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SO FAR FROM GOD AND SO CLOSE TO EACH OTHER: THE UNITED STATES IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN ART

One of the most famous sayings about Mexico and the United States has been attributed to Porfirio Díaz, a dictator who ruled from 1877 until the 1910 Revolution. Enamored of European culture, he supposedly lamented his country's position on the globe, saying, "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States." This statement from over a century ago was opportunely updated by Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, at the end of his book *La frontera de cristal* (The Crystal Frontier [1995]). "So far from God and so close to each other," is what we ought to remember in view of the political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances surrounding the current Mexico-U.S. relationship, a powerful rewording that serves as the title for this essay.

This article looks at how the United States has been represented by contemporary artists working from Mexico. To cover such a complex subject in detail would be nearly impossible, so, instead, this more modest proposal invites readers to review four recent works or artistic projects. Using the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a reference, this intentionally incomplete survey begins with a photograph taken in 1993 by Gabriel Orozco and ends with a project still underway today. The aim is none other than to allow readers to catch a glimpse of the contemporary art panorama in Mexico and to look at how artists have chosen to portray their relationship with our neighbor to the North.

A Long Time Ago on an Island Not So Far Away...

Gabriel Orozco may be a household name in Mexican contemporary art today, but in the early 1990s, he was still working his way up. While preparing his first solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, he took an iconic photograph titled *Island within an Island* (1993). The image shows a collection of wooden planks and debris piled up against a low fence, mimicking the New York City skyline seen in the background. The assembled refuse allows one to see the Big Apple anew, no longer with the dazzling allure of Times Square or the symbolic charge of the Empire State Building, but through a vacant parking lot south of the island, in decay due to demolitions and the bankruptcy of many companies in Lower Manhattan.

This work shows Orozco's play with different scales, with monumentality as well as with the record of his own experience. It also reflects the artist's nomadic lifestyle and how he would often draw from his immediate surroundings the materials to convey the social and political concerns of a given place. Since he was constantly traveling, the artist made a point of keeping a notebook, a kind of substitute studio or workshop contained on a page. Reading his entries in this part-diary/part-sketchbook can be very revealing. For example, in January 1993 he noted, "The game of consumption and circulation through manipulated desire is what justifies the political system of this society."¹ A few months later, still in New York, he transcribed a quote from Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle*:

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Gabriel Orozco, *Island Within an Island*, 1993 (silver dye bleach print image).
Courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto Mexico City/New York.

This society, which eliminates geographical distance, reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation... Tourism, human circulation, considered consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal.²

These notes remain just as relevant today, especially when thinking about a globalized world and its implications for migration. Moreover, they help evoke the kind of reflections Orozco was engaging in when he chose to assemble refuse on that cloudy day and juxtapose it against a view of New York's financial district. And yet, despite this critical background, *Island within an Island* is not a harshly judgmental or condemnatory representation; it is as much an honest depiction of the city as it is an intimate portrait of the artist and his sculptural process. Perhaps that is why the image retains a kind of poetic critique. Especially after the events of September 11, it has acquired new meaning, one of remembrance, and unsuspecting testimony to an order that seemed immovable, but that today has evolved and unfolded in ways that we can only begin to fathom.

In this piece Orozco managed to encapsulate a view of the city reserved for locals, while also depicting it as an outsider—a duality that in many ways prefigured the work of later generations who continue to address this

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topic today—. In this sense, it as a photograph that serves as a starting point for looking at different strategies employed by contemporary artists from Mexico, who question and reflect on the cultural and economic relationship with the United States through their work, such as Heriberto Yépez, Minerva Cuevas, and the collective Biquini Wax.

Translation Is Only a Click Away

In 2002, eight years after NAFTA came into force, Tijuana-based experimental writer and poet Heriberto Yépez created the video *Voice Exchange Rates*. This artificial intelligence software is “designed to help poetry return to the righteous path of the avant-garde” by automating the efforts of poets worldwide.³ The program can read, write, and translate for you, in a variety of languages, as well as imitate different poetic personas through a wide range of registers and voices. The piece, just under nine minutes long, is narrated by a bot who introduces himself as “Talk-it” and speaks in the guise of a macabre skull with bright, lidless eyes that stare at the viewer. The com-



Heriberto Yépez, *Voice Exchange Rates* (video).

puter describes how it has helped Yépez, one of his best clients, by lending him “the voice of a white American, a voice that is better than God,” to read his poems aloud, helping him overcome the barriers of having a strong Mexican accent.⁴

In contrast to Gabriel Orozco’s more nuanced representation of the United States, this piece is a satirical and radical critique of the neoliberal economy. As worker precarization becomes the norm of cultural institutions and technology risks make the individual obsolete, *Voice Exchange Rates* can be seen less as a comment on the geographical aspect of the border and more on the ideological and linguistic walls that are often much harder to climb, even for Yépez, who lived in both Tijuana and Berkeley while he was a doctoral candidate at the University of California.⁵

The fake technology promoted in this artwork is marketed toward Third World countries, where the assumption is that people should strive to change their ways and blend into a global, English-speaking world view. “Globalization is solving all human problems, and translation is only a click away,” chants Talk-it merrily, suggesting that the distribution of culture could be streamlined if only artists avoided cultural specificities and references.⁶ But homogenizing one’s production to suit a global audience could effectively be seen as selling out, compromising the author’s integrity. Yépez acknowledges this problem by having the software switch to Spanish at one point and suggest that, if caught in the act of using this program by a fellow Mexican, one should claim to be using

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the U.S. Americans’ own weapons against them, undermining the established order in their own language.

While a simplistic reading of this controversial work might see it as a blatant attack on U.S. culture, it is in fact an invitation to be suspicious of any nationalistic feeling, regardless of which country promotes it. Beyond the video’s contentious message is a thought-provoking tool for reflecting on the power relations at stake in the exchanges between Mexico and the United States. What emerges is a space where multiple cultures collide, with a complexity that escapes all binary attempts at reading the border.

The Case of Scrooge McDuck

Scrooge McDuck, the wealthiest—and greediest—duck in the Walt Disney Donald Duck comic book universe, has become the capitalist emblem *par excellence*. His signature pose, diving head first and swimming in his vault of golden coins, is appropriated by the artist Minerva Cuevas, who references this character in her 2006 mural titled *America*. Here one can see a Donald Duck look-alike, wallowing in a pool of money, against a backdrop of tall trees and strange looking animals, including snakes and what appears to be a chimpanzee with an oddly human face. The background is in fact one of the earliest illustrations of flora and fauna in the American hemisphere, a colonial representation of a land with abundant natural resources, ready to be exploited by colonial powers.

By juxtaposing these two images, Cuevas presents an open critique of the economic interests that abuse the natural environment, a decolonizing turn in the way we think about our resources. The artist’s socially engaged practice often includes altering imagery such as corporate branding, political symbols and slogans, as well as cultural references in order to reflect on economic and social

systems. In *America*, she looks at the historical use of comics as ideological tools, fostering particular world views and values as vehicles of U.S. cultural imperialism.⁷

America references Mexico's post-revolutionary muralist tradition, notably the works of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. These artists undertook major projects and commissions in the United States, bringing some of their socialist and Marxist ideologies to a U.S. audience. Their reception was controversial and judged by many as politically dangerous, in some cases leading to their removal, as in the case of Rivera's 1933 fresco *Man at the Crossroads* in New York City's Rockefeller Center. Against this backdrop, Cuevas is rethinking what a political mural could look like, addressing contemporary viewers through popular references as well as historical material.

The mural is also an indirect allusion to the study made by authors Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart,

who wrote *Para leer al Pato Donald* (published in English as *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*). The book was first published in 1971 during the Chilean revolution, and although it was banned and burned by the authorities under the regime of Augusto Pinochet, it still became a bestseller throughout Latin America.⁸

NAFTAlgias

Within the framework of the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 2017, the multidisciplinary group Arte y Trabajo BWEPS wrote a collaborative text, aptly titled *NAFTAlgia*, a combination of NAFTA and nostalgia.⁹ An almost delirious account, the essay reflected on the shared cultural references and values between the Mexican narrator and his U.S. American ex-boyfriend. This genuine melting pot included mentions of cartoons such as *Rocko's Modern Life*, the Mexican-American singer Selena, Mexican history and politics, Carlos Slim's Internet provider company, and movies like *Inception* and *Home Alone II*, among many others.

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Minerva Cuevas, *America*, 2006 (acrylic paint on wall).
Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto Mexico City / New York.

The eclectic imagery employed by Bi-quini Wax EPS uses the tactics advanced by artists such as Minerva Cuevas and takes them to a different level. Their works should not be read as cryptically encoded metaphors, but rather as a fluid stream of loosely symbolic references, sparking associations in the viewer's mind. Their methodologies combine the “local” and the “global,” echoing what art critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera described “as the ‘re-signification’ of internationalized artistic languages through local values and symbolic systems, which reflect historical, economic, and political realities.”¹⁰ There is a poignantly sharp, humorous analysis of how the opening of Mexico's economy did not translate into a leveling of material wealth between both countries —far from it.¹¹ However, since NAFTA implied a cultural opening powered by marketing strategies and the arts, it did succeed at an esthetic-affective level.

What began as a concept, or rather, a “structure of feeling,” has developed into exhibitions, installations, and performances, such as the one held at Deslave, a project space in Tijuana.¹² Here they organized, among other things, a marathon of *Stranger Things* on Netflix, where an ideological reading of the two parallel worlds in the television show served to reflect on the relationship between the United States and Mexico and the liminal space of the border. In 2018, they were invited to show their work at Human Resources, a non-profit exhibition space in Los Angeles. This time, they envisioned a tunnel capable of connecting Mexico City and L.A., a hole-border that could

Each of these artists in his/her own way speaks to the interdependence of both countries.



Arte y Trabajo BWEPS, *NAFTALGIA, Modern Life*, 2017 (digital collage of the text *NAFTALGIA in a Field of Lightning*). Courtesy of Arte y Trabajo BWEPS.



Arte y Trabajo BWEPS, *FreeFlavor.com*, 2017 (digital collage of the text *NAFTALGIA in a Field of Lightning*). Courtesy of Arte y Trabajo BWEPS.

export and import art, images, moves, ideas, feelings, thoughts, and words.

Arte y Trabajo BWEPS continues to define what *NAFTALGIA* might be: “a type of specific sensibility under neoliberalism, conditioned and motivated by the illusion of a better Mexico/USA, which has been and continues to be culturally consumed as comprised of a general lacking; an ideological deficit of the promise of capitalist plenitude now absent, on hold, or disappeared forever.”¹³ In this revised definition, it is safe to say that *NAFTALGIA* has been experienced by citizens of both countries. As the project

evolves, this term will no doubt continue to expand, but it is to this day one of the most pertinent art projects looking at what it means to be so far from God, and so close to each other.

Run Forrest Run! (Across the Border and Back Again)

Looking back, one might ask, “What did we win or lose with the economic opening of our borders?” Arte y Trabajo BWEPS would argue that a more accurate way of phrasing that same question would be to ask what stories, memories, aspirations, tragedies, and nostalgias we imported. Theirs is a post-NAFTA generation that grew up watching countless hours of Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and MTV, as well as Spanish-dubbed Hollywood classics from the 1990s, like *Forrest Gump*. Their “first taste of the New

First World” included jokes, dramas, and even Forrest’s memories: “All of a sudden, everything that Tom Hanks had gone through and was never actually experienced in Mexico became ours.”¹⁴

From Gabriel Orozco’s emblematic photograph of New York City to Biquini Wax’s ongoing NAFTAlgias, it is artworks such as these that help shape the way we understand one another across the border of cultural and national identities. What Heriberto Yépez’s incendiary software and Minerva Cuevas’s rethinking of muralism have in common is that they make visible the challenges that arise when attempting to understand and grapple with our cultural affinities and differences and to accept the limitations that emerge when we try. Each of these artists in his/her own way speaks to the interdependence of both countries, pointing at how the crisis in justice and security, the degraded environment, and the financial sphere affect us all, regardless of North-South divides. **MM**

Notes

1 Gabriel Orozco, *Materia escrita* (Mexico City: ERA, 2014), p. 82.

2 Guy Debord, “Proposition 167,” *Society of Spectacle*, 1967, cited in Gabriel Orozco, op. cit., p. 118.

3 Heriberto Yépez, *Voice Exchange Rates*, 2002. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBw8YyIpHPM>.

4 Ibid.

5 This becomes evident as the sinister bot goes on to showcase its most popular voice, that of the poet Gertrude Stein, who tries to explain to us “why Americans rule the world.” But instead of developing an argument, she gets caught in her own cyclical poetic style, repeating variations of that same phrase without actually giving an answer. This nod to those who might know her poems can also be read as a suspiciously broken record, an example of technology embedded with a subliminal message.

6 Yépez, op. cit.

7 For example, the source for this piece comes from a comic book titled “The Stone Money Mystery,” in which Scrooge, a devoted coin collector, becomes fascinated with antique stone currency exhibited in a museum. The greedy magnate sets out to try to find it, enlisting Donald and his nephews to join an adventure that leads them to a hidden indigenous community, from whom they attempt to steal one of their coins.

8 In 1975, when the exiled authors published the English edition, they prefaced it as follows: “Mr. Disney, we are returning your Duck. Feathers plucked and well-roasted. Look inside, you can see the handwriting on the wall, our hands still writing on the wall: Donald, Go Home!” Ariel Dorfman, Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck*, 1975, <https://fadingtheaesthetic.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/33788991-how-to-read-donald.pdf>, accessed April 6, 2019.

9 Arte y Trabajo BWEPS (Art & Labor Biquini Wax EPS) is the multidisciplinary study group of Biquini Wax EPS, a Mexican contempo-

rary art space and collective that aims “to analyze contemporary art under the capitalist mode of production.” The group includes Alejandro Gómez Arias, Bernardo Núñez Magdaleno, Gustavo Cruz, Roselin Espinosa, Neil Mauricio Andrade, Daniel Aguilar Ruvalcaba, and Israel Urmeer. Arte y Trabajo BWEPS, *NAFTAlgia*, 2017, <http://cam.poderelampagos.org/critica-y-reviews/20/7/2017?rq=estados%20unidos>, accessed April 1, 2019.

10 “The active, diversified construction and re-invention of contemporary art and its international language by a multitude of subjects who operate from their different contexts, cultures, experiences, subjectivities, and agendas, as pointed out above, supposes not only an appropriation of that language, but its transformation from divergences in the convergence. Hence, art language pluralizes within itself, although it has been broadly instituted by mainstream orientations. This is crucial, because to control language and representation also entails the power to control meaning.” Gerardo Mosquera, “Against Latin American Art,” *Contemporary Art in Latin America* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010), pp. 12-23.

11 As art critic and writer Jean Fisher noted, “Globalization has been a technocratic sophistication of the economic and political relations of power developed under empire: the draining of resources, information, and intellectual capital from peripheries to hegemonic centers, with the difference that the ‘center’ is less the nation-state than the impenetrable sites of supranational corporatism.” Jean Fisher, *Neither North nor South*, SITAC, 2010, <http://www.pac.org.mx/uploads/sitac/pdf/2.-Fischer-Ing.pdf>, accessed April 3, 2019.

12 For more information, see <https://deslave.art/NAFTALGIAS>.

13 <http://humanresourcesla.com/event/biquini-wax-a-dangerous-obsession/>, accessed April 1, 2019.

14 Arte y Trabajo BWEPS, *NAFTAlgia*, 2017.