

A Journey Across Borders: The L.A./L.A. – Latin América/ Los Angeles – Workshop

TEDDY CRUZ

Southern California Institute of Architecture

SCENARIO I: BORDERS, LABYRINTHS AND THE DESIRE FOR THE OTHER

Modern man likes to pretend that he is wide-awake. But this wide-awake thinking has led us into the mazes of a nightmare in which the torture chambers are endlessly repeated in the mirrors of reason. When we emerge, perhaps we will realize that we have been dreaming with our eyes open, and that dreams of reason are intolerable. And then, perhaps we will begin to dream once again with our eyes closed.

– Octavio Paz¹

At one point just before crossing the border from Tijuana, Mexico, into San Diego, California, (and in a broader sense, from Latin America into the United States) one passes through a transitional “buffer zone,” an ambivalent fragment of space. This gap seems to belong neither to the US nor to Mexico. Within it, thoughts of reality are suspended and replaced by invented, momentary utopias; one escapes to a place situated only in the imagination, where all things are real. This imagined place is constructed of connections, not of separations; of readings, not categorizations. Here one does not ask, in the words of Carlos Fuentes, “for generic affiliations but for a dialogue, not for one language, but for many languages at odds with one another, not for unity of style but for heteroglossia, not for monologic but for dialogic imagination. A cultural space which cares little about formal classifications, but much about vitality and connection, for culture itself perishes in purity and isolation.”² This adventure of the imagination ends abruptly the moment we cross the border and experience the reality we have created.

A ten-foot-high steel wall separates and demarcates the border. Its presence, a materialized political entity, interrupts an otherwise porous and continuous landscape magnifying the modern divorce between our thoughts and our actions, the separation between our imagination and our reality. It symbolizes the crisis of our modern world, one of isolation, separation and displacement. In this labyrinth of dividing walls, the only vestige of exchange is a kind of NAFTA – North American Free *Kitsch* Agreement. A permanent collection of mutual misconceptions is apparent in the North’s nostalgic reading of the South. By succumbing to the forces of commerce, the cultural history of the Mexican vernacular is turned into an instantaneous “Taco Bell” theme park. Similarly, for example, the architecture of Luis Barragan is reduced to a colorful “postmodern” style in popular “coffee-table” publications. This image is then regurgitated and commercialized as part of a distorted and now-fashionable “magic realism,” ignoring that the fictional in Latin American literature is closely related to historical, social, and political realities.

Conversely, when the South looks North, its view is conditioned by



Fig. 1. Border wall between the US and Mexico.

a desire for a progress promised by technology. Europe and the United States have been the utopia of Latin America. When building a miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower in the middle of its capital city, as Carlos Fuentes observed, “Guatemala even called itself ‘the Paris of Central America.’ Our secret yearning, of course was that one day Paris would call itself ‘the Guatemala City of Europe.’”³ This desire for “first world” values of scientific control, when imported indiscriminately, clash with the intuitive beliefs, spontaneity, and idiosyncrasy of a built landscape which has traditionally seen the role of technology as an instrument of culture and not an end in itself.

In this superfluous exchange between the hemispheres we create caricatures of each other, recycling masks of identity that keep us from recognizing ourselves. “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us more unknown, less free, more solitary.”⁴

SCENARIO II: CONSTRUCTING BRIDGES

Modernity is measured not by the onward march of industry , but by the capacity for criticism and self-criticism.

– Octavio Paz⁵

How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world.

– Maurice Merleau Ponty⁶

In Frida Kahlo’s 1932 painting, *Self-portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States*, we find a composition divided in three main parts or narratives. On the right of the canvas, we see a mechanized landscape, an image which represents the techno-



Fig. 2. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932.

logical, progressive north; the United States' fabric of industrialization marching towards a positivist future. On the left of Kahlo's painting, we find the South's nostalgic past. Its bare landscape of decrepit and decaying ruins houses the agonizing gods who are barely grasping the sky and earth in a last attempt to convey meaning. The representation of both opposing extremes seems to exalt neither; both, for example, are characterized by the absence of any human vestiges. Instead, the focus lies on the life of the figure at the center of the painting: Frida Kahlo. Frida places herself in the midst of this tension, her body is the border. She is the mediator, the interpreter and final judge of these conflicting oppositions. Her position is that of the artist as translator whose role is not to dominate and conquer reality through knowledge and power, but instead, to immerse into that reality through contemplation and critical interpretation – in the very midst of those dialectic forces. From this perspective, translation is an instrument of mediation between the artist's solitude and the complexity and ambiguity of our contemporary cultural situation.

Frida Kahlo's painting, then, reveals not only the relationship between landscape and technology, local culture and global civilization, but most importantly, the role of the artist as interpreter, bridging our contemporary abyss of rupture between thought and life. The artist inhabits life as a laboratory of the imagination where thought and life are not separate but fused in the creative act. It is the biographical, the personal, which provides the fertilizing particles that bond the placing of our bodies and minds throughout the multilayered natural, social and cultural landscape which we inhabit. As Ignasi de Solà-Morales writes, "the most 'full,' the most 'alive,' that which is felt as being experience itself, that in which the perceiving subject and perceived reality are powerfully fused, is the work of art."⁷

But our technological society does not recognize mediation between subjective experience and the objectivity of the world. We live in a world where words and acts are mostly irreconcilable. This condition not only provokes the distancing between art and practical experience but also, as Ann Pendleton-Jullian observes, "the separation of man from his reality to study and analyze his relationship to it, from a superior position. This attitude, integrally attached to man's instinct for survival, tends towards a fracturing of reality into categories so that its information may be compartmentalized and managed by the appropriate science, discipline, profession" (and educational structure).⁸

SCENARIO III: PEDAGOGICAL THEATERS

The mission of an educator is not to offer a philosophy to the student but the medium and the possibilities to create one.

– Octavio Paz⁹

The border condition, then, can serve as a lens to magnify issues of great concern in our current architectural thinking. It presents a particularly relevant challenge to all of us: how to digest the diversity and mutation of the world while retaining the mind's power for analogy and unity. On one hand, the border wall may also represent the divisions our academic institutions have built around them, distancing themselves from other sources of knowledge and inspiration beyond architecture. These are the self-inflicted boundaries of an education and practice characterized by the standardization of expression and the separation of interests through specialization which, according to Carlos Fuentes, is the "death of our times." In this fragmented context, students and architects seem more objects of information than subjects of communication.

On the other hand, the border magnifies the implicit tensions existing in the confrontation of the local and the global, the individual and society. It is also a manifestation of how, in the words of Nikos Papastergiadis, "the migration of peoples across borders, the technological changes in circulating symbols and the reorganization of the means of production have produced a series of socio-political and cultural transformations."¹⁰ All of these shifts signify radical changes that should be the inspiration to modify the institutions of representation, such as schools of architecture. How can we construct an open field of criticism allowing our education become an instrument to challenge the reductive specialization of interests and pierce at the homogeneous mantle of standardization which permeates our education? How do we filter the dialectic of these forces into a pedagogy so that our design studios become active theaters in which new narratives are invented?

But, in most cases, academic studios are not dramatic stages where situations are discovered, questions asked and doubts revealed. Too often they are, instead, institutions of representational convention where conditions are merely reproduced and not questioned. Typologies and programs are resolved with an attitude of objective certainty supported by the design formulae of a pre-determined pedagogy. This is still the legacy of an ongoing homogenizing model of modernism which continues to impose, internationally, a project based on cognitive, scientific, instrumental reason. Within this tradition, architectural education continues to look toward western Europe as its primary theoretical and historical point of reference. Although the importance of this legacy cannot be denied, we must be aware of the inter-cultural connections and historical transformations of the Americas. As Nelly Richard writes, this Eurocentric project constructs a history in terms of progress, a linear temporality which is inappropriate when applied, for example, to Latin America. Its closed, defined system of thought is "alien to the stratification of Latin American experience because it cannot accommodate the discontinuities of a history marked by a multiplicity of pasts laid down like sediments in hybrid and fragmented memories."¹¹ Modernism, then, has been generally indifferent to the idiosyncrasies of Latin America, to its different histories, memories and desires.

In the process of building new pedagogical paradigms, it seems, then, that a journey across our continent's own historical transformations can reveal many points of reference and inspiration. In order to rupture the hermetic wall which isolates our field of thought from other voices and our personal histories from diverse global realities, we have to reevaluate the way we have been trained to make and think about architecture, to explore other uncharted territories. In Latin America there seems to be an intellectual and artistic drive to establish a more critical position to interpret the changes we are experiencing locally and globally. How do we explore the diversity

of this cultural landscape? "No culture retains its identity in isolation, identity is attained in contact, contrast and breakthrough." (Carlos Fuentes)¹²

For the studio to become an active theater, then, each student must have to reflect on his/her position, adopting an attitude vis-à-vis his/her role in the process of production itself. How, then, do we open the process of design to the idiosyncrasy and diversity of the students? How do we inspire them to build a critical position, an awareness based on what they make and think? Clearly it begins with the notion that identity is itself a process which is in perpetual tension, ambiguity and transformation. The initial investigation would have to focus on the origin of a process which could allow us to read, translate and map our encounter with the world. The desire to interpret the world is common to all artistic forms and needs to be reinvented in our architecture studios. Richard Sennet suggests that our authentic engagement with the world should translate into a personal desire to make something.¹³ It is this desire which seems to be absent from our classrooms; a desire not only to solve questions but to generate them through critical thinking and creative acts.

SCENARIO IV: MAPPING ORIGINS: THE LA/LA STUDIO

Origin [Ursprung], although a thoroughly historical category, nonetheless has nothing to do with beginnings [...]. The term origin does not mean the process of becoming of that which has emerged, but much more, that which emerges out of the process of becoming and disappearing. The origin stands in the flow of becoming as a whirlpool.

– Walter Benjamin¹⁴

The L.A./L.A. (Latin America/Los Angeles) studio was founded in 1994. Since then, students from North, Central, South America, the Caribbean and the U.S. have come annually to the Southern California Institute of Architecture, SCI-Arc, to explore the changing boundaries of the Americas and architectural education. The overlapping of North and Latin American students' histories through images and words has been the canvas for inquiry. The pursuit is not for the construction of stylistic or ideological agendas but for the intensity of the event of interaction, the encounter and the conversation itself. Rather than asking who can speak, we should ask how to speak together so that our design studios may act as a battleground for the de-colonialization of our minds in order to communicate across borders in and out of the hermetic shell of the architectural profession. The search is for an architectural education that includes *other* stories which can lift the veil that obscures the potential of our multiple narratives.

In the last four years, the workshop has developed through a simple act: the suspension of our preconceptions in order to explore the unknown origin of a path that will only unfold as we walk through it. This willingness to suspend disbelief opens a pedagogy whose essence lies, both, in the drama of risk taking and critical reflection before action. In an increasingly product-oriented society, the L.A./L.A. studio provides a space in which to suspend our obsession with the "end result" in order to dwell momentarily on the importance of our insecurities and doubts and on the indeterminacy of the world, putting faith in our intuitive and critical capacities. The artistic act is invoked not as an act of self-indulgence, but as an act of self-confrontation. The act of discovery, as Marcel Duchamp observed, is to simply open a window onto something else, even if it represents failure. At this brief moment of a process' origin, architecture is poem, pure flow and intensity, not yet building. During the six weeks of the studio, this pre-architecture moment is explored, not necessarily towards the making of building, but towards constructing sensibilities.

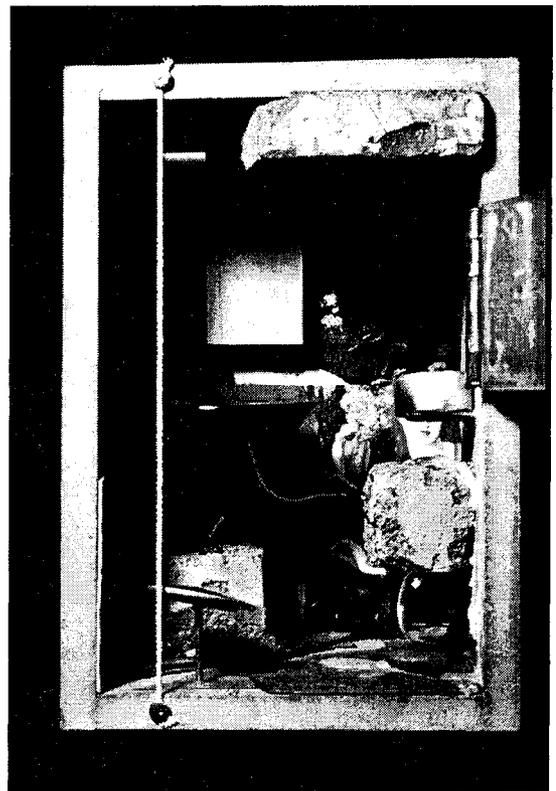
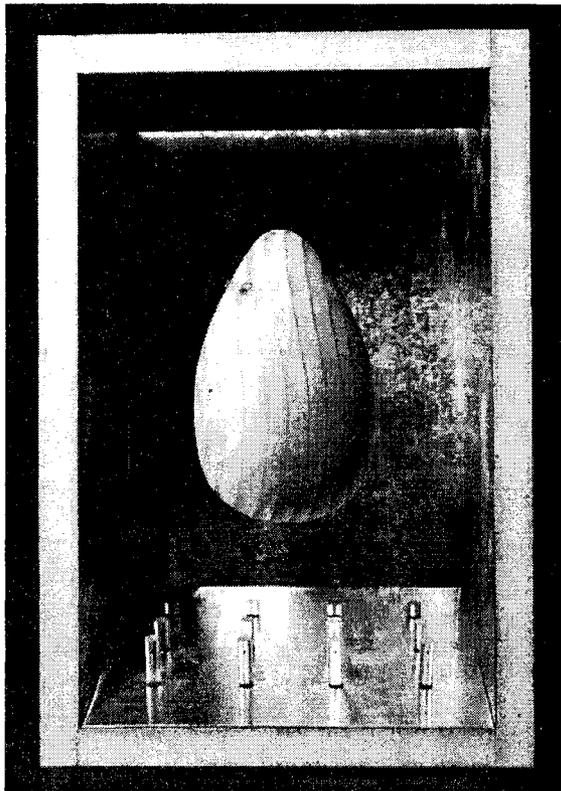
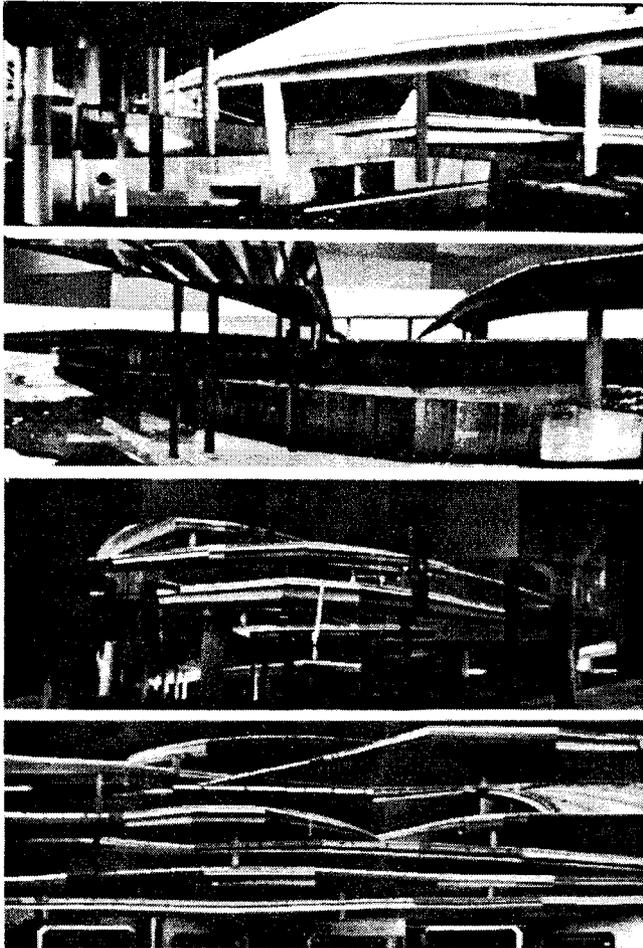
The L.A./L.A., then, more than a design studio, is a "forum" where different narratives, identities and histories are exchanged through

images and words. The visual topography of narratives which emerges out of this exchange explores a reconnection to the act of thinking through making, opening questions about the methods by which we have been trained to articulate ideas and emotions. In this process, the act of drawing and making is an event, an instrument of discovery. By initially exploring different media (charcoal, pastel, graphite, photo-transfer, collage, photomontage, resin, wax and other three-dimensional mixed media including "Form Z"), the students question the standardization of drawing. The search begins, incrementally, out of the cultural debris of the city, for the appropriate individual medium to bridge personal meanings with global identities (here, the term "medium" comes alive as an instrument to "mediate" and not as a rendering technique). The transformative essence of the artistic act itself generates a self-awareness to interpret, more critically, the city's organic information.

Upon arrival to Los Angeles, the students oscillate between the "emptiness" of the paper and the "fullness" of the city. These initial gestures map the event of arrival to an unknown city, revealing it only by juxtaposing its everyday life to the student's personal experience. What differentiates a map from a tracing, wrote Deleuze and Guattari, is that "map is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious."¹⁵ The initial drawings search to reveal the emotional power of their individual gestures, believing that only by reconnecting ourselves to the meaning and strength of the marks we make, we can better understand the forces which create borders in the first place. The students, then, journey to the city itself, where they might find their markings again, mirrored in the life of others and other situations. From the early sheets "cut" with intuitive marks, for example, to the mixed media constructions which act as "memory theaters" of their place of origin/arrival, to the "postcards" constructed from experimental rearrangements of the city's elements, the students remain receptive to the images the moment they appear. These are cultural artifacts expressing the "here and now" of the student's passage through Los Angeles, filtering their visceral responses to the intensity of the city's multiple situations.

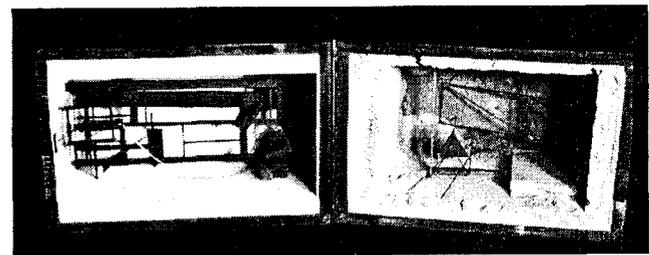
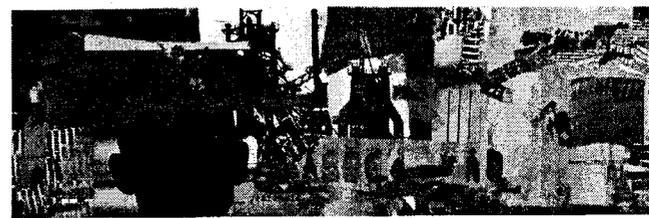
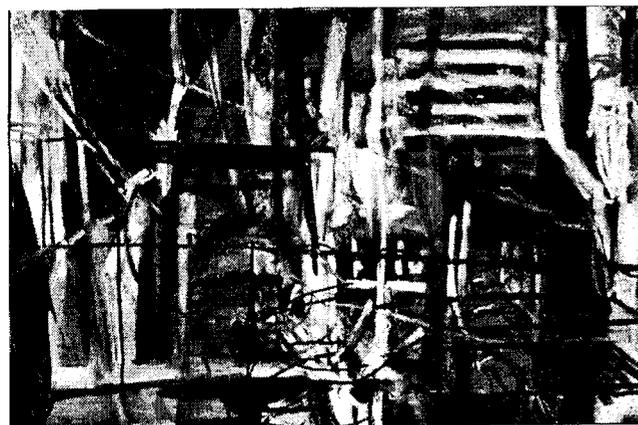
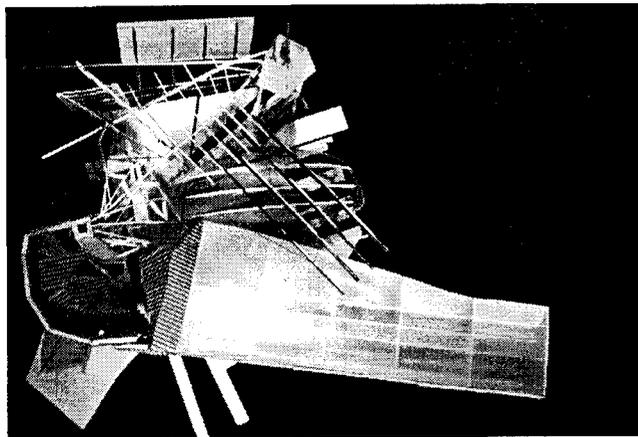
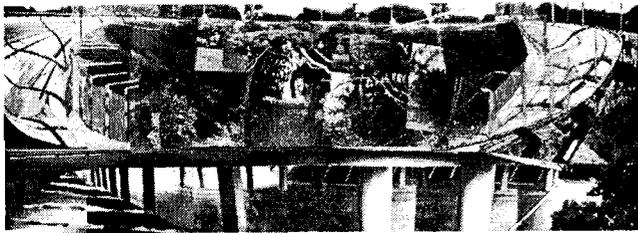
The city of Los Angeles, then, is the laboratory for the studio. Rather than articulate and resolve a given architectural programs based on typological and functional relations, the students construct narratives of relationships and associations based on their experiential readings of the city. As cartographers, they document the life of the city, travelling back and forth between the studio and the physical and cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Through the critical examination of their images, each student begins to develop a "position," physically and conceptually, about Los Angeles. L.A. is transformed into a double city – L.A./L.A. *Latin América/Los Angeles*. Through the ongoing survey of this doubling condition, the students have strengthened the recognition of themselves in the mirrors of others.

The drawings, paintings, photomontages, installations and constructions are stolen stories from the city. More than "products," the images are remnants of a process of appropriation and the temporary activation of the city's residual spaces. The works are the "rear view mirrors" that frame moments of revelation in the crevices and slices of the city. Through the emotional and intellectual power and these diverse images, The L.A./L.A. studio ultimately questions the traditional Latin American architectural education that oscillates between two extremes: an orthodox functionalist rationalism, on one hand; and a search for a folkloristic regionalism on the other. The interest lies in the space of tension between them which ultimately mirrors that of art and practical experience. Through their experience, the L.A./L.A. participants hope to construct a pedagogy driven by cross-cultural communication and interdisciplinary contact, as a basis to demolish the borders and misconceptions that keep us distant and isolated. We hope that the L.A./L.A. studio at SCI-Arc will add a thread to the fabric of cultural exchange in the Americas.



During six weeks in L.A., the flight of Icarus and the dreams of Peter Pan released us from architecture as it is traditionally known – the art of domination – and recovered its reconciliatory mission in the accessible realm of poetics. Architecturing became the mediator in which we were able to bridge personal meanings with global identities. Architecture was explored as a process that celebrates a belief in the instinctive “here and now” of human experience. A process that transformed L.A. into a canvas, collaging the unmarriageable in chance encounters of images and objects.

–Marcos Barinas, L.A. / L.A. *Latin America / Los Angeles*, 1995, student from Dominican Republic



NOTES

- ¹ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico: F.C.E., 1995), p. 230.
- ² Carlos Fuentes, *Myself with Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1988), p. 27.
- ³ Carlos Fuentes, in Ann M. Pendleton-Jullian, *The Road that Is Not a Road and the Open City, Ritoque, Chile* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1996), p. 54.
- ⁴ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, excerpted from Susana Torre, “Cultural Identity and Modernity in Latin American Architecture,” *Design Book Review* 32/33 (Spring/summer 1994):16.
- ⁵ Octavio Paz, *Convergences* (London: 1990), p. 80.
- ⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in Juhani Pallasmaa, “The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses,” *Polemics* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), p. 6.
- ⁷ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *Differences, Topographies of Contemporary Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1997), p. 60.
- ⁸ Ann M. Pendleton-Jullian, *The Road that Is Not a Road and the Open City, Ritoque, Chile* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1996), p. 173.
- ⁹ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico: F.C.E., 1995), p. 117.
- ¹⁰ Nikos Papastergiadis, “And: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Deterritorialization,” *Art and Design* (July / August 1995): 6.
- ¹¹ Nelly Richards, “Postmodernism and Periphery,” in T. Docherty ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 464.
- ¹² Carlos Fuentes, *Myself with Others* (Los Angeles: 1990), p. 12.
- ¹³ Richard Sennet, “Introduction,” *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Norton & Company Inc., 1990).
- ¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, in S. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1997), p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 6.