

Installation Art in Mexico

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Gabriel Orozco, *Altered Car*, 114 x 140 x 480 cm, 1993.

This essay is dedicated to the melancholy.

Writing about something as spottily studied in Mexican contemporary art as installation, with its origins in the 1960s “conceptualisms,” is risky because you have to take into account that you are dealing with very complex forms of expression. Oh well, here goes...

Throughout the twentieth century, the visual arts have been marked by a zeal to expand beyond traditional two-dimensionality to the third dimension. As Simón Marchan mentions in his classic book *Del arte objetual al arte del*

concepto (From Object Art to Concept Art),¹ as early as Allan Kaprow’s legendary 1958 “environments,” defined as an artistic form that surrounded the spectator and used all possible materials (visual, tactile and manipulative), many ways of relating to spaces developed.

Forty years later, with the coming’s and going’s and up’s and down’s of non-object languages, the transformation of traditional physical bases for art, the technological trends, the proliferation of hybrid or simply non-conventionally classifiable genres, globalization, the crisis of nationalism and the value placed on the new, what can we say about the alternative proposals in Mexico that include installation art?

In the essay “Tratado de Libre Comer” (Free Eating Agreement),² that Abraham Cruz Villegas wrote for the exhibition “Myself and My Circumstance,” we find fundamental comments for the beginnings of a historiography of contemporary art in Mexico.

Cruz Villegas mentions that at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, different collective strategies emerged influenced by post-object movements, called by scholars “the Generation of the Groups.” New, fresh means of expression came to the fore, including street art, mail-art, environments, derived from concept art, performances and non-object art, always signed by associations as diverse as Proceso Pentágono, Tetraedro, No-Grupo, SUMA,

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Germinal, Tepito Arte Acá, Mira, Marco, the Visual Research Workshop, the Art and Ideology Workshop, etc.

In the 1980s, along with postmodern neo-Mexicanism, amidst the crisscrossing trends in traditional art, a possibility for experimentation opened up called the Salon for Alternative Spaces. On five different occasions, this salon hosted the work of artists who were trying to go beyond the familiar formulae already attempted by the artists from the groups. And so, surprising formats and ideas arose, sometimes risky ones like installation environments and so-called object-art.

Intolerance led to institutional panic, however, and the Salon for Alternative Spaces was closed indefinitely with no explanation whatsoever, at the same time that all state participation in unorthodox artistic activities came to a halt.

From that time on, it became clear that the opportunity for development was not to be found in institutions, schools or museums. Criticism, on the other hand, had become a craft consisting in writing descriptive reviews of exhibitions, an attempt to explain or reject work a priori. Although some artists continued to hold on to the 1970s slogan of “taking over spaces,” this gradually became “creating spaces” and a concern for generating their own space for development, either alternative or peripheral to institutions.

People had to work with what they had at hand and improvise. Isolated actions led to the creation of what at a distance could be seen as a parallel movement of artists’ spaces and promotional strategies, like the Agency Gallery and the Des Aztecas Salon, among others.

In 1989, Guillermo Santamarina, Fulvia González Rossetti and Gabriel

Orozco organized the show “Speaking Of,” using Joseph Beuys’ work to explore the possibilities of art in situ. Held at the ex-Desierto de los Leones Monastery with the support of the Goethe Institute, this can be considered the first exhibition made up completely of installation art, until then unknown on the Mexican artistic scene.

Under these conditions, contemporary artists have built their own scenarios at improvised, uncomfortable and sometimes contradictory moments,

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giving rise to structures for production, distribution and consumption of their own works and projects.

In addition to the El Chopo University Museum, which in 1993 became another institutional space, the ex-Monastery of Santa Teresa (or the Ex-Teresa, as it is commonly called), under the auspices of the National Institute of Fine Arts, became a center for the promotion and dissemination of what was called “alternative” art. The Performance Art Festival held at the El Chopo changed venue, moving to the Ex-Teresa, where it has made its permanent home, together with installation and video-art.

However, works linked to this “alternative” art received greater recognition after 1995, when, 10 years after the

close of the Salon for Alternative Spaces, the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (Fonca) incentive program for young creators opened up a special category for alternative media.

In the 1990s, many independent spaces opened their doors and have sought official funding: among them, The Bakery, Blue Zone, the Tower of the Winds, Art Deposit, Box Two, Art & Idea, The Office, etc. These projects, although not independent, have operated autonomously of the broad official cultural “line,” maintaining freshness in the spectrum of aesthetic proposals that were increasingly self-critical and open to international dialogue.

At the end of the 1990s, the museums and galleries opened their rooms up to the most recent productions done by young artists, in formats linked to new technologies and languages, without hiding their avowed interest in keeping up with the pace of the general mobility of contemporary art.³

ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGES AN OVERVIEW

The second part of this essay is an interview the author did with Guillermo Santamarina, the director of the Ex-Teresa Today’s Art, curator and cultural promotor specialized in alternative languages.⁴

What are the differences between environment art, installation and in situ art? The differences are very subtle, but we could say that installation is a resource for expression/communication that uses physical, sensory and intellectual relations present in the contexts in which the “subject” is placed, as well as the ability to situate itself, regardless

of the terrain where the exhibition is presented, whether it be a gallery or site-specific, which imposes the elements of an autonomous subject, distancing itself from any contact with the “exterior.”

A few years ago I wrote about this, trying to define two types of installation according to their contextual relationship: “concentric” and “excentric.”

Specificity (a condition of the in situ experience) corresponds to a process of integration of elements and can be related to other categories of today’s visual arts: public art, the “performative” installation, intervention or interactive conceptualism.

I would consider installation which does not establish specific links to its surroundings and whose constituting elements, therefore, free from external burdens, are ordered inflexibly, more a sculpture, organized according to the norms of “concentricity.”

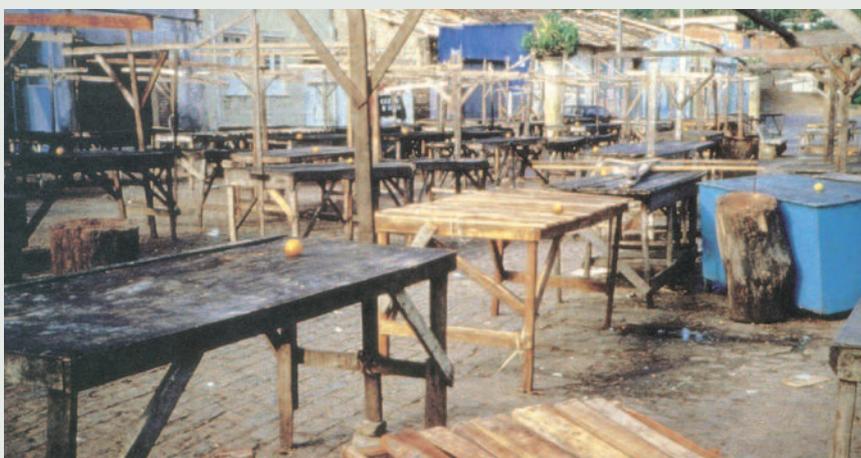
The idea of an environment —up until the 1980s this term referred to almost any expressive development that occupied a space, but is now included in the broad category of installation— is related to the sensory experience that an installation projects, whether in site-specific conditions or not. It is an experience specific to our senses, due to its graphic, luminous, aural, olfactory, gustatory, climatic or other effects which are controlled (as in the concentric case) or contextualized (in the excentric case). Its distinctive charge is undoubtedly poetic, but almost never develops with more complex structures where the semiotics, for example, would be the “nucleus” (the subject) of the work. The environment is, perhaps, predominantly “formalist.”

We would still have to describe what until recently we called “interven-

tion,” which could be conceived of as a more precise kind of environment, particularly in its contextual formulation.

Who are Mexico’s most representative installation artists and why? What are some of their most outstanding works?

I will mention only three of the at least eight dozen artists who have explored this field. After the muralists, Frida and Tamayo, Gabriel Orozco is Mexico’s best known artist abroad. One of his most



Gabriel Orozco, *Crazy Tourist*, 1991.

talked-about installations was presented at and together with New York’s Museum of Modern Art (*Home Run*, 1993). It “intervened” the windows of apartments and offices next door to the museum garden with an element, oranges. Another occupied an entire men’s club, a totally Victorian institution, in downtown London (*Empty Club*, 1996), commissioned by Art Angel. Another work by Gabriel which has made a lot of noise is his project for the last “Documenta” exhibition, the installation of a gigantic ferris wheel half buried in the ground. Apparently, this will be presented soon at the Hanover Fair.

Born in Belgium, Francis Aljés began to develop as an artist in Mexico City during the second half of the 1980s.

He is the other international star whose work is displayed at very prestigious venues. Right now, for example, he has a very successful presentation at London’s Lisson Gallery. Francis is tireless and prolific, and so I’ll only mention one of his installations: the dualist video projection that he presented at the last Sao Paulo Biennial, *Paradox of Praxis* (1998-1999) and that we also included at Montreal’s exhibition, “Myself and My Circumstance.”

I will include someone who has not yet achieved the high profile of the other two, but who will soon, one of our key artists today, Santiago Sierra. Although he’s Spanish (he arrived in Mexico City only about five or six years ago), he is already recognized as a representative of contemporary Mexican art. As with Francis Aljés, Mexico has been both his inspiration and a platform from which to launch his work. He is a radical conceptualist in the style of those innovators who sparked the American school of the 1960s and 1970s, Graham, Smith and Burden. Some of his work even looks like these artists’. His links to his surroundings are always provocative, or even offensive, such as in the case of the five-minute blockade

of Mexico City's Periférico freeway at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, which he achieved by crossing all lanes, including the side road, with a trailer truck. Until January of this year, the Rufino Tamayo Museum exhibited the remains of an action, *455 Paid People* (1999), carried out in its Room 7, a new institutional channel for this kind of installation.

What are the "external" influences in the work of these artists?



Francis Alÿs, *Francis Alÿs and the Collector*, 1991.

I don't understand what you mean by "external" influences on their work. They usually structure their processes in close contact with reality, with the flow of the everyday, in a kind of "new realism" outside the workshop. Only very sporadically do they "create" a work space like other artists dependent on traditional materials (although Francis Alÿs occasionally paints models that are then reproduced by helpers). Energetically tied to the street, they become "perpetual pedestrians," or traveling tourists, if you will. None of the three consciously takes on the theme of national identity or the codification of native cultural roots. None manifests any specific political position, but they cannot be catalogued as apolitical, either.

What does the future hold for these languages?

That is hard to predict. I think these languages are particles of an infinite capacity for expression which cannot return to being fenced in by authorized techniques, white-walled galleries, the tyranny of appraising critics, the cosmetic prescription, the judgement of decoration or —the one I like the best— conciliation with the foolhardy note of certainty.

What contributions do Mexican installations make both inside and outside the country?

I think the visual arts long ago shed the idea of making an important contribution to society. Gabriel Orozco's frequent presence on the international scene has generated curiosity among curators and influential institutions worldwide about Mexico's artistic community.

What are the pro's and con's of the installation-institution binomial?

I don't remember the pro's. The Ex-Teresa represents the determination of an eminently conservative institution to take on board at least two events that involve this medium of expression: the

"opportune" form of "hairbrained" freedom in selecting support for art "for young people" and the possibility of a dialogue close to what the "great world" out there considers timely and sophisticated. Beyond that, there are slip-ups and potholes. I doubt that Mexican institutions are sensitive enough to broaden out their notions about the role of contemporary art in the critical sphere of a society like ours.

The con's, in addition to the short-sighted definition, in which installation and other "new" languages are no more than "crazy," "fashionable" and "opportunistic," and which does not accept that the activities associated with these languages and carrying out a work require funding efforts different from those needed by "white paint, a hammer and nails."

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With this I conclude my review of installation in Mexico. I hope this space can serve to speak of spaces: public spaces, open spaces, exterior spaces; private spaces, closed spaces, interior spaces; transgressed spaces and transgressing spaces. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Simón Marchan Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto. Las artes plásticas desde 1960* (Madrid: Alberto Corazón Editor, 1972).

² This is a play on words in Spanish: the term for "free trade agreement" is "tratado de libre comercio", and the word for "eat" is "comer." Thus, "free eating agreement" sounds even more like "free trade agreement" than it does in English. [Translator's Note.]

³ Fine Arts Museum catalogue, November 4, 1999-February 5, 2000, *Yo y mi circunstancia. Movilidad en el arte contemporáneo mexicano* (Montreal: INBA, 1999).

⁴ Interview with the author in Mexico City, February 11, 2000.