

Latin American Art Ceases to be Latin American Art ¹

Gerardo Mosquera

Latin American art is going through an excellent period at the moment, precisely because it is ceasing to be Latin American art. I refer to the double process of escaping from one's own trap as well as from a distant one. One's own trap in this case is the identity neurosis that Latin American culture has suffered as a result of the multiplicity of its origins. We are always asking ourselves who we are, because it is difficult to know. We are confused and intoxicated by our own labyrinths. Now we are beginning to discover ourselves to a greater extent in fragmentation and *collage*, accepting our own diversity and even our own contradictions. The danger lies in coining a postmodern *cliché* of Latin America as a kingdom of complete heterogeneity.

The distant trap is connected to our own. It consists of the prejudicial consideration of Latin American art as derivative of the West, without keeping in mind its intricate participation in the West. Often the works themselves are not even examined: passports are requested upon arrival and baggage is searched under the suspicion of some contraband smuggled in from New York or Düsseldorf. To obtain a visa for their originality they are obliged to be *fantastic*, to resemble nobody or to resemble Frida Kahlo... Demands are made for an originality based on traditional cultures, that is, relating to the past, or a total invention as concerns the present.

¹ This is a republication of Gerardo Mosquera's frequently cited but difficult-to-find short text 'Latin American Art Ceases to be Latin American art' which was published in an 1996 ARCO Madrid catalogue as G Mosquera, *El arte latinoamericano deja de serlo*, (ARCO Latino, 1996). The article lays out the original arguments behind his more developed later essay 'Good-Bye Identity, Welcome Difference: From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America' (2000). The editors would like to thank Gerardo Mosquera for permission to reprint this text.

The passports are often not valid, since they respond to processes of hybridisation and appropriation in response to the post-colonial situation. Their pages are filled with re-significations, neologisms, re-inventions and “incorrections”, dating back to the Baroque era. This is even more the case in our own times, when complex restructurings of identity are taking place; multiple identities, identities, neo-identities, mixed identities, displacement among identities, “ethnic games”. The very idea of Latin America and Iberoamerica has always been problematic. Is the English-speaking Caribbean included? Mexican-Americans? Does it extend to the indigenous people that in some cases do not speak any European language? Do they form a part of the West, or do they offer a contradiction to it? In any event, the United States is without a doubt one of the most interesting of the Iberoamerican nations, and, after Mexico and Spain, it will soon be the third to speak Spanish.

This authenticity syndrome has reached postmodern manifestations. The new attraction of the centre for the extremes has allowed greater circulation and legitimisation of art from the periphery. But too often value is only assigned to those works that explicitly reveal the difference or that best satisfy the expectations of neo-exotic postmodernism. “Fridomania” (passion for Frida Kahlo) in the U.S. is an obvious example. This attitude has led some artists to a paradoxical auto-exoticism.

Fortunately, Latin American art is beginning to be seen without its surname. Instead of being forced to speak of its context, it is being recognized more and more as a participant in a larger activity that at times refers to art itself. In fact, our continent has always been a space for originality, where distinct cultures have flourished. Contextual complexity has often been woven into its art, but at the same time it has enriched the potential for the “international” trends themselves. This characteristic capacity, to be read simultaneously in “international” terms as well as something quite different has made Latin American art attractive again, but it brings with it the danger of conversion into the too-perfect alternative to the mainstream.

Ceasing to be “Latin American Art” also means leaving simplifications behind in order to place an emphasis on the continent’s extraordinary symbolic production. Two nations stand out today for the interesting movements taking place there: Brazil and Cuba. Culturally similar,

they have given birth to processes as worthy as they are different. The Brazilians have developed constructive, minimalist trends with a unique understanding of material, and they look toward the centres unfettered by local concerns. The result is an extremely original entry within the minimal-conceptual “international” trends. They have charged it with an expressiveness verging on the existential, shattering the boring coolness that prevails elsewhere. This is the best example of Latin America’s contribution to the practice of “international” art without surnames. The Cubans, on the other hand, have turned toward context as a way of constructing the “international” out of the vernacular. The preceding schematic analysis should in no way serve to diminish the variety and force of artists in both countries.

There are outstanding artists throughout the continent, and vibrant art scenes in Colombia, Chile and Mexico. In general, the most interesting movement is the use of installations and conceptual art as a means of weaving together aesthetic, social, cultural, historical and religious elements as such, without any sacrifice on the artistic level. On the contrary, artists have strengthened the analytical and linguistic tool of conceptualism as a way of dealing with the extreme level of complexity within Latin American culture and society, where multiplicity, hybridization and contrast have introduced both contradiction and subtlety at the same time.