On Stage: Pedro Manrique Figueroa and the Rethoric of Modernist Art History

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In April of 1996, a group of Colombian artists organized an exhibition at the Santa Fé Gallery in Bogotá to pay homage to Pedro Manrique-Figueroa, the precursor of collage in Colombia[2]. While none of Manrique-Figueroa's work was present, the exhibition put on view artworks based on his collages, as well as objects and historical documents about his life and the intellectual atmosphere that surrounded his artistic production. On display were some of his shoes, clothes, personal belongings and his favorite books: *The Communist Manifesto, Psychology of the Masses, The Joy of Life, Sigmund Freud: His Work and His Mind,* and *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology and the Disney Comic.* Although Manrique-Figueroa's name and collages had already circulated, illustrating journals such as Historia Crítica[3], and Valdez[4], he was relatively unknown and his name was all but forgotten by art history.

In the absence of his work, the scraps of his life and the local character of his collages drew the attention of journalists, artists and art historians, who, in turn, gave way to different and contradictory ways of understanding him. For some, Manrique-Figueroa was the quintessential Latin American artist. He seemed to be the solution to the modernist historiographic concern with the originality and autochthonous character of Latin American art. Proof of this was found in the fact that Manrique-Figueroa was producing collages long before any other Latin American artist, and reinventing Surrealism according to local concerns. In his collages, Manrique-Figueroa, in a surrealist fashion, juxtaposed the beautiful and the ugly, the brilliant and the stupid, the normal and the repugnant, the sacred and

the pagan, while engraving "All rubbish is writing," misquoting Artaud's famous sentence: "All writing is rubbish."[5] He appeared to be one of the many sources of the fascination with the Latin American by Artaud, Bataille, Métraux and Rivet. Through Manrique-Figueroa, Joaquín Torres-García's inverted map of Latin America twists endlessly.

Art historians used Manrique-Figueroa as an elucidation of the methods of art history, attempting to prove his existence, autochthony and originality, and thereby securing a place for him in the history of Latin American art. Were these collages—'trimmings' as he lovingly called them—his original collages? His work was found scattered among his belongings and in places where he had lived and worked. Some were mysteriously inserted among the pages of books in public and private libraries. Others were mixed with his private clothes, and some were found in the archives of galleries and cultural institutions under the label of "plagiarism." He never signed his work, but his style was incontrovertible. Further art historical investigations established his unique pattern for cutting and pasting. Beyond his authorial originality, the question remained, "were these collages stylistically original?" Were they authentic avant-garde art and autochthonous Latin American cultural expressions?

The issue of originality raised many questions and debates. Martina Diatribhe, one of the most important Latin American art historians, briefly quoted Pedro Manrique-Figueroa in her series of lectures about Latin American and Colombian Art in The National Library in Bogotá, between 1974 and 1978. She quoted him to explain the modernist distinctions between high art and popular culture, avant-garde and kitsch, international and provincial culture. She argued that, sadly, the old-fashioned European avant-garde and the dangerous German kitsch influenced Manrique-Figueroa's work; therefore, he was not worthy of commentary. She stated that he was a typical example of what Marta Traba called the mistakes of the Colombian superstructure, which, "fascinated by melodrama,

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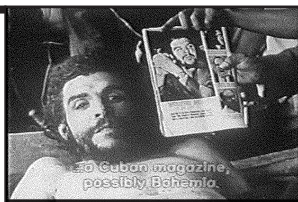


baroque, excess and kitsch, was condemned to underdevelopment and third world-ism."[6] Consequently, Manrique-Figueroa was doomed to anonymity and buried beneath the universalistic and formalist pretensions of modernist Latin American art history.

His career as an artist was persistently marked by failures and frustrations. His work was rejected seven times by the Annual National Artists' Salon. He participated in very few group exhibitions and, in fact, the homage paid to him in 1996 at the Santa Fe Gallery was his first solo exhibition, but unfortunately, none of his work was shown. He was part of the scandal during the Salon of 1968 when, in protest of Manrique-Figueroa's exclusion, Alvaro Barrios decided to cover his own work. The most credible version of the reasons for his rejection came from Barrios himself, who argued that the person in charge of receiving applications and artworks thought of Manrique-Figueroa's work as an unfortunate joke. She filed it under her desk and forgot about it. The day the jury was making its final decisions she found it and showed it to them. Pedro Manrique-Figueroa's work was categorically rejected.[7]

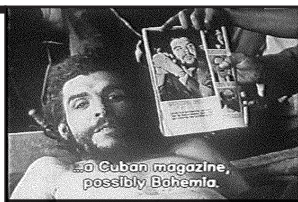
For others, Manrique-Figueroa was an invention that, being a montage of real and false stories and images, mimicked art history and revealed its "*facies hippocratica.*" As a fraud, an invention, Manrique-Figueroa motivated contradictory responses. In *Semana*, No. 726, of April 1996, Eduardo Serrano, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá, attacked the Santa Fé Gallery homage by stating: "Pedro Manrique-Figueroa is a fake, he is not an artist and he did not exist." Almost everyone knew this. However, for some of those who knew it, the homage was a collaborative project that mimicked the rhetoric of modernist Latin American art history, bringing to light its obsessive emphasis on connoisseurship, authorship and authenticity and its links to discursive strategies of modernism, modernization and cultural modernity. It was a performance that displayed a dynamics whereby art history creates narratives of nation, art and culture, which are simultaneously threatened by disjunctive forms of cultural signification. In other words, the concepts of art, nation and Latin American culture are continuously becoming forms of social and textual affiliation, anchored in the linear time of cultural modernity. Manrique-Figueroa was a metaphor of the ways in

which texts of national art and culture are continuously constructed and, at the same time, disrupted by the repeated emergence of local/partial accounts that disturb the stability of these national signs.

Pedro Manrique-Figueroa's is part of a group of Latin American artistic projects that have been exposing concerns about the poetics and politics of modernist Latin American art history's rhetoric. They share the project's attention to art history's discursive strategies and its configurations of power and knowledge. By mimicking art historical discourse and appropriating major languages of art and culture, they have created conditions of possibility for the emergence of minor, marginal and queer assemblages.

Latin American art history took shape during the 1960s and 1970s within the binary context of the Cold War. Gerardo Mosquera has argued that the rhetoric of this newborn Latin American art history was marked by the "key concepts of 'resistance', 'socialization', 'anti-colonialism' and 'revolution'," and was mostly based on the oppositional political climate of the Cold War.[8] He considers its emergence to be a "boom" of Latin American writers "that involved such great names as Juan Acha, Aracy Amaral, Damián Bayón, Fermín Fèvre, Néstor García Canclini, Mirko Lauer, Mario Pedrosa, Marta Traba and others who responded to Acha's plea for the production of theories".[9] This "boom" marked the end of literary and poetic criticism—upon which most of the study of art was based—and the emergence of a new discipline. He considers Marta Traba's *La Pintura Nueva en América Latina* to be crucial for this project since it was the first book "to approach Latin American art in a global manner, attempting to give the subject some conceptual unity."[10]

Latin American art history during the 1960s and 1970s was a corpus of writing, he argues, based on a social theory of art and on an affirmative notion of identity for Latin America, which gave extreme importance to the ideological character of art and culture. Its backbone, he states, was strong opposition to new forms of Euro-North American colonialism and imperialism, as well as



a continuous interrogation of the theoretical considerations of Marxism, the social history of art and dependency theory for explaining the cultural and historical particularities of Latin American society and culture. For him, the Cuban Revolution and North American intervention in the establishment of dictatorial regimes, as well as the crisis of developmentalism, provided art history with an oppositional political character and made it part of a particular 'Sixties Spirit': a utopian agenda that represented Latin America as "the forum for every hope and every failure."[11]

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Conceptualism: Points of Origin: 1960-1980*, held at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999, Mari Carmen Ramírez critically refers to such an oppositional character when she introduces the role of Conceptualism in Latin American art during the 1960s and 1970s. Ramírez draws attention to the misunderstandings of conceptualism owing to the "Cold War legacy, of which Marta Traba's biased 'thesis of resistance' is representative."[12] She states:

> From the very beginning, Traba zealously denounced conceptual practices as 'imported fads' whose emergence revealed the degree to which a sector of our artists had 'surrendered' to North American cultural imperialism.[13]

Ramírez refers to Marta Traba's contention to non-autochthonous Latin American cultural expressions as well as her opposition to artistic trends coming from the United States during the 1960s. In the chapter "La Resistencia" (The Resistance) of her book *Dos Décadas Vulnerables en la Artes Plásticas Latinoamericanas (Two Vulnerable Decades in Latin American Art),* Traba denounced "American aesthetic colonialism," which, during the 1960, annihilated the critical and creative trend of artistic movements such as Mexican Muralism. She argued that some Latin American artists have "resisted" American cultural imperialism by creating autochthonous images that talk about the cultural and social conditions of Latin America. She finally made claims for an authentic Latin American art that, being cultivated, resisted modern art as a bourgeois, imperialist expression. This may explain her understanding of Conceptualism as imported

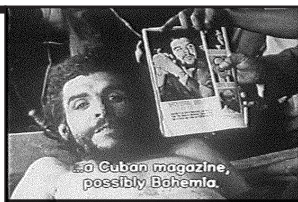
"fads" and her call for resisting it. Ramírez concludes that it is necessary to question Traba's "passionate claims for continental autonomy", taking into account the end of the Cold War and new trends of critical thinking that have emerged in the last three decades.

Shifra Goldman also gives importance to a group of Latin American historians and theoreticians during this period that combined the rigor of social history with various Marxist approaches. In relation to the oppositional character I have been referring to, she argues that,

> Marta Traba became the most important critic promoting modern art in South America from the 1960s until her premature death in 1983….She vehemently attacked social realism, and opted to support a uniquely Latin American art which would not mimic that of U.S. materialism and false values. On the whole, however, her criticism, while of high caliber and much respected in Latin America, was definitely idiosyncratic.[14]

Goldman seems to introduce a certain ambiguity within the politics of this historiographic Latin American project. By stressing Traba's rejection of socialist realism and her interest in promoting modern art—in fact, Traba co-founded the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá in 1964—Goldman subtly suggests that in spite of her support of an autochthonous Latin American art and her opposition to U.S. materialism and false values, her criticism was somehow ambiguous and definitely "idiosyncratic."

This ambiguity is perhaps most explicit when Traba attempts to explain the artwork of the Colombian artist Beatriz González. Replying to the furious responses from the Catholic Church and the Academy of History when González exhibited her first furniture works, with images of Christ and Simón Bolívar painted on tables and beds, Traba argued that they were responses polluted by ideological considerations and unable to approach art with the disinterest appropriate to an aesthetic object.



Accounting for González's artwork, Traba stated:

> Wherever it goes, her work will be read as a great work of art, without having considerations of its national or provincial background affect its standing . . . . To suppose that because the work bears a close relation to local idiosyncrasies might conspire against its importance and condemn it to anonymity, is to ignore that the work of art triumphs solely to the degree to which it is supported by a sufficiently valid formal structure.[15]

Traba herself related her historiographic work to French sociology of art and social art history. In fact, when she was asked about her approach, she answered: "Sociology of art, exactly the way Pierre Francastel thought of it. A sociology that is interdisciplinary, that investigates the profound structures of both the plastic object and the social context, without abandoning the visual field."[16]

Nevertheless, Traba's considerations of González's work seem to be mainly informed by the principles of American formalism, which she officially rejected. On the one hand, by considering the purpose of art to be the achievement of a valid formal structure, Traba seems to echo American formalism's central argument that art is a formal practice that takes its own methods and rationale as its subject matter and whose relevance lies almost exclusively in its relation to an inner artistic tradition of visual and formal issues. On the other hand, when exploring the local character of González's work, Traba paralleled formalist arguments, positing that a successful artwork must avoid any local or national reference and achieve the level of the universal. Finally, when opposing art history to responses 'polluted' by ideological considerations, Traba seemed to follow the modernist manifesto for an objective and neutral art history whose main concern was to maintain its disinterest, appropriate to aesthetic objects, untainted by ideology and politics.

It is not my primary concern to argue against Latin American art history's critical and oppositional character during the Cold War. I do not want to deny the specific histories and cultural struggles within which this historiography emerged, nor do I want to suggest that Traba's approaches are representative of all Latin American art history. I am interested in her work as emblematic of a rhetoric that

informed the modernist projects of art and culture in Latin America during the Cold War: a historiographic writing that defined itself for and against Latin American culture. It was a narrative whose strategies perform a double operation whereby Latin America becomes subject and object of modern discourses of culture, and art history both constitutes itself and creates its cultural other.

This discursive operation has been widely explored as an ambivalent form of colonial appropriation, known as mimicry. In "Of Mimicry and Man," Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out that mimicry is a mode of representation whereby colonial discourse appropriates the colonized as similar, *almost the same*. Yet, in order to be effective, it needs to construct it as its other, that is to say, as a disavowed other, *but not quite*. Mimicry is a form of appropriation that is in itself a process of disavowal.[17] Through this operation, the new Latin American art history defined itself by representing its cultural other as an underdeveloped culture, fascinated with "the baroque, excess, melodrama and kitsch." It also gave way to representations informed by the need of a reformed, recognizable Latin American cultural other, under the dictum of developmentalism, cultural modernism and modernization policies.

From this theoretical and political perspective, I furthermore argue that modernist Latin American art history was among the discursive strategies of what Arturo Escobar calls "developmentalism". As he defines it, "developmentalism was a discursive formation that colonized Asian, African and Latin American realities, through/by which development achieved the status of certainty in the social imaginary and people came to recognize themselves as "developed" or 'underdeveloped'".[18] Its purpose, pervading all social sectors from the left and right, "was quite ambitious: to duplicate the world based on the image of the developed world at the time."[19]

Following V. Y. Mudimbe[20], Timothy Mitchell[21] and James Clifford[22], Escobar argues that modernity is based on a regime of order and truth whereby the world is divided into two: "a realm of

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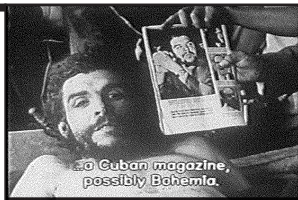


mere representations and a realm of the 'real'; into exhibitions and an external reality; into an order of mere models, descriptions or copies, and an order of the original."[23] Developmentalism followed this "quintessential" dimension of cultural modernity and gave way to representations of the Third World as a copy attempting to become an original in order to articulate its configuration of power and knowledge. Although all the peoples of the world were in theory able to achieve it, in order to be true it in fact needed its other; that is to say, it was necessary to acknowledge that not everyone was able to pursue it.

Modernist Latin American art history was among these disciplinary modes through which Latin America became caught up in the modernist polarities of original and copy, avant-garde and kitsch, cultivated and primitive, universal and local, international and provincial. It was a rhetoric that explicitly helped establish distinctions between modern culture and Latin American culture, and, more subtly, made possible the production of representations of the national subject as a modern, cultivated citizen, including/excluding forms of sexual, ethnic and gender difference. It attempted to integrate Latin American culture within the discursive modes of modernity.

These questions about the disciplinary modes of cultural modernity can be explored through artistic projects that have taken the rhetoric of modernist art history as their subject matter and political target. Bhabha has stated that mimicry also produces strategies of identification that double, mock, repeat colonial discourse. Its ambivalence—*almost the same but not quite*—becomes a resemblance that is also a menace, where difference is produced in writing. As he puts it:

> What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. Mimicry *repeats* more than *re-presents* . . . the ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite.[24]

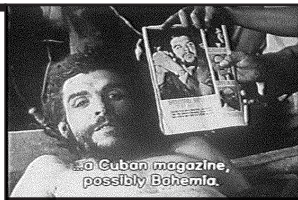
These artistic projects, I argue, used strategies of mimicry, dismantling the binary, oppositional, utopian character of 1960s and 1970s culture. In so doing, they have set up a rich postcolonial, queer, minor scene, addressing issues of cultural politics, cultural difference, and opposing the new forms of colonialism and imperialism without colonies that emerged in the Cold War period. It seems to me that, along with the oppositional strategies that Traba, Mosquera, Ramírez and Goldman have pointed out, there was a rich exploration and experimentation of other forms of cultural resistance.

I have identified at the outset three strategies of mimicry such as copying, appropriating and cultural anthropophagy, which in turn relate to specific art historical rhetoric: formalism, conceptualism and the avant-garde project of merging art and life. The first strategy, copying, may be discussed through the work of the Colombian artist Beatriz González, specifically her series of versions of Western art painted on beds, tables, vanities and hall-trees. It displays the dialogue that took place between Marta Traba, González's work and Clement Greenberg's work about the distinctions between avant-garde and kitsch, as well as art and popular culture.

The strategy of appropriation can be studied through the uses of the conceptualist rhetoric by the Colombian artist Antonio Caro and the Brazilian Cildo Meireles. Luis Camnitzer has given these artistic strategies the name of visual guerrillas.[25] Caro and Meireles' strategies function within local environments, intervening within the institutional networks, hiding behind their frames. By mimicking the rhetoric of conceptualism and art, both Meireles and Caro drew attention to the ways in which colonialism and imperialism split the narration of the Latin American nations, which was mainly based on epic tales of freedom and autonomy from the wars of independence.

Finally, anthropophagy can be studied as a queer and postcolonial strategy of mimicry associated with cannibalism, deglutition, vomiting and defecation of Western traditions that create no humanistic and no dialectic forms of subjectivity. There

the dialogue that took place between Marta



is a line of dis/continuity that links the discussion of anthropophagy in the Brazilian culture from Oswald de Andrade's "Anthropophagite Manifesto" of 1928 to Hélio Oiticica's writings and artwork about the condition of Brazilian and Latin American culture in relation to modernism and cultural modernity in the 1970s, and, ultimately, to the XXIV Sao Paulo Biennial of 1998, whose main theme was Cannibalism and Anthropophagy. In particular, these anthropophagite strategies gave shape to Oiticica's *Parangolé*, through which he established a critical dialogue with art history and modern culture and opened crucial questions to the politics of the queer and the marginal and cultural difference.

Along with these artistic projects, Pedro Manrique Figueroa's took on the discursive strategies of modernism, undermining and postponing their disciplinary modes by duplicating, mimicking and appropriating the rhetoric of modernist art history[26] . They are cultural interventions that did not oppose modernist artistic and cultural discourse with a dialectic, humanistic, essentialist, and utopian response. Insinuating themselves within the modes of discourse, they have disrupted it within its very modes of articulation and provoked conditions for the emergence of local, queer, marginal and minor collective enunciations.

NOTES

1 M.A. Art History (Twentieth Century) Goldsmiths' College, University of London. M.A. Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.. Ph. D. (c.) Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y. He has published articles on Latin American art and cultural practices in Colombian and international magazines.

2 Lucas Ospina, Bernardo Ortiz and François Bucher initially organized the retrieval of Pedro Manrique Figueroa from oblivion. Most of Pedro Manrique's accounts are from L. Ospina. *Exposición Homenaje a Pedro Manrique Figueroa: El Precursor del Collage en Colombia.* Ex. Cat. (Bogotá: Galería Santa Fé, 1996).

3 *Historia Crítica*. No. 11. Julio-Diciembre 1995, Universidad de los Andes. Bogotá, pp. 4, 19, 20, 36, 37, 38, 52, 62, 78, 80, 93.

4 *Valdez*. Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo. Bogotá. 1995, pp. 31-32.

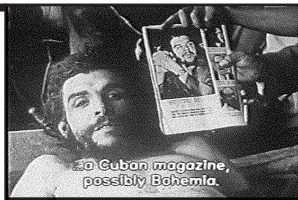
5 A. Artaud. *The Peyote Dance.* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995)

6 M. Traba. *Los Muebles de Beatriz González.* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1977), p. 40.

7 Accounts of Manrique-Figueroa's existence are contradictory and anachronistic and have been recovered by meticulous inquiries and interviews with people who knew him and shared his political concerns and the ludicrous moments of his life. The following are scattered accounts gathered by Lucas Ospina and extracted from the exhibition's catalogue:

> According to the official records of the church of Choachí, Cundinamarca, a small town close to Bogotá, Pedro Manrique-Figueroa was born the 27th of February 1929. We know, from the same records, that he helped the priest with various tasks, but was not a sacristan, as some historians state. We also know, with absolute certainty, that he appeared in the list of 'boys' working for the Trolley Company in Bogotá. One of his various jobs was that of cutting and pasting timetables and notices to patrons at the station. Some art historians now argue that this was the source of his formal and visual concerns and may well explain his fascination with and accuracy in making collages.
>
> His reasons for going to Bogotá remain hidden. The assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a popular candidate for the presidential elections of 1948, provoked a popular riot. People from lower-class barrios took the streets, destroying stores and stealing goods. Soon, downtown Bogotá was in flames. With the destruction of the trolleys, Pedro Manrique-Figueroa lost his job and was forced to find a

a popular candidate for the presidential elections of 1948,



new way to make a living. He supported himself by setting up a stand in San Victorino, a popular flea market in downtown Bogotá, where he sold religious cards. During his free time, he cut pieces of religious images, mutilating pieces of the Bible. He mixed everything according to a rectangular format, a format he would maintain during his entire artistic career. He had to abandon this job when his stand was set on fire. Some historians have argued that the culprits were members of "Tradition, Family and Property," an extreme right wing movement that took offense at Manrique-Figueroa's vernacular use of religious images.

He also worked as a graphic designer for the Communist Party. He created a promotional card of the National Congress in Cúcuta in 1973, which juxtaposed a swastika with a picture of the people attending the meeting. For this, he was fired immediately. Lonely, walking the streets, Manrique-Figueroa realized that his 'trimmings' were just causing him problems and did not relate to any ideology. Like a jealous lover, they were isolating him from time, places and friends. He was forty-four years old and his sole possessions were a small group of cards, just papers that any wind could disperse. To avoid additional political problems, Manrique-Figueroa, then, decided to be an artist.

8 G. Mosquera. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary art criticism from Latin America*. (London: INIVA, 1995), p. 10.

9 Ibid., p. 10.

10 Ibid., p. 10.

11 Ibid., p. 11.

12 M. C. Ramírez. "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980". In *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin: 1950s-1980s.* Ex. Cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 54.

13 Ibid., p. 54. She refers to M. Traba. *Dos Décadas Vulnerables en las Artes Plásticas Latinoamericanas*. (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1973), 87-153.

14 S. Goldman. *Dimensions of the Americas.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.11. She also refers to *Dos Décadas Vulnerables en las Artes Plásticas Latinoamericanas.*

15 M. Traba. *Los Muebles de Beatriz González.* p. 9-10.

16 Araujo de Vallejo, Emma. *Marta Traba*. (Bogotá: Planeta Editores, 1984), p. 340.

17 H. Bhabha. "On Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 85-86.

18 A. Escobar. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. (Princeton: PUP, 1995). p.8.

19 Ibid., p.8.

20 V. Y. Mudimbe. *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

21 T. Mitchell. *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

22 J. Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture.* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

23 A. Escobar, op. cit., p.8.

24 H. Bhabha, op.cit., p.86, 89.

25 L. Camnitzer. "Antonio Caro" in *AnteAmérica.* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, 1992) p. 54.

26 There are numerous contemporary Colombian artists and artistic projects that can be approached from this perspective of mimicry: La Bienal de Venecia, some works by Juan Fernando Herrán, Wilson Díaz, François Bucher, Bernardo Ortiz, Andrés Fresneda, among others.

and Unmaking of the Third World.