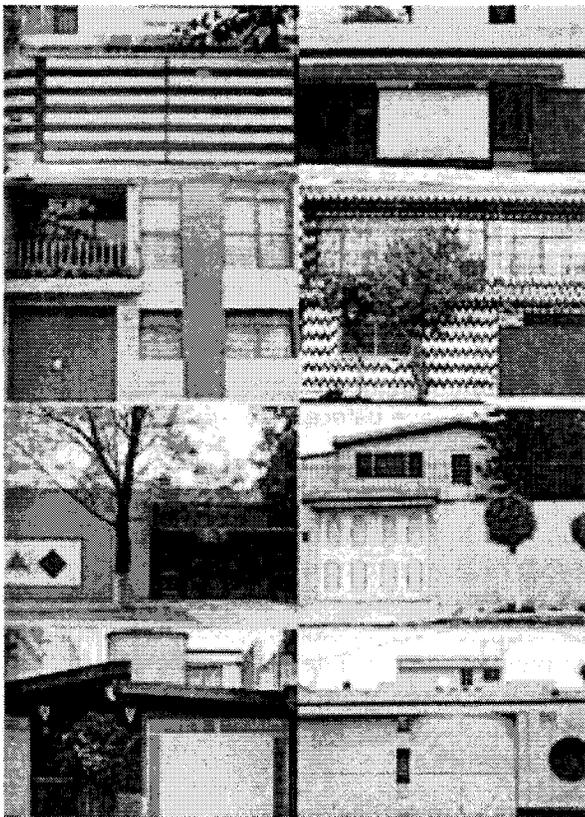


Global Positioning: The Geopolitics of Art Production and Reception in Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

The trouble architectural discourse has understanding the mutual interplay between the universal and the local is, perhaps, because the 'local' has a tenuous place within it. The discipline's foundational partitioning of the built environment into separate categories -- architecture, building, vernacular -- leaves architectural practice, especially in the

non-west, with little room for maneuver: the 'local' contemporary architecture is either vernacular (and hence not architecture) or else if it is architecture, it is by definition a copy of the universal, western model.

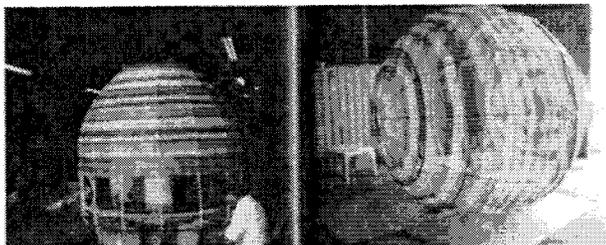
Bracketing out folk, popular, and vernacular production has left architectural practice and criticism ill-equipped to look at the 'local', or the popular, from a local point of view. While other disciplines have benefited from recent theoretical developments in cultural and postcolonial studies, architecture remains in thrall to metropolitan perspectives. In contrast to art practice and criticism, for example, architecture still has trouble approaching the local and the popular as legitimate categories for production and analysis.

This paper proceeds from the premise that, in a world where cultural flows are no longer one-way -- whether north-to-south or high-to-low -- there is much architecture can learn from other cultural producers who do not have this difficulty engaging and appropriating the local or the popular. The recent boom in global art biennials, many either located in or focusing on art from the periphery, provides examples of how both art institutions and artists maneuver and negotiate shifting disciplinary, geographic, and cultural borders.

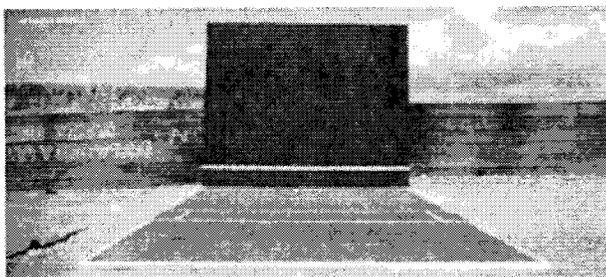
Mexico has been a particular beneficiary of this curatorial and critical expansion. While a series of big exhibitions over the last few years, curated by museums outside Mexico, have had the combined effect of choreographing Mexico's recent 're-entry' into the global art circuit, a sophisticated local artistic and critical community has negotiated the complications and dividends of this metropolitan largesse by valorizing the local and the popular.

This paper focuses on one of these shows, *Axis Mexico*, curated by the San Diego Museum of Art. It looks carefully at both the work included and its curatorial framing. It explores the capacity of certain Mexican artists to engage the local and the metropolitan. It questions singular notions of dissemination, production, and reception. And it traces the way in which notions of the local, the global, and the national operate between third world contexts and first world institutions.

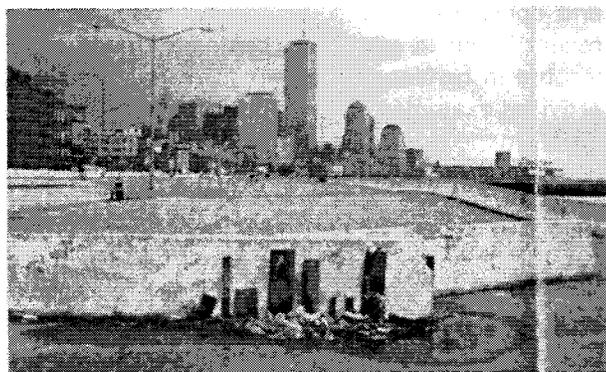
In doing so the paper identifies certain notions, both theoretical and procedural, that might be brought to bear upon other north/south encounters between cultural producers, whether artists or architects.



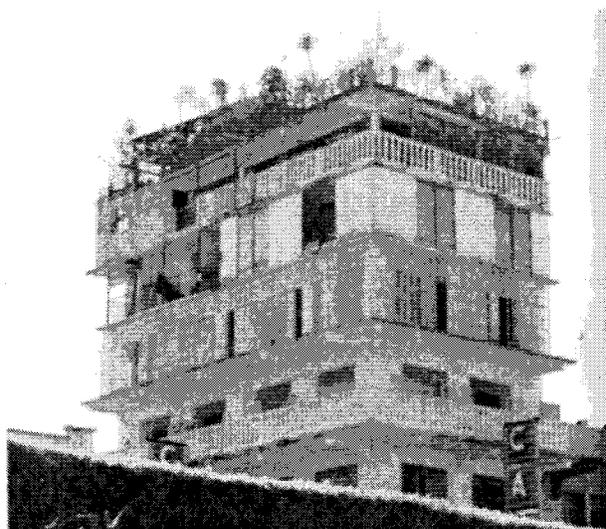
Pedro Reyes



Gustavo Artigas



Gabriel Orozco



Anton Vidokle

AXIS MEXICO: COMMON OBJECTS AND COSMOPOLITAN ACTIONS

Exhibitions like *Axis Mexico* excite as they unsettle. It is rare to find shows of contemporary art in museums of fine arts that engage both the mind and the eye; it is rarer still to find within them work that exceeds the critical spin or the curatorial frame. *Axis Mexico* gave us occasion for both.

The clever curatorial formulation made possible a coherent display of diverse and wide-ranging work from south-of-the-border. The powerful dyads, *objects/actions* and *common/cosmopolitan*, admitted a range of media: photography, installation, performance, video, painting, sculpture, and digital production that indexed a world of practices: political agitprop, portraiture, cross-genre formal transformations, (faux) documentary, appropriation, outsider art.

Lacing it all together was the curator's professed desire to devise a "game of theoretical contacts and connections between recent Mexican art and the international avant-garde" from the late 50s through the late 70s. With each artist or work in the show assigned a worthy forebear, contemporary Mexican art was assimilated into the "globalized language of contemporary art". Of the nineteen artists exhibited, only one escaped being deputized to an art-historical antecedent; the high-low miscegenation of Ruben Ortiz Torres' chaotic *desmotherismo* mutations perhaps thwarting all

attempts at establishing paternity.

The very ease with which the institutional spaces and art historical references marshaled, deployed, and recontextualized this work for "U.S. audiences", however, gave one pause. There was a nagging sense that the ballast that history provides could be dispensed with, that *context* is now something "globally transparent" (Shaw).

Yet surely, even in an art world-without-borders, the "accepted precedents" of art history neither appear nor operate in the same manner at all points on the globe; surely there are still lags and disjunctions, specific gravities and particular sedimentations, that render opaque any easy understanding or dissemination.

A critical operation that would have arbitrated these differentials, in intention and reception, among contexts and audiences at various historical moments, might have opened up a space for speculation: to wonder, for example, how the work of Gustavo Artigas or Gonzalo Lebrija both relates to and escapes any association with Chris Burden or Dan Graham. However, given its desire to lock down this work within the "lingua franca of global artistic circuits" (Ramirez), the critical focus of *Axis Mexico* was not on discursive disconnects and misreadings.

It was all too easy to come away with a sense of the works encapsulated and afloat in a benign yet decidedly American world-art mart. Shows that take as their subject matter the complicated transit of visual languages across cultural boundaries - especially didactic shows such as this one - demand a finely calibrated critical apparatus that supports a careful parsing of the multivalent registers and shifting valencies of work produced between cultures.

The art historical framework that structures *Axis Mexico* does not allow for such nuanced and provisional readings; its modernist narrative of singular origin and an outward (and imperfect) diffusion is predicated on a "topology of artistic connections in terms of center and periphery" (Bann). This view of dissemination, of course, is very different from a model of cross-cultural exchange that proposes, and triangulates among, multiple, simultaneous, and distributed contexts of production, consumption, and reception.

MEXICO

Its metro-centric understanding of globalization notwithstanding, however, *Axis Mexico* - the show and the catalog - does raise the bar for exhibiting and interpreting "globalized art" and its trajectories in Las Americas.

Like other recent shows on contemporary art practices in Mexico, it too moved well beyond the essentialist eldorado of nationalist myth and the preoccupation with *mexicanidad*. In its stead Mexico was figured as an axis, a condenser, or a locus for the swirling transformations of mexican sensibilities. In fact the work in the show seemed so eager to "free itself from the stereotypes of Mexican art" (Arriola) - whether from the long twilight of Mexican modernism or the gaudy brightness of its popular and folk arts - that one wonders about the direction and desires of art in post-PRI Mexico: what prompts the desire to exchange, in the words of Osvaldo Sanchez, "the whole of the past for a little future. . ."

The range of work included in *Axis Mexico* helped chart an alternate Mexico as well, foregrounding a reading of its territory as an extended temporal and spatial threshold (between the U.S and South America, the Caribbean and the Pacific, the old and new worlds), and as a sort of ur-zone for the hybrid condition (the site of the convergence of two cultures, the contact zone of the "first globalization", an integral part transatlantic circuitry).

Though the curator selected and put on show work that engages the "context of Mexico - as place, idea, and multi-faceted culture", by artists who "identify with Mexico, whether by birth, nationality, and residence", the show itself did not problematize its own identification with, or investment in, particular discourses about 'Mexico'. Perhaps because it left its own contexts (disciplinary, institutional, geo-political) and audiences untroubled, visitors too were let off-the-hook, set free to gawk and gape at what looked like just more contemporary art, even if this time it was from, like, *Mexico*?

LOCAL CONCEPTUALISM

The curatorial linkages made between individual artists and specific conceptual art practices suggested extending this interpretive framework to

the show as a whole: the possibility of seeing *Axis Mexico* and the artistic milieu it represents through the prism of conceptualism.

Conceptualism was a key development of 20th century art, one that "deepened the scope of what art could be" and, in the process, redefined its compass as an aesthetic, social, and cultural activity (Camnitzer). Unlike modernism earlier, conceptualism emerged in multiple locations across the globe including Latin America in the period between the 50s and the 80s. Local conceptual movements arose in response to local conditions and in dialog with similar practices elsewhere; in a sense it was the first art movement of the global village, predicated upon the planetary awareness that advances in travel and tele-communications made possible. Its manifestations in Latin America were "suited to the political immediacy and economic precariousness" of the period, opening up a space for "artists to explore problems and issues related to concrete sociopolitical conditions" (Ramirez).

Axis Mexico does not explore this rich multi-centered terrain; its arrow points steadily north toward the conceptualism found in the anglophone metropolises. However, if one were to situate the work included in *Axis Mexico* within the various phases of Latin American conceptualism - if one were to connect the dots to include the Mexican 70s collective Los Grupos, or the Brazilian Helio Oiticica's *nova objetividade* - perhaps a "highly differentiated reading of globalism would result", one in which "localities are linked in crucial ways but not subsumed into a homogenized set of circumstances and responses" (Camnitzer).

Such a comparison would also show how well, if at all, the "ideological and ethical profile" of the earlier conceptualism comes through in the neoconceptual practices exhibited in *Axis Mexico*. The distinctive markers of Latin American conceptualism in the 60s were its political activism and its appropriation of the public sphere: merging art and life to slip past the stranglehold of state control, its institutional critique extended to political regimes as well. If the goal of the earlier conceptualism, to summarize Oiticica, was to endow "works with a cultural sense, and to adopt all means of communication with the public" (Ramirez) what might be the common intentions, if any, that fuel the current work?

If the earlier work arose out of the disappointments of yankee-inspired *desarrollismo* (the economic development policies of the 50s and 60s), what does the current work speak to or push against? How complicit is it in neo-liberalism's new world order? How prominent, on the "map of inclusion", are Mexico City's and Tijuana's galleries and studios? Where, to borrow Olivier Debroise's unfortunate but telling phrase, "do curators, critics, and museum directors go upon arriving in the country?"

In the rush to validate its global currency, one should not forget to ask: Who is the public for this work? How well does it communicate outside the institutional apparatus? Who, to put it bluntly, do the artists and the institutions that show them think is the audience?

Wendy Shaw, in her perceptive critique of a recent edition of the Istanbul Biennial (Istanbul, like Mexico City, is another one of those metropolitan peripheries that pulls the rug from under this binary) glosses this issue:

What is won through the production of contemporary art is the right and ability not simply to speak, but to create new modes of language through which to speak. The choice of audience - the people equipped with the tools of decoding and comprehension required to synthesize that speech - is, in its essence a political one, for it sets the limits of who will thereby also acquire cultural capital with which to speak in their own right.

Common/Cosmopolitan

By pairing 'common' with 'cosmopolitan' and then deploying them as modifiers for 'objects' and 'actions', *Axis Mexico* set up a *ménage à quatre* of critical terms, a modular heuristic that enables us to test the terms in various combinations: common actions on common objects; common actions on cosmopolitan objects; cosmopolitan actions on cosmopolitan objects. This interpretive remixing can help isolate the multiple registrations of each term: local, vernacular, prosaic, low; worldly, universal, sophisticated, high - as well as the dialectical relation between them.

Thinking of the common and the cosmopolitan as mutually implicated, even mutually constitutive categories, opens up possibilities for imagining "ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home – ways of inhabiting multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously" (Pollock).

Cosmopolitanism in twentieth-century Latin America has been associated with either the middleclass "fantasy of escaping its [vernacular] context as if it were an unforgivable stigma" or else with the "Arielismo" of the Latin American cultural elites, an epicurism that saw itself in heroic opposition before "the Caliban of North American materialism and mass culture" (Medina). Artists such as Gomez Pena and Ortiz Torres and critics such as Cuauhtemoc Medina have upended this neat classist take by identifying another cosmopolitan sensibility, a subaltern one that operates from below, transforming "commonplaces into sources of subjective sophistication".

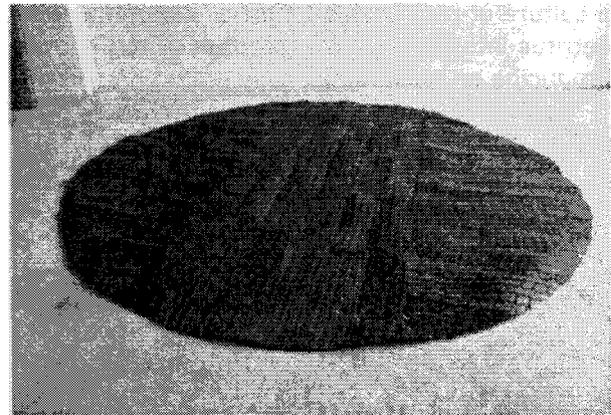
Operating within the "continuous and never-ending flux of symbols between popular cultures, nationalist repertoires, commercial products, avant-garde experiments, radical utopias, and subcultural fashions. . .", this sensibility helps "shape the new culture of the Americas". In this new world dis/order (Pena) or Speedy Gonzalez Global Culture (Medina), the gravitational pull of the metropole is clearly not the simple one-way flow assumed by first-worlders.

Marginal/Cosmopolitan

This cosmopolitanism of the margin and the marginal suggests that contemporary Mexican art may yet offer "new archives, geographies, and practices" that would allow us to imagine cosmopolitan ways of thinking and acting that bypass the "absolute universalisms of western cosmopolitanism". If, with Sheldon Pollock, we understand cosmopolitanism as *action* rather than *declaration*, as *practice* rather than *proposition*, as a choice made by cultural producers everywhere rather than as a metropolitan benefit accruing to the few, then perhaps we will be less ready to route everything through New York. In doing so we might also be able to imagine simultaneous affiliations "to a larger world" and "to a smaller place", and appreciate the ability to see "the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller" (Pollock).

The best work in the show did just that. The work of Gonzalo Lebrija and Jaime Ruiz Otis included in *Axis Mexico* is formally precise, modest, and immediate. Its complexity lies in the locations, traditions, and practices it indexes and appropriates. Both Lebrija and Otis work the differential between various cultures and genres: high/low, local/metropolitan, manufactured/hand-crafted; urban/rural; public/private; commercial/popular/folk. Perhaps it is this toggling back and forth that gives their work a porosity and a generosity – an openness – uncommon among critically aware art and architecture. It does not insist upon a singular reading; nor does it wear its 'criticality' self-consciously.

JAIME RUIZ OTIS



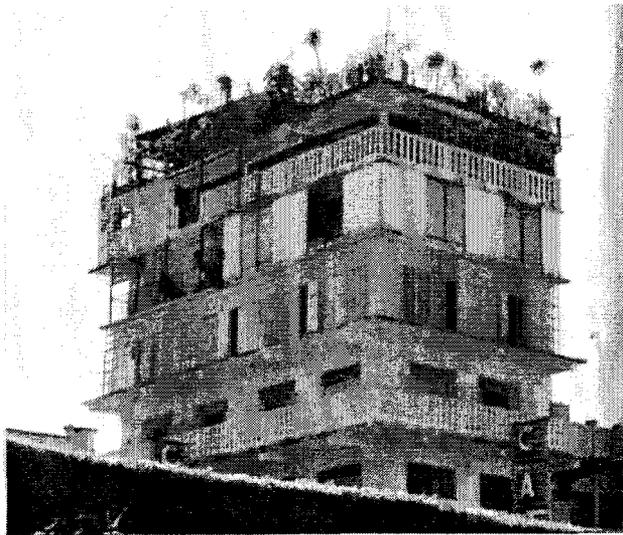
Jaime Ruiz Otis

The first encounter with Jaime Ruiz Otis's *Radial Rug* (2001) is inauspicious; it looks like what it is, a bunch of tire treads gathered up and stapled together, road kill on the gallery floor, to be avoided as one made a pass around the gallery. Though the material was abject, and its presentation raw, the primitive artifact harbored formal ambition and utilitarian appeal: an abstract black dot that offered itself up as a rug. Close up, its specific material qualities became evident: rubber, scuffed with the wear and tear of prior use, made even more spongy underfoot by the fact that the natural curl of the re-cycled treads kept them from laying flat. The transformation from waste to utility was both deft and honest; unlike the transmutations of some folk and most 'outsider art', the material

was not disguised, its origins covered over. Even the title referred back to the type of tire that was its material source: radials, made by the millions in the maquiladoras that line the border, where long hours of low-wage labor are transformed into global capital.

Otis selects his material "directly from the trash bins that line the yards" (Hertz) outside these factories. This knowledge, however, is not necessary to prompt a suspicion that Otis puts into play the social history of the materials he re-uses. The re-assignment of the recycled rug as 'art', to be displayed and sold as such, triggered a reactivation of the social residue dormant in the material. Another kind of labor and another kind of space had effected one more transformation, this time with the value added quite disproportionate to the effort. At the rub of a throw-away culture against a culture of recycling, Otis turns waste into want, detritus into desire; his aesthetics of the left-over producing an unexpected supplement.

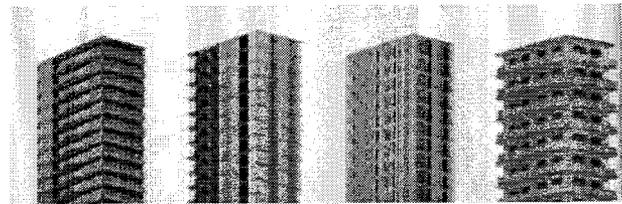
GONZALO LEBRIJA



Building in Tapachula (2002) comprises of two photographs; the story that unfolds depends on which photograph you start with. The smaller image is of a commonplace of the urban vernacular: a reinforced concrete frame building with cantilevered floors, possibly left 'unfinished' by the contractor/developer, and subsequently completed or adapted by its occupants according to their needs or available resources and materials (in this case the detritus with which third-world do-it-yourselfers make do). A vigorous solipsism renders each

floor its own universe, the individual negotiation between interior and exterior carried out by the occupant on each floor baldly inscribed on its collective 'envelope'.

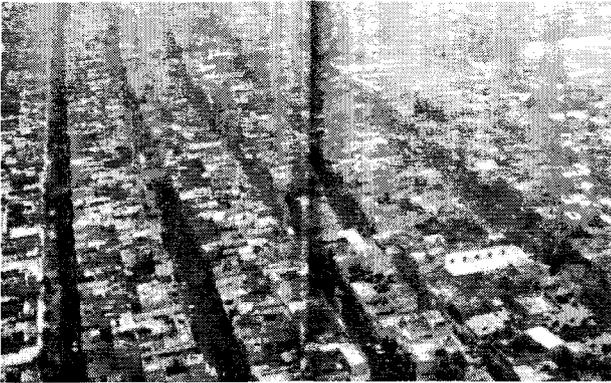
The image below shows a series of four high-rises, each with a distinctive façade crisp against a common blue-grey ground or 'sky' (the frame crops out all context including the ground on which they stand). With nothing else on the horizon, their only points of reference are each other and, by extension, the seductive promise and pedestrian reality of modern architecture. Our attention falls upon their envelopes, on the formal and functional variations that give each building an individual skin and texture, which we peruse for clues to the building's geographical, temporal, stylistic, and socio-economic provenance. Arrayed as if upon a billboard, or in a text book, the buildings in the photograph reveal the aspirational horizon (better high-rise living for all!), the compositional desires, and the formal preoccupations of modern architecture's ostensibly function- and construction-driven logic.



Gonzalo Lebrija

Each photograph alludes to a different formal fiction and explanatory model for the generation of architectural language: standardization or customization, whether pre-determined by the architect or initiated by the user. The frisson of the piece lies in our aestheticization of what drives both narratives: the strategic rigor of formal and material orders versus the tactical flexibility of intuition and invention.

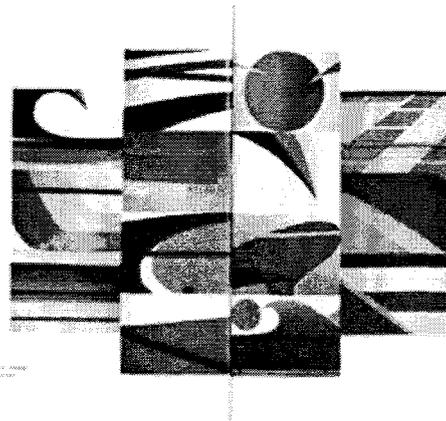
These narratives come unraveled when we realize that the source for each of the four high-rises in the larger image is a floor of the building in Tapachula, cut and pasted and repeated in a digital manipulation that both mimics and mocks the procedures of architectural design and building construction. The genetic material for what appeared to be an essay on modernist themes and variations turns



out to be the ad-hoc home-improvement efforts of unknown inhabitants of a provincial town in Chiapas. Standardization suddenly appears contaminated by the vernacular, while the latter reveals an inchoate desire for systematization. The engineer and the bricoleur find themselves in each other's territories and stories; disciplinary pieties and boundaries get muddled. Having fallen for the illusion, our disciplinary distinctions and rationalizations are revealed to be illusory as well, figments best dispensed with when operating in a world where cultural flows are both top-down and bottom-up.

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