

Trial and Error: Luis Benedit's *Laberinto invisible*

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"I see that man will resign himself each day to more atrocious undertakings; soon there will be no one but warriors and brigands; I give them this counsel: *The author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past.*"¹

Less than a page long, Jorge Luis Borges' story "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" provides a clear distinction between two types of labyrinths: visible and invisible. In the "first days of Islam," a Babylonian king humiliates his Arab counterpart by trapping him in a labyrinth built in his palace. The Arab king gets his revenge by abandoning his rival in the desert to die of exposure, boasting,

"In Babylonia didst thou attempt to make me lose my way in a labyrinth of brass with many stairways, doors, and walls; now the Powerful One has seen fit to allow me to show thee mine, which has no stairways to climb, nor walls to impede thy passage."²

The labyrinth of the Babylonian king is "visible" in two senses. On the one hand, there is a larger map or plan of the structure that its architect or owner is aware of, in which the logic of the whole (and its safe navigation) is apparent. On the other, there is the experiential viewpoint from within the labyrinth, wherein it is a machine that disorients, makes one lost; here walls and forking paths serve as

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 22.

² Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 263-264.

visual obstacles to comprehensive understanding. By contrast, the Arab king's "labyrinth" is radically transparent—equally so for planner or navigator. With so few visual cues to knowledge and confusion alike, this labyrinth proves far more perilous.

Luis Bedit's [*Laberinto invisible*](#), designed in 1971 and installed in the artist's *Projects show* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972, incorporated technology to effectively superimpose Borges' oppositional labyrinths. Bouncing motion-sensitive light beams between eight mirrors (one concave, the other seven flat), Bedit enlarged a laboratory maze for rats to human scale. Alarm bells would signal incorrect choices of direction, while successful completion would yield the "reward... of the privilege of observing the looks and behavior of a 'Mexican ocelot' (an amphibious creature which is supposed to be related to the origin of the human species)."³ While technically "invisible," then, the work staged the process of learning the work's contours. As test subject within the maze, one would gradually attain the totalizing gaze of its designer, despite its radical invisibility. This work was reinstalled after a long hiatus at Henríque Faria Gallery in New York between February 2 and 26, 2011; the artist passed away on April 12 of this same year.

Bedit was closely associated with the lighting entrepreneur, curator, and critic Jorge Glusberg, whose Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) was the major institution for contemporary art in Argentina throughout the 1970s.⁴ From its inaugural exhibition, *Arte y cibernética*, in 1969, the Center, under Glusberg's guidance, took inspiration from cybernetics, the interdisciplinary, systems-oriented science originally devised by Norbert Wiener.⁵ Wiener famously coined

³ Jorge Glusberg, "Luis Bedit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York," *GT-181-A and -181-A-1*, December 28, 1972. The exhibition was presented by Bernice Rose, an associate curator at MoMA.

⁴ See Néstor García Canclini, "Modernity After Postmodernity," in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 43-5.

⁵ For this exhibition, staged at Galería Bonino, the institution was called the Centro de Estudios de Arte y Comunicación; Glusberg changed the name the next year.

the term from the Greek word meaning “steersman” to describe the potential of feedback systems to control and improve the efficiency of given machines or systems; his earliest work was to devise servomechanisms for World War II bombers that could track changing conditions and make real-time adjustments to more accurately hit targets.⁶ Despite these military origins, by the mid-1960s cybernetics had been expanded into an interdisciplinary science applicable to all human and social systems.⁷ From 1970 forward, Glusberg employed the moniker *arte de sistemas* (systems art) to categorize and promote the Center’s artists.⁸ The term recalls Jack Burnham’s cybernetics-inflected “systems aesthetics,” which he elaborated in an *Artforum* essay of 1968 as focusing on “relations between people and between people and the components of their environment” in the hopes of ameliorating “the quality of all future life on the Earth.”⁹ Glusberg echoes Burnham’s optimism about systems-oriented art when he argues that in *Laberinto invisible* “The process of behavior adaptation as related to error (learning curve) constitutes an obvious feed-back mechanism which allows the participant to adapt to the mechanics of the system until he becomes part of it. ‘Trial and error’ obliges one to memorize and register the alternatives of the positive path.”¹⁰

⁶ See Peter Galison, “Ontology of the Enemy,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 228-266, and Norbert Wiener, “Cybernetics,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (April 1950), pp. 2-4, and *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

⁷ The theorists involved in positing this shift within cybernetics include Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, and Ludwig von Bertalanffy. For a history of the field that is limited to cognitive cybernetics, see Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁸ The term repeatedly featured in CAYC group exhibitions of the early- and mid-1970s. See Jorge Glusberg, *Art Systems in Latin America*, exh. cat. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1975), *Arte de sistemas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1970), “Arte de sistemas en el III Bienal Coltejer. Medellín, Colombia,” *GT-116 and 116-A*, April 19, 1972 and May 10, 1972, *Arte de sistemas: X (Víctor Grippo), Y (Alberto Pellegrino), Z (Alfredo Portillos)*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1971), *Arte de sistemas II: Arte e ideología*, CAYC al aire libre, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1972), *Center of Art and Communication in Camden Arts Centre: From figuration art to systems art in Argentina*, exh. cat. (London: Camden Arts Centre, 1971), *De la figuración al arte de sistemas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1970), and *El grupo de los trece en arte de sistemas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1972).

⁹ See Jack Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” in *Great Western Salt Works: essays on the meaning of post-formalist art* (New York: G. Braziller, 1974), pp. 16 & 24.

¹⁰ Glusberg, “Luis Benedit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York,” *GT-181-A-1*.

Laberinto invisible is part of a larger series of works by Benedit incorporating biological and quasi-scientific systems, beginning with his *Micro-Zoo* exhibition in 1968: separate plexiglass habitats for birds, cats, ants, lizards, fish, turtles, and bees.¹¹ After this followed an extremely prolific phase, which lasted until the mid-1970s, in which the artist produced a multitude of variations on the habitats: aquariums, plant feeders, birdhouses, and mazes for ants and rats in the same “behavioral studies” vein of *Laberinto invisible*. With *Biotrón*, shown at the 1970 Venice Biennale, he exhibited a functional pollination system, complete with live bees and flowers, in a giant glass vitrine. *Fitotrón*, a terrarium-bound hydroponic habitat also exhibited at MoMA in 1972, followed this work.¹² Benedit repeatedly exhibited his plans alongside their finished products, as if bidding the viewer to share in his process of conceptualization, realization, and research. *Laberinto invisible*, however, is the only work in the artist’s *oeuvre* designed for a human participant.

Can, and should, this moment in the late artist’s career be read in terms of contemporaneous events in his home country? This is a difficult question. On the one hand, 1972 stands as a transitional year between two different dictatorships that would rule Argentina, the first between 1966 and 1973, the second between 1976 and 1983. It was the second of these that would engage in relentless repression, torture, and disappearance, culminating in the death of some 30,000 people. By 1971, however, the military that would ultimately carry out this coup was already experimenting with increasingly brutal methods for eliminating “subversion” and extracting information from sources, effectively treating citizens as bio-political subjects to be experimented upon. Here *Laberinto invisible*, with its compelling merger of visible and invisible labyrinth, experiential confusion and totalizing knowledge, becomes something like an analogy for this mode of political subjecthood under dictatorship. A larger design is transparent, palpable;

¹¹ See Luis Benedit, *Micro-Zoo*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Galería Rubbers, 1968) and “Artes y espectáculos: Plástica: El micro-zoo de acrílico,” *Primera Plana*, December 3, 1968.

¹² See Jorge Glusberg, *Luis Benedit: Phitotron*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación, 1972).

yet this does not mitigate direct, immediate control over bodies and movement. Yet we should not forget that Benedit's work was designed for the international arena, in an increasingly globalized art world in which local context was deemphasized. It is the dexterity of this work in adapting to different contexts—to fit into the seemingly apolitical systems art of North America yet also refer analogically to political conditions in Argentina—that perhaps gives its darker connotations a topicality in a present moment similarly characterized by a push and pull between the comprehension of systems and hopeless imbrication within them.