in three sections. The first, *Modernities*, refers to the saga of modern Paraguayan art (from the 1950s to the first half of the 1980s). The second, *Demodernities*, deals with production by sectors which regain a protest position during the confused period of the so-called *Transition to Democracy*, a stage begun after the fall of the dictatorship and coinciding with the criticism of modernity (the middle of the eighties to the middle of the nineties).² The third section, *Parallel Modernities*, concerns certain specific entries within modernity. Starting from the relevance of codes that are very deep rooted in their respective cultural traditions, certain popular sectors develop their own responses to the challenges of modernity; responses which, in many cases, end up constituting a refutation of the modern program and, in fact, tally with certain contemporary objections (questionings of formal autonomy, originality, good taste, stylistic relevance, etc.).

[txt]These three moments are considered in terms of their differences from modern and postmodern paradigms respectively. Indeed, all the peripheral postures assumed around modernity imply different degrees of translation, of betrayal, of the modern ideology. As its figures and its discourses are differentiated or reappropriated, modernity suffers important distortions. So much so that the essential notes of its concept come to compromise and at times to hinder the

possibility of talking about the modernity of certain forms of art. But this misunderstanding constitutes the central point of any theory about difference in art. Distortion, mistiming, infidelity of transcription open up possibilities for the particular. As already acknowledged, the disconnection produced by differentiation facilitates a margin for the inscription of difference. But, even at an angle and fleetingly, the distortion of the central models suggests not only a defense against the tyrannizing expansion of the modern logos but also an exit in the middle of the depressed postmodern Western landscape.

Subirats calls certain Luso-Hispanic cultural productions and “the modern artistic contribution of the countries of the Third World” in general *Avant-gardes of the South*. And he sees in them “a contribution to the aesthetic of modernity and postmodernity often obliquely slanted in the essays of theoretical interpretation of the avant-gardes.”³ Thus, against the grain of the end-of-century mood, this article has a certain inevitable optimistic tone. To read the art produced in one region or country—like that realized elsewhere—following strictly the milestones that mark certain itineraries of meaning, necessarily yields a favorable balance. And it does so because it considers only the outstanding points and leaves aside a large part of the artistic production of that place, the majority of it, if not more, mediocre like that of anywhere else.

The first section is developed from a modern reading of modernity. This is because one possible way of following certain clues to modern art is to travel its much trodden routes, perhaps making out other directions from the corner of one’s eye. Thus, in order to revise the modern itinerary it can prove effective in some cases (in this one) not so much to question its evolution, impelled by the course ordained by Reason and its marked direction, but to surmount this current. They could discern from within other channels and other shores; impetuous flows that advance in the other direction; secret tributaries, new

volumes that overflow the level previously fixed. In the case of the art of Paraguay, the detailed observance of a modern logic of styles can express not so much the adherence to a strange rationality as the necessity to seek an ordering principle in the middle of a too obscure history, the desire to inscribe temporality in a petrified landscape. Thus, in order to study the modernity of Paraguay it can prove fruitful to do so in historicist code: to analyze its own logical developments and compare the imbalances of its stages in relation to the stages of the modern art which serves as its guide. Through those lapses in synchronization, its own rhythm can be stressed. The last two sections resist being read in sequential code and promote a more disordered approach.

[a]I. Modernities

[b]Broken Modernity

[tx]Artistic modernity began very late in Paraguay. Officially, it happened with the opening of an exhibition of the *Arte Nuevo* group in 1954. That same year the dictatorship of General Alfred Stroessner began, whose shadows gathered over the country's history during more than three decades and whose signature still marks the difficult present. Modern art completed its cycle in the course of those 35 years; it can be said—if it were possible to establish an exact date for such occurrences—that it reached the culmination of its process at the end of the 1980s. That is, in the same period in which Stroessner was overthrown and a different age commenced. Even protected from the temptation of determinist simplifications, it is a fact that this coincidence sealed the evolution of modern Paraguayan art, whose images could not be separated from the adverse climate that besieged its production.

[txt]The entire project of modernity carries stigmas of the time of Stroessner. It is a cloistered and doubly peripheral modernity;⁴ an obscure and disarticulated modernity, unevenly formed by the corruption that created opulent oligarchies and by the many forms of

oppression and marginality that regularly renewed the old miseries. A modernity deformed by the coarse militarist myths of the “national being” and implanted at the margin of modern ideology: without civil liberties or political guarantees, Stroessner’s military dictatorship ruled (or tried to rule) citizens who were silent, silenced. A modernity, then, profoundly contradictory, like many Latin American modernities. Undoubtedly simplified, this was the basis of the history. Upon it was sketched the modern project of the arts in Paraguay. Its programmatic bases interpreted faithfully enough the great principles and strategies of the international avant-gardes. Nevertheless, the burden of history itself was so heavy that, under its weight, that project ended up adulterating, if not being ignorant of, many of the fundamental suppositions of modernity.

[b]Redemptions, Falsifications

[tx]The question is complicated because, in itself, the development of modern art carries its own paradoxes. On the one hand, it is centered on the autonomy of the signifier: it begins to define itself from the specificity of language, from the reign of the form. Thus, concrete artistic processes correspond to moments in the development of forms—styles that are linked almost in syllogistic form and are considerable, nevertheless, in their internal order. On the other hand, this unpredictable, self-reflective evolution is obliged to take account of reality and even to amend it. Just as elsewhere, modern art is, from the start, committed to rectifying society and redeeming history in a direction which contradicts the very autonomy of its signs. This contradiction was the cause of anxious attempts to reconcile form and content (signifier and signified, language and object, art and society, etc.). But it was also a fertile source of the best moments of modernity.

[txt]Resolving this tension between the disdainful seclusion of its field and its passionate commitments to history has charged modern forms with energy. How can this opposition be resolved between faithfulness to the diaphanous order of the signs, on the one hand, and duties to

the turbulent dominions of society, existence, and “objectivity,” on the other? How does the self-absorption of the language adapt to a project beset by temporality, thrown outside itself towards the clear course that utopia signals? Here a founding charter of modernity appears: those contradictions can be overcome through the action of the avant-garde movements, by means of permanent innovation that forces the language to the limit, obliging it to release other names of the reality out of which to transform it.

Modern art is conscious of its own development in the course of stages that synthesize successive contradictions according to a coherent sequence driven by the avant-garde movements. The latter develop an impeccable choreography: they move assuming positions around precise problems that unfold their questions and find responses in counter-positions which, in turn, will pose their queries according to the order of a well-oriented guide. But, on being projected onto barbarous terrains, these secret rationalities become distorted. Or are obliged to readapt themselves to the requirements of other times and other rhythms.

[b]The Premoderns

[tx]Dark and enclosed times; staccato rhythms, strident, quiet. Although, it has been said, the avant-garde slogans were late in appearing in Paraguay, the ground was quietly being prepared for them through a slow and relatively long route. When, once the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay is over in 1870, this country is ready to resume the course of a devastated history, it does so from a base of utter dependency. In 1906 the first recipients of scholarships are sent to Italy to be trained in the profession of the “Fine Arts.” However, they go there not because Italy is of much interest to Paraguay, but because it was of considerable significance to Argentina, whose aesthetic models of the beginning of the century came from the old Italian academies. Paraguay then, receives the models filtered through regional submetropolises: primarily Buenos

Aires and, later, São Paulo, and thus sums up, in a way, the path of European/North American art through the mediation of River Plate and Brazilian models. The wages of being a colony of colonies, as Eduardo Galeano would say. But what is interesting about these duplicated mediations is that, with so much traffic and handling, the paradigms end up losing definition and potency. And the artists, such as there are, have opportunities to exploit the natural erosion that the twice-copied original suffers and of working on the imbalance exposed by the difference. The second-hand copy, the bad copy, has always been a good ally when it comes to reversing the meaning of colonial signs.

[txt]But the mediations not only adulterate the original codes, they also displace their effects. And so, in this way, in passing through the successive lock-gates of hegemonies and subhegemonies, the time that elapses within the subcolony between the exemplar and its copy is extended. Such a delay, of relevance in a process obsessed by being up to date, offers the opportunity for local artists to take up the foreign forms according to the rhythm of their own times. The first scholarship holders brought from Italy a form of painting framed within a fin-de-siècle academism confusedly stuffed with loose ingredients from romantic and realist systems that were not fully digested. But this image is incubated by secret renovative principles that go on to be manifested later according to the requirements of different occasions: they come to the surface encouraged by circumstances of their own and induced by influences from Buenos Aires, which sends weak Impressionist tremors during the 1910s (Exhibition of the Argentinian Centenary, which was attended by Paraguayan painters) and delegates expressive and constructive reinforcements of Postimpressionist origin from the following decade on. But these novelties do not yet have a mission of rupture: they do not enter into dispute with the naturalist concept of representation; they scarcely dynamize it. Exempted from the obligation to dismantle an academic tradition that it did not have, Paraguayan painting did

not encounter any conflict between Fine Arts representation and modernist figuration, which was slowly gestating in the background of bucolic landscapes and stiff historical portraits.

Nevertheless, Paraguay's delay, its redoubled dependence, and its isolation carry on designing a modernity that is solitary and different, differentiated. The painters lend a hand to successive stylistic elements, not following the internal impulses of a necessary process but responding to the requirements, always delayed, of subtropical climates. Neither the break with the past, already mentioned, nor the enunciation of a utopian ideology, nor the displays of modernization signified themes or motifs that preoccupied or seduced the premodern artists at that time.

However, they could not avoid a condition that seems to be indispensable for the development of peripheral modernity: the faithful observance of each one of the stages traced by the historical route of the avant-garde movements. But compliance with this requisite was secured to the detriment of another, which ended up distorting the meaning of the first: the successive steps delineating the sequence did not control the tendencies and movements charged with carrying out the great modern missions. Whether this was, at first, through the scarcity of artists and means; or whether it was, later, through the pressures of the dictatorship (the latter opposed to the constitution of collectives that might conceal subversive programs) or through characteristics particular to the local temperament, what is certain is that, in general, the itinerary of modernity was controlled by individuals. During the early decades, only one artist represented one stage, one current: a necessary link so that the process could reproduce the whole exemplary sequence. Thus, Juan Samudio, one of the first scholarship holders, embodies the Impressionist moment. A timid and conciliatory Impressionism, as we saw, but sufficient to respond to the necessities of his time and to tick the corresponding box.

Representing the Impressionist moment against the background of a time that seemed frozen allowed many of the modern struggles and upsets to be prevented; the effort had taken up nearly quarter of a century. Suddenly history appears to be accelerated; the great war waged against Bolivia, the so-called Guerra del Chaco (1932–5), prompts conflicts as yet hardly contained to surface and reveals a convulsed scene, shaken by the crisis of political hegemony that will explode in the revolution of 1947 and will only be resolved in 1954 with the rise of Stroessner to power. The second stage begins in the middle of the thirties (Samudio dies in 1937, as if to draw a line). Perhaps under pressure from the postwar mood of urgency, that stage summarizes in its way, in the course of two decades, the Postimpressionist panorama prior to the eruption of the European *isms* of the beginning of the century. This summary, as we already know, is sketched via Buenos Aires: it consists, in reality, of an interpretation extracted from the Postimpressionism of the River Plate prior to the *Martinfierrista* revolution of 1924 (preliminary to those *isms* of Buenos Aires). A late version, adapted to the necessity of naming a different history, too different.

According to a possible (simplified and modern) reading of modern art, the Impressionist moment flows into a sphere known as “Postimpressionism,” ruled by the figures of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and the Symbolists. From this quadrivium the historical avant-garde movements are drawn: Cubism starts out from the first of these figures; Expressionism takes the second two as its reference; Surrealism will follow the way marked by the Symbolists. By being transplanted and re-transplanted, and by being so on foreign soils, this scheme undergoes important alterations. But the most profound changes do not derive so much from the re-adaptations required by the peculiarities of a specific medium so much as from the work of appropriation and dismantling performed in the subordinate regions. Reproduced (counter to the ideal of originality that was there at its outset), differentiated and subdued (beyond its proclamations of

rupture and of permanent updating), converted into a personal resource (outside the framework of collective programs and tendencies), the beginnings of the avant-garde movements as much as their strategies end up being profoundly adulterated. For example, if we return to the above-mentioned scheme: of the major directions latent in Postimpressionism, the Paraguayan artists take, with much delay, only the two that will afterwards be the foundation of the modernist breakaway: that direction which privileged the formal organization of the work and that which insisted on its expressive intensity. The third, that which will end in Surrealism, is ignored for now. And that happens simply because it is not of much use: a poetic challenging of the rationalist myth has little to do in Paraguay. Excess rationality was never a serious problem in these lands: what Octavio Paz claimed, referring to superficial Latin American romanticism, is valid here: “The artists could not rebel against something they had never suffered: the tyranny of reason.”⁵

During the period of “transition towards modernity” (the 1930s and 1940s) the phenomenon in which a name represented a moment occurred once more. And so, each one of the above-mentioned directions is summed up in the work of one artist. Through solid forms and a schematized and assured composition, Jaime Bestard takes charge of the formalist moment, while Wolf Bandurek (Figure 3) [TS – Figure 3 near here] assumes the historical task of laying the foundations of expressive content by means of a vehement and tormented figuration: the Postimpressionist (pre-avant-garde) cycle is closed and is referred to the following moment.

Dramatic and, at the same time, firmly structured, the works of Andrés Guevara and Ofelia Echagüe could be interpreted as a synthesis between these two moments (Figure 4). [TS – Figure 4 near here] But whether because it was developed outside the country (Argentina and Brazil)—in the case of the former—or whether because it grew up withdrawn into itself and had few links with local

production—in the case of Echagüe Vega—neither of them produced any continuity or generated a process. Thus, the particular Expressionism of Bandurek and the formalism peculiar to Bestard (Figure 5) [TS – Figure 5 near here] will only be superseded from the work of the *Grupo Arte Nuevo* onwards, though the out-of-place precedent represented by the works of Guevara and Echagüe Vega cannot have been unknown.

[b]Arte Nuevo

Formed by Olga Blinder (Figure 6), [TS – Figure 6 near here] Lili del Mónaco, José Laterza Parodi, and Josefina Plá, the *Grupo Arte Nuevo* is created in 1954, and is the first of the avant-garde movements to present certain features of its own: it emerges with explicit intentions of breaking away and brings together a collective around a basic ideology defined as “modern” (the series of exhibitions shown by the group, which is later joined by artists such as Edith Jiménez (Figure 7), [TS – Figure 7 near here] Leonor Cecotto, and Hermann Guggiari, is called *Primera Semana de Arte Moderno Paraguayo* (First Week of Modern Paraguayan Art), in undoubted allusion to the distant Brazilian experience). But the movement is prepared to sacrifice other features of modernity to the exigencies of its own *tempo*: the artists take the resources and arguments of tendencies which they adapt to the “necessities of the medium” independently of the validity that these have in the (sub)metropolises (the model of the *Primera Semana* in São Paulo was already 32 years old).

What are those necessities of the medium? Based in this case on the dichotomous model of modernity, the group understands that the tension between the autonomy of the language and the force of the expression constitutes the central question to be confronted. Josefina Plá, the theorist of the movement, states it plainly and categorically: “What unifies the artists . . . is their sincere anxiety to renew, in parallel with the form, the content of Paraguayan painting . . .”⁶ It was already claimed that this anxiety was one of the great motives of

modern art. Now the novice modernity must conciliate its terms however it can. It does so by remembering simultaneously the lessons of Bestard and the experience of Bandurek: it resorts as much to a controlled constructive and geometrizing organization as to a passionate distortion of expressionist origin. Arriving opportunely from São Paulo in 1956, Livio Abramo brings his own model of synthesis between the severe order of the form and the productive confusion of historical content.

The result of the complex appropriation of the 1950s is a figuration firmly underpinned in its construction and emphasized in its dramatic meanings: a sort of “cubistized” Expressionism. Or rather, crystallized, given that Cubism, invoked then as a reference, is reinterpreted so liberally that it maintains little of its original meaning. In reality, just as has been said about surrealism, Cubism did not have any mission to accomplish in the plastic arts of Paraguay: it was not confronting a well-affirmed naturalist representation whose spaces it had to disarm; it was seeking only to give solidity to the new forms and to establish principles of order, to constitute—it is worth mentioning—that useful moment of structural clarification of the modern Latin American image, which, in the words of Juan Acha, represents a “salutary corrective,” which Frederico Morais qualifies as a “period of cleaning and disinfection” and Tarsila do Amaral understands as an “obligatory military service.”⁷

Before finishing this point, it is appropriate to explain here certain conditioning factors affecting the flexibility of the new peripheral avant-gardes in adapting themselves freely to different situations and comfortably adulterating the central models. Modern art grew up in Paraguay as a marginal and minority practice, isolated from the rest of Latin America, away from the great cultural majorities, ignored by the middle classes, who did not see in its forms sources of utility or elements of prestige, and on the sidelines of any official interest. These conditions certainly impeded any type of support and encouragement

for its manifestations and had a negative effect on the professional training of the artists and their international reputation. But, on the other hand, they constituted a certain guarantee against the intervention of an authoritarian State and the maneuvers of an ignorant and presumptuous middle class.

[b]The Cosmopolitans

[tx]The abstraction with which the 1960s duly begins institutes a new purge of the image: another historical rite of “cleaning and disinfection”; another necessary moment for the modernizing evolution in operation. On the one hand, it enables the underpinning of the process of updating demanded by this stage: it is connected to the movement of internationalization begun in Latin America in the previous decade and, paradoxically, bestows a certain family air on Latin American art. On the other, free of thematizations and figurative rhetorics which compromise the sovereignty of the form, abstraction underpins another basic modern conquest: the autonomy of the aesthetic. Artists such as Edith Jiménez, Carlos Colombino, Lotte Shulz, Laura Márquez, and Michael Burt, among others, successively purify the image until they reach a non-figuration that oscillates between organic and geometric tendencies and results in the material informalism of Fernando Grillón, Alberto Miltos, and Ricardo Yustman and, later, in the *op art* and kinetic image of Enrique Careaga (Figure 8). [TS – Figure 8 near here]

[txt]It is clear, from what has been shown, that the abstract artists work immersed in the historical logic of modernity, but they do so in a dispersed form and on the margin of clear programs; without the aim of registering their works historically. The second tendency formally instituted in an organic group and following an avant-garde proclamation appears in the middle of the 1960s. The name of the group, *Los Novísimos*, clearly denotes their zeal for renewal and their affinities with the expansive cosmopolitist front that was then advancing across the map of Latin America. But, paradoxically, the

group *Los Novísimos* (formed by Enrique Careaga, José Pratt, William Riquelme, and Angel Yegros) acted more as proclaimers than as executors of avant-garde actions (Figure 9). [TS – Figure 9 near here]

Another imbalance can be detected here between the exemplary avant-gardes and their disturbed Paraguayan versions; the local avant-garde drives occurred in a dissociated and unfocused form, according to the particular interests of the artists or the programs of the group. In effect, beyond their impassioned revolutionary slogans, the concrete proposal of the group *Los Novísimos* consisted of a readaptation of *action painting* and neofiguration, while the “experimentalists” such as Ricardo Migliorisi (Figure 10), [TS – Figure 10 near here] Bernardo Krasniansky, and Laura Márquez, who presented daring *happenings* and mounted disconcerting *environments*, acted on the margin of any ideology or body of proposals. On the other hand, the group *Los Novísimos* lasted very little time; immediately some of their representatives passed into the ranks of more radical experimentalism. The latter were formed by artists who, through the influence of the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires (1964–8), startled the provincial atmosphere of Asunción with the audacious acrobatics of a hasty and somewhat banal experimentalism. Banal but necessary: it accomplished the function of shaking an overly prudish sensibility in order to include aspects which, with the opening up of international awareness, brought the winds of the time.

It has already been said that the group *Arte Nuevo*, like the artistic production of the 1950s in general, had felt responsible for resolving the antagonism created between the clarity of the artistic language and the confused pressure of the historical content. The following moment—which now comes under consideration and which coincides, approximately, with the decade of the 1960s—has as its mission to confront another modern disjunction: the opposition between the particular and the universal: how to be faithful to contemporaneity without betraying the particular experience and its own history. We

already know that in a modern register this question is solved dialectically: the central–peripheral poles (or hegemonic–subordinate, dominant–dependent, etc.) constitute terms of a process that advances by feeding on its own tensions: Latin American art is the result of a synthesis between the local and the international. Nevertheless, the role of the dependent avant-garde movements is to appropriate the metropolitan innovations in order to adapt them to the requirements of their own history. But Paraguayan history itself was profoundly marked at this moment by the dictatorship of Stroessner. In this way, the local–international opposition once more coincides with the need to express a period that is too intense; that is, it ends up being connected to the form–content disjunction, although the reasons do not fit together so easily and its edges do not overlap neatly.

[b]Utopias

[tx]To explain further, at this moment Paraguayan art is faced with one of the great modern themes, namely, that relating to the utopian perspective of artistic creation and the emancipatory commitment of its practice. The art grows in spite of the dictatorship and, partly, in opposition to it. The modern “commitment to history,” which seals a moment in the task of the avant-garde, is related here to the inescapable anti-dictatorial position. Although some artists, like Olga Blinder and Carlos Colombino (Figure 11), [TS – Figure 11 near here] dare to denounce the outrages of the system directly, in general the references at this time require the creation of a particular rhetoric, full of suggestions, of course, and driven by an insistent truth. Many artists develop a strong critique of the military authoritarianism but they do so obliquely, through powerful metaphors, obscure ciphers, allusions that constantly mobilize the language and force it into ingenious, at times desperate, games.

[txt]But the obscure maneuvers of metaphor not only allowed the dissimulation of critical discourse and transgressive desire; by means of its evasions and veils, its semblances and silences, they also

contributed to questioning in the code of representation the legitimacy of a vertical order and a unique meaning. That is, they promoted critical, non-denunciatory rhetoric. In this sense, perhaps without intending to, the art offered its best anti-dictatorial arguments: out of its deviations it helped to unnumb dulled sensibilities; through its deflected focuses, to suggest the conflicts concealed by the militarist myths. Myths that invoke the “National Being” as the foundation of an essential identity and expel all difference considered threatening. In this direction, and not always consciously, certain improvised “vanguards of the South” could fulfill a role which, if not revolutionary, was at least critical and protesting.

[b]Ripe Times

[tx]The anxiety to be up to date at all costs placated, the 1970s recover the temperate tone. It is a very different moment, marked by an unusual process of economic growth⁸ which permits, for the first time, the consolidation of an art market and the investment of the artist with a certain social prestige. Even though art continues to be scorned by the government and developed at the margin of any official interest and of an efficient system of middle-class patronage, it now has discrete commercial circuits that increase its production and the professionalization of more than a few agents of its own. Equipped with the institutional recognition that the market signifies, matured by two decades of intense development, and faced with the necessity of adjusting forms that had been born late and grown in a hurry, Paraguayan art during the seventies and part of the eighties acquires a more conservative tone (on a formal level) and a clearly reflective direction.

[txt]Paradoxically, however, the 1970s had begun with a movement played at the other extreme of reflection and oriented in the opposite direction to that of the linguistic purges of the two previous decades (the “cubistization” of the 1950s and the abstraction of the 1960s). Although outlined during the last years of the previous decade, the

eruption of the so-called “fantastic figuration” coincides exactly with the direction of the seventies. The design of Jenaro Pindú, Ricardo Yustman, Selmo Martínez, Luis Alberto Boh, and, later, Miguel Heyn clears away ominous climates loaded with delirium, deviation, and menace: the fateful ciphers of a time that could not be revealed. Obviously, the antithesis this tendency marks in respect of the reflective direction, which had already been incubated and will now emerge, betrays a secret link between the two movements and allows interpretation of the disorder of this fantasy design as the necessary and obscure obverse of the wise reflections of the language upon itself. This moment seeks to exorcize the monsters remaining from the previous scene in order to prepare the following one. But the latter, as we shall see, will not be able to evade the nightmares lying in wait for a continuing history.

The analytical tendencies, linked to metropolitan conceptual art, now begin to be profiled. The appropriation carried out by the Paraguayan artists of certain resources of the conceptual avant-gardes (the latter in the strict sense) is interesting since it implies once again the adulteration of the metropolitan models. It is known that the analytical option, an opportune term suggested by Menna,⁹ erupts like one of the most solid forces that define the horizon at that moment. The great cycle of artistic modernity closes with great self-reflection that highlights its own rhetorical mechanisms and equips itself with aseptic fields of language. Reality is observed, with a lack of confidence, from the peephole of concepts, the ultimate principle of representation: so much so that the idea of the work ends up displacing its execution. This self-reflective tendency, proclaimer of postmodern criticism, which is already prepared and will make its entrance immediately after, appears in Paraguay in the first years of the seventies. But in doing so, it becomes refracted, unfocused, contaminated with the pressing contents of a dramatic time, forgets its tautological proclamations, escapes from the pure, self-conscious circle of the language and, at times, is dissolved by the muddy current

of history. A history certainly more preoccupied by its own misfortunes than by the intimate mechanism of the codes or the specular play that enables the manipulation of the signs.

Developed in Asunción by artists such as Carlos Colombino, Osvaldo Salerno (Figures 12 and 13), [TS – Figures 12 and 13 near here] Bernardo Krasniansky, and Luis Alberto Boh, this tendency is known as “Re-figuration” and arises midway between the seclusion of aesthetic forms and the claims of the historical drama. This is because this reflection of the language on itself did not occur in Paraguay to the detriment of the image strongly committed to expression. Thus, although reflective and formalized, the peculiar Paraguayan version surpasses the aseptic schemes of the concept and embraces a dense and very solid figuration: the “Re-figuration” serves not only to consolidate the significant frame of the work but also to accommodate profuse social content, connect with the figurative tradition of an expressive stamp, pass furtive messages, metaphorize oppression, and evade censorship. But, above all, to announce the possibility of different perspectives of enunciation, the existence of other margins of inscription.

The task of disembedding a syntax run in a closed circuit and opening it to the inclemencies of a climate that presses from outside helped to overcome the not inconsiderable risks of conceptual narcissism of that moment. But also, and at the other extreme, it allowed a denunciatory and pamphleteering sense of the critique to be avoided. This unfocused manner of working the language could, in this way, often avoid the contentism of the motif as much as the self-sufficiency of the form consumed, something which marked a primordial achievement in terms of the modern Paraguayan program. Thus, following its own paths, the image, simultaneously reflective and dramatic at this moment, is presented as surmounting the conflicts that disturbed and mobilized the difficult course of artistic modernity in Paraguay. In the first place, it builds a bridge between the serene kingdom of language

and the turbulent fields of history; in the second, it proposes a convincing model of mediation between the need to tune to the international timetable and that of following the rhythm of its own circumstances. In this way, this moment is considered the most intense and prolific in Paraguayan plastic arts, in which they reach the culmination of their process of modernity.

But that same idea of time completed and consumed, so dear to modern thought, has a different scope in peripheral cultures from that which it possesses in the center. With reference to the latter it seems inappropriate to suppose a model realized, and to the former the idea of a synthesis that satisfies differences, of a circle that is closed, spent, and satisfied, is unthinkable. Thus, although one may talk of a different time in order to name its passing immediately after overthrowing the ferocious military tyranny, many questions, surviving and dispersed, will continue to fill the postmodern air with ghosts. Here too a modern illusion is woven. And a short breach is opened.

[a]II. De-Modernities

[b]The Slips of the Transition

[tx]On February 3, 1989, in the early morning, the dictatorship of Stroessner fell, pushed by former accomplices of his who had been able to smell the new air of their time. Officially, the period of the so-called *Transition to Democracy* begins then, which corresponds with the ambiguous time of the post-dictatorships in South America and coincides, in exact date, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the melancholy post-historic rituals. The moment known as that of the post-dictatorial transitions in the Southern Cone elapses in a passing place; a “displace” which, by its own provisional definition, is transitory: a “mistime”. And it does so immersed in a new atmosphere, supplied with lights less crude and scenes not as dramatic. A climate that is confused with that of the clouded postmodern landscape.

[txt]But the fiction of a time suspended and temperate—a fiction associated with the fall of the military dictatorships and in tune with the innocuous global present—could not last too long. Soon the neutral postmodern horizon was clouded with the return of unburied ghosts and the shadow of new threats and, very soon, the “post-democracies” of the South allowed glimpses of the effects of new corruptions, violence, and serious disruptions linked with brutal processes of transnational neo-liberalization. The ever more serious environmental, political, economic, and social crises that shook the countries of the South during that agitated end of century are reconciled with difficulty with the lightweight models and the apathetic airs that surround globalized culture. The pressures of their own histories, which increased, no doubt, with universal events, once more adulterated the meaning of certain central paradigms.

Moreiras finds in the post-dictatorial situation of Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay the prototype of the postmodern cultural *impasse*. That is, the Southern Cone well represents the postmodern paradox, according to which certain peripheries, heterogeneous in their modes of production and relatively resistant to the fetishization of the world as merchandise, have greater possibilities than the center of keeping alive the sense of a channel of history. In the context of a general weakening of the historical sense, overwhelmed to the end by the symbolic power of transnational capitalism, “the possibility of historicity would, nevertheless, be less exhausted on the periphery than that which is in the center.”¹⁰

That adulteration of the central paradigms of postmodernity, increased no doubt by this different position on the construction of history, provoked a new slide in the production of some Latin American art, driven more by the pressures of their difficult time than by the bland seductions of transnational imageries. Already during the 1980s in the Southern Cone, some tendencies in contemporary art began to attempt new forms of dissidence again and to recover,

nevertheless, their diminished political commitment and their weakened argumentative vocation.

But as much to oppose the indulgent globalized images, it is worth comparing these critical tendencies in the art of the Southern Cone in the eighties and nineties with equivalent, contemporary directions developed in the metropolises, especially the different models of activist, political, or alternative art produced in New York: the most defined and influential proposals and the best supported theoretically. These are centered basically on the obsessive questioning of the system of art itself (institutionality of museums, galleries, curatorships, publications, criticism), the emergence of new identities (ethnic, racial, sexual, cultural) and certain locations of (micro)power (sexuality, gender, body). Correspondingly, the peripheries inherit these preoccupations but, in doing so, they again displace them; they re-send them to other places. They convert them into an obsession with the tortured or disappeared body; they link them with the theme of the construction of memory and the reconstruction of the public; they confront them with discussions about the relation of center–periphery, global–local; they involve them in the horrors of hunger and violence, in the necessity to re-imagine utopias in contrast to an unfortunate present.

Once more, certain questions that are well formulated at the center lose definition once resituated in marginal zones. In this way, the self-questioning of the system of art does not signify the same for regions lacking a well-established institutionality in this sphere: an institutionality partly necessary, or at least demanded by the most critical sectors. Thus, the protest positions of the South, more than against an institutionality of art lacking in strength and prestige—incapable of constituting itself in hegemonic counter-pole—orient their forces against the mediocre aestheticism propagated by the global markets and, even against certain stereotypes of the art of the

mainstream (the politically correct, the multiculturalist cliché, the exoticist readings of Latin American art, etc.).

Also the theme of the politics of difference functions differently in the North and the South. The South American art of the eighties happily makes space for “alternative” figures and images, but soon recognizes that, translated into a different artistic practice, against a background of complex historical experiences relative to the theme of the ethnographic, the pluricultural, and the multiethnic, “the policies of identity” end up being, at best, forced. And even more: it warns that, posed in multiculturalist code, such policies tend to substantialize the differences, atomize sectorial demands, and hinder the possibility that these are articulated in group projects. The slogan appeared, therefore, to introduce the theme of difference but to do so facing a certain common range of meaning that might facilitate a social construction: to think of the diverse as closer to the figure of citizenship than to that of identity. This is because, during the post-dictatorship, as much as or more than the respect for difference, social cohesion was presented as a basic requirement for a region faced with the exigency of laboriously recomposing its worn social scheme and attempting shared projects.

[b]The Return

[tx]In Paraguay, these critical directions hatched suddenly, once the nineties had already begun, immediately after a brief, suffocating situation of stagnation. Around the middle of the 1980s, in effect, the creative tension that was driving the activity of the plastic arts had begun to lose impetus. Certain great names were being repeated, and it became impossible to discern the prospect of the arrival of changes or, at least, generational reinforcements. It seemed as if, with the culmination of the modern experience, the artists had not completed recognition of their new functions and places. As has been indicated, this situation of uncertainty and paralysis coincided with the lack of appetite of the postmodern atmosphere and, from 1989, was linked to

the stage of post-dictatorship. A stage awaited with delayed anxieties; a moment of flaming liberties. But also a time of new disenchantments. Soon after the fall of the dictatorship, the presence of artistic and cultural sectors began to fade; they lost drive and enthusiasm and softened their gaze. This was because positions were then no longer so definite nor certainties so clear. The space in which power is played, traditional field of heroic battles, became a confused scenario of multiple actors and unstable positions.

[txt]This ambiguous diversity acted as a propitious agent for the affirmation of the difference and complexity of social forces but, as has been said, it also became a factor that dissolved collective identities and certainties. This was because, although the dictatorship of Stroessner had managed to impede the constitution of a firm social fabric, the resistance to the system constituted a strong utopian reference point around which diverse sectors of civil society were allied and against which many artists fervently constructed their metaphors. Thus, the dramatic script of the dictatorship was succeeded by a confused and unfocused libretto. Disorientated, the artists needed to reformulate their positions and adapt themselves to an unknown script, a choreography created in the theater without markers or contrasts. At that point, that soft and deflated moment for the culture occurred: the hoped-for transition was experienced more as a loss of reference points than as a restorative stimulus of historical meaning. Against this anemic background the emergence of new forces began to show itself from the early years of the nineties. Alongside artists who had already produced a significant body of work, such as Carlos Colombino, Osvaldo Salerno, Ricardo Migliorisi, Bernardo Krasniansky, and Félix Toranzos (Figure 14), [TS – Figure 14 near here] other new names appear, not always so young, such as Fátima Martini, Karina Yaluk, Carlo Spatuzza (Figure 15), [TS – Figure 15 near here] Engelberto Giménez, Marité Zaldívar (Figure 16), [TS – Figure 16 near here] Mónica González, Feliciano Centurión, Alejandra

García, Marcos Benítez (Figure 17), [TS – Figure 17 near here] Gustavo Benítez, Pedro Barrail, and Adriana González, among others. And afterwards, the last batch formed by very young artists such as Claudia Casarino, Fredi Casco, Bettina Brizuela, Marcelo Medina, and others. From different places and across distinct and mixed media, all of them aim at a critical reassessment of representation and attempt new treatments of the public–private relationship and new registers of the historical gaze. In this search they meet names from disciplines that, until then, were operating separately and that now exchange positions and share places; names that come from previous decades, like that of Jesús Ruiz Nestosa, or that are defined during this time, such as, among others, those of Jorge Sáenz, Juan Britos, Carlos Bittar, Gabriela Zuccolillo (photography), as well as those of Paz Encina, Tana Schémbori, and Juan Carlos Maneglia (video).

In different degrees and with disparate scope, these artists adopt the rhetorical strategies of the international art of the eighties and nineties (the conceptual anesthetism, the emphasis of the narrative and discursive dimension, the allegorical resources, the intertextuality, the technological hybridity) and they appropriate its basic themes (the media culture, the anthropological dimension, the repositioning of subjectivity and memory, etc.). But in the best cases, those resources and these themes are brought to a parallel scene where they are forced to deal with local or global problems linked to their own experience. Perhaps the return of extra-aesthetic content implies a reaction against excessive modern formalism. But it is indubitable that it also signifies a reply to the unbearable lightness of postmodern aestheticism: the eagerness to return to scrutinize, uselessly, the real; to adopt positions, perhaps transitory, faced with the intricate tasks that history proposes and to anticipate sustainable futures from them.

[a]III. Parallel Modernities

[b]Shortcuts

[tx]Up to now, we have been analyzing the imbalance operating between the metropolitan modernities and their peripheral versions; a differentiation exploited by the latter in order to twist the original meaning indicated by the former or to attempt to reinvigorate it or to supplant it when it was exhausted. But now we find ourselves facing another case. That of subjects which, without offending too much the language or the concept, could be called “sub-peripheral.” They are popular, suburban, and indigenous sectors, communities, or individualities that do not pretend to imitate or construct particular versions of European–North American signals but to pursue their own historical paths, generally of traditional origin (colonial or pre-Hispanic), and naturally to assume that the obscure reasons of the time brought them, each time with greater frequency, to penetrate into territories ruled by modern codes (economic, social, cultural, aesthetic codes). That is, these collectives or these persons do not reveal a preoccupation with being modern, nor an anxiety to preserve “authenticity.” Nor do they fear adopting, sometimes with great rapidity and almost always with self-confidence, modern models when they are convenient for expressive or functional requirements. Nor are they uncomfortable with obstinately maintaining archaic forms when these retain validity. No mention is made here, since they are very well known and irrelevant in this instance, of the cases of mutilation, devastation, and coercive imposition of cultural forms, as well as those concerning the preservation, more or less uncontaminated, of the traditional models; this point refers exclusively to the processes through which certain modern forms are filtered and redefined from continuing practices of histories outside modern experience.

[txt]These impure processes perhaps constitute the most characteristic expressions of what comes to be called “cultural hybridity” in order to designate certain notes of intermixed postmodern globalization. But although coincidences and intersections between the popular¹¹ and the postmodern imageries exist, it would be extravagant to talk about a “popular postmodernity”:

if, on its own, each term is problematic, together they would comprise an unnecessarily complicated concept and, as such, one that is of little use. It seems improper to apply categories arising from a saturation of modernity to cultures governed by traditional symbolic systems, amodern modalities, and mixed, fractured, and incomplete experiences of modern times.

The daring seizure that certain popular sectors carry out of the complex iconography of modernity does not imply adherence to the modern program, nor, much less, affiliation to avant-garde principles or recognition of the autonomy of the aesthetic. The popular artists do not conceive their productions as sequences of a linearly ordered history: they take the necessary figures directly and insert them in the course of a different path, their own, and at the level of different times. Pressurized by new conditions that compromise its survival, those cultures develop different symbolic strategies of appropriation of images, techniques, and modern codes, and even contest circuits particular to modern institutionality (on the level of art: market, publications, distinctions, participation in international competitions and events, etc.). Contrary to discriminations and preconceptions that seek to reduce popular expressions to banal folkloric productions, examples of ethnographic (if not archaeological) collections, petrified national essences, or curious residues of a world in extinction; contrary to these prejudices, of strong ideological sign, many popular artists, integrated or not in communities or sectors, re-create and re-accommodate the scenarios of their production, and even try to widen them, competing with the learned sectors and even with industrialized culture.

[b]The Four Scenarios

[tx]Continuing in the direction of taking examples from the culture of Paraguay, brief mention is made of some particular situations, produced in four different scenarios. The first of these concerns the specific modernity of certain urban or suburban artists whose

sensibilities are to be found forged in popular matrixes, even though their works come to be circulated in learned institutions of art. The most significant case is that of the work of Ignacio Núñez Soler (Figure 18), [TS – Figure 18 near here] which has been produced without any contact with the development of artistic modernization, although it anticipated many of its consequences in a parallel and separate scene. Like other painters (Juan Bautista Rojas, Carlos Reyes, or, more recently, Benjamín Ocampos), he is linked to the modern desire to follow shortcuts of his own, and naturally mixes different contents and linguistic repertoires of the avant-garde movements and the culture of the masses; without major procedures, he jumps directly from his iconographic quagmire of references to formal and expressive triumphs which enlightened modernists achieve by means of long and laborious processes.

[txt]In the second scenario, indigenous artists incorporate techniques, images, and modern usages either to replace their diminished iconographies or to oxygenate them with new reinforcements or, directly, to explore alternative survivalist sources. For example, certain Avá-Guaraní and Nivaklé groups compete with *design*, producing sculptural forms intended for utilitarian functions foreign to their daily life (Figure 19), [TS – Figure 19 near here] just as Mak'a communities invest in the urban market, substituting synthetic materials for vegetable fibers, and Ishir populations create for sale strange baskets, intruders in their history but connected, no doubt, with their exalted aesthetic. One particular case is that of Ogwa, an indigenous Ishir-Chamacoco who has invented for the delight of ethnographers and benefit of the galleries of Asunción, beguiling and assured drawings, teeming with gods, shamans, and nameless beasts, which dialog with the febrile neo-baroque imagery of some of the learned artists.

In the third scenario are represented rites based on obscure indigenous-Catholic syncretisms that are firmly rooted in certain

peasant communities. Offered to the patron saint of the community, these profane religious festivals preserve the formulas of the traditional libretto as much as they are open to the dramatization of strictly contemporary events of the present day. The most illustrative case is that of the festival of the patron saints Peter and Paul which takes place in Altos, and whose tangled scenic structure obsessively preserves the narrative nucleus of the ancient ritual: the archaic dispute around the mastery of fire and the mythical rape of primitive women by the historical adversaries of the indigenous Guaraní, the ferocious Guaykurú. Those who personify them attack, dressed up in rustling costumes of dried leaves and, like many of the characters who appear in the scene, with their faces hidden by masks of wood or cloth. Around this fixed kernel of the storyline, which begins to develop after liturgical worship, a delirious succession of performances occurs, referring to events of burning local, national, or global significance: peasant demands, cases of public corruption, political or social scandals, elections of queens, disputes between neighbors, fashion parades, or international conflicts, represented in a mood of parody and tone of media spectacle with impeccable scenic effects. To the sequence of the mass, the fervent worship, the obscure rite, and the theatrical extravaganza is added the popular expression of jubilation: the dance which rounds off the festival and greets the peasant dawn with polkas sung in Guaraní and monotonous tropical rhythms.

The last scenario is intersected by the experience of rural artist-artisans whose work invades modern territories without deviating from the path of indigenous and Mestiza tradition. I take the case of two peasant ceramists who look out onto the scene of contemporary plastic arts from the threshold of their pre-capitalist world and over the intact foundation of their own memories. In November 1994, Juana Marta Rodas and her daughter Julia Isídrez, resident potters of the Caaguasú company in the village of Itá, received from the international jury the most important prize for the plastic arts that

was then awarded in the country (Gran Premio de la Bienal Martel de Artes Visuales). From pre-colonial times it was the mothers who transmitted to their daughters the secrets of ceramics, a craft which, since then, has survived the impact of different adversities, preserving the original alchemy of the technique and the sure outline of its forms. But although well secured to the foundations of this tradition, the images of these ceramists unexpectedly acknowledge the challenge of new influences, of distinct functions, of other airs of their own time. Well then, what do they have to do with Mestiza history and the tradition of earthenware, these capricious pieces, these dramatic sculptures that appear to respond more to the deliriums of an urban artist than to the serene invention produced in the fields? It is unquestionable that these artist-artisans continue naming a territory that already produced forms in clay long before the Colony. But likewise it is obvious that they express a definitively different sphere, a space into which have filtered other perceptions and other ways of seeing the same landscape, which is already no longer the same. These disturbing sculptures demonstrate that, considered in themselves, neither tradition nor modernity offers guarantees, nor do they constitute threats; what legitimizes the symbols that the one or the other produces is the truth that feeds them both. And the truth of Juana Marta and of Julia is that of an ambiguous time and a torn present. The labour of expressing it fully supposes an intense effort and requires secure, solid forms, figures that are further behind the origin and above the barrier traced by the modern threshold. These stubborn, difficult to catalog desires proliferate in different places in Latin American cultures. They operate at different levels of a blurred spectrum that moves between the popular and the modern (or the global and the massive) sliding from form to form along an indeterminable range of positions and behind a dream restored a thousand times. In these confused tasks are to be found some of the strongest arguments of the difference in the indefinite terrains of Latin American art.

[a]Notes

- [nt]1. During the War of the Triple Alliance (1865–70) waged by Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay against Paraguay, newspapers were published on the battlefronts, such as the *Cabichuí* (“wasp” in Guaraní) and *El Centinela*, profusely illustrated by wood engravings made by the soldiers. These expressions constitute a significant example of Latin American popular art.
- [nt]2. This article was written in 1998.
- [nt]3. Eduardo Subirats, *Linterna mágica. Vanguardia, media y cultura tardomoderna*, Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1997, p. 14.
- [nt]4. On the one hand, Paraguayan culture suffered a long tradition of enclaustration which was broken just after the fall of the dictatorship of Stroessner; on the other, it bears the weight of a double hegemonic mediation: at least during the modern moment in the strict sense that it received metropolitan paradigms through the regional submetropoles of, first, Buenos Aires and, then, São Paulo.
- [nt]5. Octavio Paz, “Palabras al simposio de Austin, Texas,” in Damián Bayón, *El artista latinoamericano y su identidad*, Caracas: Monte Avila, 1977, p. 23.
- [nt]6. Josefina Plá, “Movimiento renovador en nuestra pintura,” *La Tribuna* newspaper, Asunción, 11.04.1954.
- [nt]7. Frederico Moraes, *Artes plásticas na América Latina: do trance ao transitorio*, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1979, p. 90.
- [nt]8. The flow of capital resulting from the accelerated internationalization of the Paraguayan economy, the hydroelectric project at Itaipú, and the investments of multinational companies, many of them based on the unbridled corruption promoted by the Stroessner oligarchy, prompted the sudden reactivation of the national economy during the decade of the seventies.

[nt]9. Filiberto Menna, *La opción analítica en el arte moderno. Figuras e íconos*, Colección Punto y Línea, Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili S.A., 1977.

[nt]10. Alberto Moreiras, “Posdictadura y reforma del pensamiento,” in *Revista de Crítica Cultural*, no. 7, Santiago de Chile, November 1993.

[nt]11. With reservations, the term “popular” is used here as an essential reference and for practical reasons located on the margin of any discussion regarding its relevance. In this article, “popular” is understood as the whole group of great majorities or minority sectors excluded from an effective participation in the social, economic, cultural, and/or political and self-affirmed in its difference through a symbolic production alternative to the hegemonic cultural models.

[TS – captions]

[fig]Figure 1

Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, 17th century, Franciscan Workshop, Caazapa, Collection Museo del Barro.

[fig]Figure 2

Cabichui. Periodical published during the War of the Triple Alliance, 1967, Collection Museo del Barro, Paraguay.

[fig]Figure 3

Wolf Bandureck, *Storm*, oil on canvas, c 1940. Private Collection

[fig]Figure 4

Ofelia Echagüe, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 1952. Collection Museo del Barro. Paraguay.

[fig]Figure 5

Jaime Bestard, *Untitled*, not dated. Private Collection.

[fig]Figure 6

Olga Blinder, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, 1953. Private Collection.

[fig]Figure 7

Edith Jimenez, *Flowers*, oil on canvas, 1954. Private Collection.

[fig]Figure 8

Enrique Careaga, *Propuesta luminico cinetica para una partida de ping pong* (Proposal for light kinetics for a ping-pong match), 1969

[fig]Figure 9

Angel Yegros, *Icon A*, 1966. Collection Museo del Barro, Paraguay.

[fig]Figure 10

Ricardo Migliorisi, *El Banquete Inconcluso* (The unfinished banquet), 2000. Collection Fundación Migliorisi.

[fig]Figure 11

Carlos Colombino, *E.T. Serie. Reflexiones sobre Durero* (Reflections on Dürer), 1980. Collection Museo del Barro. Paraguay

[fig]Figure 12

Oswaldo, *Composition Impression*, 1974, Collection Museo del Barro, Paraguay.

[fig]Figure 13

Oswaldo Salerno, *La Pileta* (The pool), installation, 1997, Collection of the Artist.

[fig]Figure 14

Felix Toranzos. *Sueños robados* (Stolen Dreams), installation, 1998. Collection Carlos Colombino.

[fig]Figure 15

Carlo Spatuzza, *Corazonada*, 1997–2002, Collection of the artist.

[fig]Figure 16

Marite Zaldivar, *Estampas patrias* (native prints), installation, 1995.
Collection of the artist.

[fig]Figure 17

Marcos Benitez, *Hacer y deshacer la vida cotidiana* (Doing and undoing everyday life), installation, 1999. Collection Museo del Barro. Paraguay

[fig]Figure 18

Ignacio Nuñez Soler, *Corrida de toros en 1906* (Bullfight in 1906), oil on canvas, 1980. Collection Museo del Barro, Paraguay.

[fig]Figure 19

Money-box by Angelica Duarte (Ava Guarani), 2000. Collection Museo del Barro. Paraguay