

téntica *galerie des femmes* para complacencia y disfrute de la mirada del *voyeur*.

La soberbia naturaleza muerta atribuida a nuestro pintor desde hace más de 50 años¹⁴ sirve de excepcional colofón del catálogo: es un florero de virtuosísima ejecución, cuya inmediatez nos impele, paradójicamente, a desvelar otros niveles de lectura subyacentes. Su inaprensible luz revela la apariencia de las cosas, tan bellas y tan frágiles, cuya naturaleza queda sumida en la profunda y postrera oscuridad de lo desconocido.

Completa el libro un apéndice biográfico del artista a cargo de Daniele Benati, texto que reproduce con correcciones y adiciones el publicado por el autor en 1993, y el imprescindible repertorio bibliográfico.

Magnífica es la edición de la editorial Silvana, como acostumbra en sus obras de gran formato, con un nutrido repertorio de ilustraciones a color que acompañan a los lúcidos textos que hemos comentado; no obstante, hemos observado algunas erratas que no desmerecen, de ninguna manera, el empeño editorial.¹⁵

También hemos de hacer referencia a las salas del Museo de Santo Domingo, lugar que ha acogido el montaje expositivo. Inauguradas en 2005 con la exposición *Marco Palmезzано ed il Rinascimento nelle Romagne*, al año siguiente se organizó en ellas una muestra dedicada al pintor Silvestro Lega da Modigliana, uno de los principales representantes del movimiento de los *macchiaioli*. Ambos even-

tos fueron dedicados a ilustres pintores de la región y ofrecieron una elevada calidad estética y científica, al igual que el que ahora nos ocupa, convirtiendo así las rehabilitadas salas del antiguo convento dominico en un espacio cultural de primer orden de esta región italiana, espacio que en 2009, tras la exposición de Cagnacci, acogerá otra dedicada al escultor véneto Antonio Canova (1757-1822).

En definitiva, el libro sobre Cagnacci resulta muy recomendable para conocer una parte de la pintura de las décadas centrales del *Seicento* en Italia y para acercarse a una figura no muy conocida fuera de su región natal. De este artista esperamos que en los próximos años se vayan descubriendo más obras, tanto en Italia como en otras colecciones foráneas —entre estas últimas nos consta al menos de una en México—, además de nuevos datos documentales que ayuden a conocer su trayectoria y su personalidad.



*Escultura Social: A New Generation
of Art from Mexico City*
Julie Rodrigues Widholm

Chicago/New Haven, Museum of Contemporary Art/
Yale University Press, 2007

By

REBECCA GÓMEZ, EDWARD HAYES JR.
AND CAITLIN SOLÍS

Curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm of the
Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago,
“Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art

14. Núm. cat. 87.

15. Por ejemplo, la ilustración de la página 195 no se corresponde con la ficha del catálogo a la que acompaña (núm. 33, *San Andrés Corsini servido por querubines*), sino con una *Cleopatra* de la Colección Salamon de Milán.

N. B. Agradezco su ayuda en la traducción del texto a la licenciada Valeria Bacci.

from Mexico City” exhibited the work of twenty contemporary Mexican and foreign-born conceptual artists at the Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution in San Antonio, Texas from July 31, 2008 through October 26, 2008. Artists included María Alós, Carlos Amoraes, Julieta Aranda, Gustavo Artigas, Stefan Brüggemann, Miguel Calderón, Fernando Carbajal, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Dr. Lakra, Mario García Torres, Daniel Guzmán, Pablo Helguera, Gabriel Kuri, Nuevos Ricos, Yoshua Okón, Damián Ortega, Fernando Ortega, Pedro Reyes, Fernando Romero and Los Súper Elegantes. Exhibiting work from the past five years, the artists disinherit themselves from traditional and national forms of art. In new media and through the transformation of conventional materials, the artists in “Escultura Social” deconstruct identity, reconsider community dynamics, and explore new conceptual approaches.

The twenty generationally grouped artists, whose international careers took off in the closing years of the twentieth century, discontinue the post-revolutionary social realist project of *muralismo*, the enigmatic and idiosyncratic painting of the *Ruptura* era (e.g., Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo) and 1980s *neomexicanismo*, the critical project of revisiting national identity. As noted by Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) curator, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, the “Escultura Social” artists engage in a “rigorous new vocabulary that embraces untraditional sculptural materials as well as video, photography, installation and performance.”¹ Severing their

1. Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, Chicago/ New Haven: Museum of Contemporary Art/Yale University Press, 2007, p. 10.



1. Julieta Aranda, *Untitled (Coloring Book)*, 2007, vinyl appliqué, dimensions variable, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois. Photo courtesy of the artist.

links with *mexicanidad*, or the semiotics of Mexican identity, “Escultura Social” reflects tenets of trans-nationalism and post-colonialism in a global contemporary art context.

In the absence of conventional artistic forms and nationalistic genres that contextualize traditional exhibitions of Mexican art (for example, the exhibition “Myth, Mortals and Immortality: Works from the Museo Soumaya de México,” that ran concurrently with the Museo Alameda exhibit), “Escultura Social” presents a variety of twenty-first century media to export a synthesis of social critique through the time-based works of María Alós, Carlos Amoraes, Gustavo Artigas, Miguel Calderón, Los Súper Elegantes, Yoshua Okón, Damián Ortega and Fernando Ortega. Working in the third dimension are artists Fernando Carbajal, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán and Pedro Reyes. Among the two-dimensional works, *Nuevos Ricos* juxtapose film stills with newspaper photos, Pablo Helguera presents a photo journal of his Panamerican travels, Dr. Lakra tattoos found posters and other objects with eclectic graffiti,

and Julieta Aranda, Stefan Brüggemann, Gabriel Kuri and Mario García Torres venture into semantic projects.² Unbound by prescribed forms of artmaking tied to a national statement, “Escultura Social” deconstructs identity, reconsiders community dynamics, and explores new conceptual approaches.

Transcending Identity Politics

“Escultura Social” seeks not to define Mexican art but rather to bring together a younger generation of artists (with connections to Mexico City) whose international careers unfolded in the final decade of the twentieth century. The participating artists and their works have in common an explicit deviation from obvious representations of cultural identity—that is, the common thread connecting these artists is that they do not address issues of identity.³ Mexico City merely represents a point of departure or origin, an incidental identifier, while the artists connect to each other more closely through their approach to

creating contemporary art.⁴ The exhibition’s curator, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, appears to break from the past by establishing a common ground for the artists other than that of the visual depiction of identity. The artists’ points of origin, relocation, and sites of creation differ from one another with Mexico City serving as a tenuous connection.⁵ Widholm makes

4. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 10.

5. Some of the artists are from Mexico City and are Mexican; some were born in the United States and relocated to Mexico City; some live in the United States but create art in Mexico City; and, some are from Mexico City but create art in the United States. María Alós (b. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1973; lives and works in Mexico City); Carlos Amoraes (b. Mexico City, 1970; lives and works in Mexico City); Julieta Aranda (b. Mexico City, 1975; lives and works in Berlin and New York); Gustavo Artigas (b. Mexico City, 1970; lives and works in Mexico City); Stefan Brüggemann (b. Mexico City, 1975; lives and works in Mexico City and London); Miguel Calderón (b. Mexico City, 1971; lives and works in Mexico City); Fernando Carbajal (b. Chicago, 1973; lives and works in Mexico City), Abraham Cruzvillegas (b. Mexico City, 1967; lives and works in Paris); Dr. Lakra (b. Oaxaca, Mexico, 1972, lives and works in Oaxaca); Mario García Torres (b. Monclova, Mexico, 1975; lives and works in La Jolla, California, and Los Angeles); Daniel Guzmán (b. Mexico City, 1964, lives and works in Mexico City); Pablo Helguera (b. Mexico City, 1971; lives and works in New York); Gabriel Kuri (b. Mexico City, 1970; lives and works in Brussels and Mexico City); Nuevos Ricos (Carlos Amoraes; Julian Lede, Buenos Aires, 1971; Andre Pahl, Hilden, Germany, 1975); Yoshua Okón (b. Mexico City, 1970; lives and works in Mexico City and Los Angeles); Damián Ortega (b. Mexico City, 1967; lives and works in Mexico City and Berlin); Fernando Ortega (b. Mexico City, 1971; lives and works in Mexico City); Pedro Reyes (b. Mexico City, 1972; lives and works in Mexico City); Los Súper Elegantes (Martinián López-Crozet b. Buenos Aires, 1968 and Milena Muzquiz b. Tijuana, Mexico, 1974; live and work in Los Angeles).

2. Also, architect Fernando Romero who originally exhibited at the MCA as an “Escultura Social” artist, presents the model of Soumaya Slim de Romero’s (his wife) museum downstairs, marrying the post-colonial to mid-modern collection with the contemporaneity of “Escultura Social”.

3. “Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City” is an exhibition of contemporary art; however, the name evokes the concept of identity-specific art that developed in Mexico during the 1920s, and was first implemented in Mexican murals as part of the national, government sponsored program, designed to represent identity in art. Some of these works of art relate to Mexico; others are not so easily identified, such as the pieces by Carlos Amoraes, Nuevos Ricos, Los Súper Elegantes, María Alós, and Pablo Helguera.

clear that she is not constructing an identity for the artists by stating:

Unlike recent larger surveys of Latin American art or regional overviews of Mexican art, *Escultura Social* contextualizes work that has been informed by twentieth-century art historical moment, urban life, current political issues, and popular culture—television, music, movies, or flea markets—in a fresh way that is not easily identifiable as Mexican. Without defining a cohesive movement or providing a comprehensive panorama of artists working in Mexico, this exhibition includes innovative work from the last five years that has had a significant impact outside of Mexico by artists who formed a community at a particular time.⁶

Widholm emphasizes how the exhibit brings together artists with Mexico City ties and demonstrates how the artists employ innovative practices and deal with social issues.

In Patricia Martin's catalog essay for *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*,⁷ an exhibition that draws parallels with "Escultura Social," Patricia Martin states that "[e]very national display is doomed to failure, because there is an implicit expectation for artists to respond to the place where they work in the same way."⁸ One might expect the artists of "Escultura Social" to channel the fervor and cultural milieu of Mexico City because the curator structures the exhibition around the capital city; however,

many participating artists do not evoke a traditional Mexican culture instead, they critique social issues outside of a solely historical national discourse. For instance, the Los Angeles-based duo, Los Súper Elegantes, consisting of Martiniano López-Crozet and Milena Muzquiz, creates works that speak to a transcontinental MTV generation raised in the internet age. Their two videos on display, *Sixteen* (2004) and *Nothing Really Matters* (2006), feature a mix of pop music videos with the conventions of the *telenovela* (Spanish-language soap operas) interlaced with a danceable, almost irritatingly catchy, original score that resonates throughout the exhibit floor. Rather than marketing their artwork as specifically Latino, the artists aspire to be "pulling identity politics off the map and traveling with freedom passports."⁹ Instead, their video, *Sixteen*, transcends ethnicity to provide social commentary on class structures by creating a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Juliet escapes her confining and oppressive existence in a trashcan to be reunited with her Romeo.

Continuing the trend, *Useless Wonder* (2006) by Carlos Amoraes contains nothing that would identify the work as uniquely Mexican. The project consists of a double-screen video projection in one dark room, one side depicting an apocalyptic vision, the other a black and white map of the world that deconstructs like a jigsaw puzzle. Amoraes draws from his liquid archive, a digital database of drawings, to morph and sequence into video, with mysterious music created for this project.¹⁰ The images on the "end of days" side of

6. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 10.

7. The exhibition assembled the work of contemporary conceptual art emerging from Mexico City.

8. Patricia Martin, "o-2*" in *Mexico City: An Exhibition About Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, Long Island City, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002, p. 48.

9. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 210.

10. The liquid archive is "based on photographs of digital vector drawings," which are "synthesized into ambiguous forms that combine silhouettes with traces," and can then be used in his projects. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

the projection include apocalyptic creatures (such as a raven-headed woman, skull-faced monkeys, and a half-wolf, half-woman being); these iconic images are recognizable, but the narrative into which they are placed is purposefully confusing.¹¹ The artist places the figures in a changing landscape of trees and red ribbon, creating an apocalyptic vision that conjures feelings of fear and hope in the viewer. The project demonstrates a process of engaging him or her with questions that cannot readily be answered.

Significantly, as part of Nuevos Ricos (a hybrid art venture and record label on which he collaborated with Julian Lede and Andre Pahl), Amorales developed another project, *Los guerreros* (*The Warriors*, 2007), which arguably contains a Mexican theme by responding to the social conditions of youth culture in Mexico; however, the installation's primary aim does not relate to a national identity, but instead examines an urban gang subculture that thrived across both sides of the Río Grande. The installation includes movie stills of *The Warriors* (1979), which fictionalized and popularized New York gang culture. In the 1980s, Mexico City witnessed the emergence of an "entire youth subculture of gangs [...] divid[ing] the city into new geographies."¹² The work consists of a series of twenty digital prints mounted on aluminum in two horizontal parallel rows. In each frame are two images; below is an image from the film and above rests a reproduction of an archival newspaper image of gang scenes in Mexico City that eerily

mirror the celluloid stills. *Los guerreros* demonstrates how fantasy evolves into reality and the insidious influence of popular culture imported from the United States on urban Mexican youth.¹³

María Alós provides yet another example of the exhibit's creation of an image of contemporary works devoid of nationalism. Alós's work deals with issues of social interaction and how modern society is more accustomed to dealing with machines than engaging in human interactions. Included in the exhibit are two video installations, a greeting and a farewell; to take the concept to the literal level, the artist hired actors to welcome and bid farewell to the attendees on opening night.¹⁴ According to Museo Alameda Interim Executive Director Eliseo Ríos, the effects this orchestrated greeting had on museum-goers ranged from feelings of cynicism and invasion of personal space to positive public response.¹⁵ This strategy functionally provides a commentary on the relationship between the museum and its patrons; and, by expressing greetings and gratitude, the museum acknowledges the interdependent relationship between a museum and its visitors.

Widholm attempts to diverge from past exhibits of contemporary Latin American art by not relegating the artists to "many of today's curatorial tropes: displacement, flow, transnational transactions, nomadism, translation, borders."¹⁶ However, the work of Pablo Helguera indeed delves into the relationship between the United States and Latin America

11. Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Exhibitions: Live Cinema/Carlos Amorales: Four Animations, Five Drawings, and a Plague," <http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/313.html?page=1> (accessed November 18, 2008).

12. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 160.

13. Ibid.

14. Eliseo Ríos, interview with Rebecca Gómez and Edward Hayes, Jr., digital recording, December 2, 2008.

15. Ibid.

16. Patricia Martin, "o-2*," p. 48.

and articulates the concept of Panamericanism. Lecturing on *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (SPU, 2006), Helguera stated that he considers the following issues in his approach to creating art: 1) where people are; 2) why they are there; and, 3) why it is important. SPU reflects Helguera's thoughts about the definitions and purposes of the museum and of art. In this project he rejects the concept of representing specific localized identities; instead, the project deals with global notions of community and Panamericanism. As a transnationalist with both insider and outsider perspectives, experiencing and living in both Mexican and US-American cultures, he is capable of considering how the United States relates to the world, in particular, to the Latin American world, both within and outside of national and political borders. Addressing these issues, he posits that his project represents a "Bolivarian" notion of US-American identity, which supersedes his personal identification with Mexico.¹⁷

The material of SPU comes from a journey the artist made by van from Alaska to Argentina, stopping twenty-seven times to create dialogues on the true international meaning of the term "American" in a globalized world. A fictional and ceremonial aspect appears throughout the project's tour in the guise of a portable yellow tent that evokes a traditional school house, thus effectively creating a miniature cultural center. He began the trip on May 20, 2006 in Alaska by interviewing the late Marie Smith Jones, at the time the last speaker of the dying language, *Eyak*; and he concluded his trip

at the opposite end of the hemisphere in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, by interviewing Christina Calderón, the last woman to speak the native *Yaghan* language.¹⁸

Helguera's journey raises questions about local culture, the uniqueness of place, and the notion of "Romantic travel."¹⁹ During the tour, he noticed that audience response changed depending on location; and, he felt that the project became more interesting as he traveled south because it became less about art and more about the questions raised through the concept of SPU. The artist found the communities he visited did not view themselves as part of a larger whole and thus did not identify themselves as Panamerican; he realized that people wanted answers that would help them better understand their lives, the world, and their places in it. He thus laid the groundwork for using art and SPU as instruments to deal with social concerns within the art world and beyond its institutional borders.²⁰

Like writers, artists are ever searching for universal meaning, drawing on their own culture and life experiences in order to express the human condition. This new generation of artists recognizes that, in the current global reality, exclusively nationalistic art lacks relevance and represents dated ideals; it thus seeks to transcend conservative national representations through a conceptual art dealing with universal social issues. Deconstructing the exhibit "Escultura Social" reveals the varied reasons behind organizing a non-identity

17. Pablo Helguera, lecture, Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, San Antonio, October 10, 2008. "Bolivarian" after the nineteenth-century architect of South American independence, Simón Bolívar.

18. Pablo Helguera, lecture, Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, San Antonio, October 10, 2008.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

specific exhibition marketed toward a young, urban Latino audience.²¹

Significantly, this is the MCA's first incursion into organizing a group exhibition of artists from Mexico²²—an artistic equivalent of free trade in the post-NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) age. One suspects that issues of art market politics were an important part of the reason for using the Mexico City context as the reference point of the exhibition, since this could be a motive of interest to the strong Mexican demographic presence both in Chicago and at the other location in the Smithsonian Institution-affiliated Museo Alameda—a Latino Museum in the heavily Hispanic San Antonio market. Art historian Cuauhtémoc Medina notes

a monstrous paradox: the circulation of works in the global art system is still tied to the model of national representation. When suddenly, in 2002, a series of global art institutions compete to assemble work and artists solely based on the fact that they operate in or in relation to a place such as Mexico City, they can very well produce an inversion in terms — *de-localizing* this work has the possible consequence of *re-nationalizing* it.²³

The curator does, however, attempt to avoid “re-nationalizing” the artists in “Escultura Social”. Widholm focuses less on categorization

by geography and more on linking works pertaining to a shared social perspective, and grouping men and women who represent a new young generation of artists.²⁴ Difficulties emerge in breaking the bonds and boundaries of nationalism, and yet the curator coordinates an exhibit that transcends national identity.

Community as a Site of Creative Expression

The concept of community surfaces throughout the exhibit as artists explore the dynamics of being a privileged outsider representing, incorporating, and exploiting marginalized communities for purposes of creative expression exported for public, and significantly foreign consumption. While Helguera engages with communities from Alaska to Argentina to articulate a transnational Panamerican identity; Artigas, through an altered basketball rim and video, illuminates an oft-stigmatized and stereotyped group, young men of color from the inner-city, working collectively for a positive goal. Okón deconstructs insider/outsider positionality regarding representation in popular media, while Reyes and Kuri suggest art world exploitation, neither artist crediting the marginalized non-artist individuals responsible for the actual construction of their works.

Emerging from a lofty ideal of establishing a Panamerican intercontinental and multilingual community through verbal exchanges, Helguera creates a superficial society by superimposing his notion of a Panamerican identity onto established, yet isolated communities across the Americas. The twenty-

21. The catalog (*Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*) notes that the Mexican population in Chicago is the second largest in the United States.

22. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 10.

23. Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Mutual Abuse,” in *Mexico City: An Exhibition About Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, Long Island City, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002, p. 38.

24. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 9.

seven sites visited by the artist and his crew on their 120-day tour, are rich in unique histories, both painful—as evidenced in the testimonies of survivors of brutal civil wars, and treasured—as in the speakers’ devotion to preserving their languages. Helguera’s project deviates from a creative and innovative practice and enters problematic territory as a result of failing to address ways of moving beyond communication towards concrete action. Unfortunately, his work evokes on some level anthropology’s colonialist tendencies, in which an outsider enters an isolated, foreign locale to glean from the society useful artifacts and observations and reports the findings to a foreign audience eager to hear tales about the natives. After sparking a dialogue laden with ideal aspirations with participants, whose reactions ranged from biting cynicism to confusion, Helguera’s commitment of returning to the communities visited along the SPU tour is not clear in the installation included in “Escultura Social”. Instead, the viewer sees twenty-two framed images with an accompanying journal-like entry below each photograph. Despite apparent claims to the contrary, Helguera’s ambitious School of Panamerican Unrest project appears to be an exercise in self-interest. Traveling to such disparate locations as the outer Alaskan territories, Oklahoma, Guatemala, and Argentina, Helguera envisioned his project as merely raising questions about Panamerican identity, rather than providing a platform for true discourse and articulation of solutions in places wracked by extreme poverty, sheer industrial abandonment, horrific civil wars, cultural imperialism, and colonialism. While his motives appear genuine, the limitations in the work imbue Helguera’s constructed “Panamerican” community with artifice.

Unlike Helguera, Okón approaches his pseudo-ethnographic projects without lofty pretensions and instead uses video to challenge perception and representation through humor. In *Lago Bolsena* (2005), Okón uses the digital video medium to deconstruct insider/outsider positionality regarding representation of the marginalized in popular media. Situated in a darkened room, in which the aural component of the piece seems to surround and overwhelm the viewer, a three-channel video projection simultaneously depicts wide, medium, and close-up shots of residents of the Santa Julia neighborhood of Mexico City behaving in a mock-primitive, almost caricature fashion. While the subjects’ style of dress and surroundings are thoroughly modern, their actions and demeanor call to mind National Geographic documentaries in which anthropologists study populations untouched by Western ideals and technology. Clearly, Okón and the Santa Julia residents enjoy toying with the idea of deconstructing the more empirical, ethnographic fare that is often the only representation the foreign audiences have of indigenous groups. Throughout the disjointed, disorienting, and deceptively short video, Yoshua Okón explores the concept of the “other,” and questions whose right it is to label a community as “other,” or savage.

Considering the selection of Santa Julia in particular, one of the poorest and reportedly most dangerous neighborhoods in Mexico City, the association between identity and marginalization is even more apt. Similar to the National Geographic documentaries, Okón’s piece also reflects the concept of insider/outsider; however, Okón contests the validity of outsider representations of foreign/marginalized communities. Although he creates controversial, subversive videos and installations that challenge bourgeois notions of what constitutes

art, due to his privileged status Okón remains part of the elite and, as such, operates as an outsider with the working class subjects depicted in his works. His economic privilege (which allows him to make his art), racial privilege as a white man (which has deep implications for success and art world acceptance in the extremely racially divided country that is Mexico), and his attainment of higher education in a country where the median level of education is about seven years, starkly distinguishes him from his proletarian participants.²⁵

Despite these class and phenotype differences, Okón continues to engage such disparate groups including, but not limited to, corrupt Mexico City policemen, Mexican Nazi-sympathizers, and Carl's Jr. fast food chain employees, to name a few. Through these video shorts and installations, Okón has also achieved international recognition. The artist's video shorts and installations represents a product of globalization and post-NAFTA Mexico that appeals to a foreign audience eager to embrace cutting-edge conceptual art from Mexico City, which has long been an artistic site of production for European and American artists.²⁶

Much of the foreign interest generated in Okón's work and that of other experimental conceptual artists such as Miguel Calderón, can be traced to La Panadería, an alternative artist-run space and residency founded in 1994 by Okón and Calderón. The success of the

space is widely credited for revitalizing the contemporary art scene in Mexico City and for focusing the attention of the international art world on the Distrito Federal as a place of fruition for legitimate and noteworthy art.²⁷ The artists transformed the former bakery during a period of intense social upheaval in 1994 when Mexico, the United States, and Canada officially signed NAFTA into law despite widespread protest in each of the countries involved, and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) orchestrated a rebellion in Chiapas for "indigenous people's liberation from First World oppression and the genocidal destruction of their distinct cultures."²⁸ La Panadería emerged from this political and cultural milieu in which change, for better or worse, seemed apparent and the old guard of Mexico's ruling elite was being challenged in ways not seen since 1968. The time was ripe for young artists, albeit affluent and foreign-educated, to challenge the traditional Mexican art scene, which habitually served the conformist and decadent tastes of the rich Mexican elite. Through events, residencies with foreign artists grounded in their experiences in Mexico City, dialogues, and performances, La Panadería became a space by and for artists; it broadened the parameters of contemporary and experimental art, exploring culturally and socially-relevant conceptual art and introducing Mexican audiences, who traditionally lacked access to museums and galleries, to contemporary works created by both Mexican and international foreign artists.

25. *Multi-level Governance and Territorial Development: Trends in OECD Countries and in Mexico*, Washington, D.C., World Bank/IFC Headquarters, March 2003. <http://www.worldbank.org/urban/urbanruralseminar/pres/crosta.pdf>.

26. Itala Schmelz, "Lines and Convergences: Conceptual Art in Mexico During the 1990s," in *Escultura Social*, p. 36.

27. Ibid.; John Welchman, "Yoshua Okón: Crying Wolf," *Flash Art*, January-February 2004, pp. 96-99; La Panadería.

28. M.A. Jaimes Guerrero, "An Indigenous American Intifada," in *First World, Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge*, San Francisco, City Lights, 1995.

Post-Panadería saw Okón creating works that examined human nature and socio-political contexts/constructs in Mexico City and Los Angeles, all of which blur the lines between fact/reality, fiction/artifice, and viewer and spectator. In 2004, Okón filmed *Crabby*, the first part of series that examines the ways in which ethnographic documentaries “a la” National Geographic exoticize indigenous communities as the “other.”

Continuing the series with *Lago Bolsena*, the audience appears to have an intimate view of community interaction whose significance is lost to foreigners—the viewer is excluded from this inside joke; however, these actions are created by Okón and the participants as a critique of ethnographic documentaries and to mock those who watch these films, particularly those who use them as a way of judging an unfamiliar community. The video shows scenes of neighborhood residents emerging from an open manhole and practicing primitive tribalistic rituals. The video also depicts a gendered binary in which the male and female characters are filmed separately and engage in gender-specific actions. In the scenes with men and boys, the characters throw rocks at a wall despite a sign with the words *no golpear, no construir* [no bashing, no building] hand-written in permanent marker on the signpost. The intentional inclusion of the sign implies a presumably illiterate society since the men appear oblivious to the words as they act in direct opposition to what the sign commands. Further analysis of the signpost graffiti calls into question the ability of communities to construct their own identities. Hegemonic structures historically deny marginalized communities’ agency and self-determination. In the case of *Lago Bolsena*, the refusal to grant marginalized communities autonomy as im-

plied by the graffiti reflects the lived realities of Santa Julia residents and the effects that visceral depictions of such groups have on the dominant society.

Enforcing stereotypes of indigenous female gender roles, separate scenes depict women and children chanting, grooming each other, and collecting grass. Wide-angle group shots of both male and female characters show them crawling in animal-fashion, grunting, and growling and reveal the construction of artifice as the cameraman is clearly visible. On another level, the video seems to exist outside the constraints of temporal reality. Not only are the contemporary characters exhibiting behavior associated, correctly or falsely, with societies of the ancient past, but the video also has such a disorienting effect on the viewer, perhaps due to the lack of a discernible language and disjointed scenes, that the duration of the film feels much longer than a mere ten minutes. Looping the video obviously adds to the feeling of endlessness as the short film cycles into perpetuity; however, even without the repetition, the structure of the video itself conveys an endless continuity of ridiculous images of marginalized communities.

Bearing in mind that Okón is exhibiting the work for a foreign audience, the motivations behind the piece take on significant implications. Not only is Okón challenging foreign (read: Anglocentric, industrialized, globalized) notions of Mexico, its people and geographic spaces, but also the definition of what constitutes Mexican art. He creates “art defined as a question instead of an answer.”²⁹

Taking the concept of community to a different level, Gustavo Artigas, with his project *Ball Game* (2007), blurs the lines between

29. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 38.

collaboration, performance, and documentation. In addition to presenting a conceptual nuance in the game by aligning the hoop along a vertical axis, the artist provides museum visitors with a fresh perspective on the inner city that is not conflated with romanticism or warped by stereotypes. Through collaboration with the community, Artigas provides a portrait of a *barrio*, which despite being beset by poverty and gang violence refuses to embody a fatalistic attitude and transcends marginalization. Commissioned by Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, Artigas illuminates an oft-stigmatized and stereotyped group of young men of color from the inner-city working collectively for a positive goal. In creating *Ball Game*, the artist collaborated with the Resurrection Basketball League of Southwest-Side Chicago.³⁰ The league represents one of the Health and Safety Initiatives of the Resurrection Project in Chicago, which serves the predominantly Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen, Little Village, and Back of the Yards.³¹ The organization's mission of "[building] relationships and [challenging] people to act on their faith and values to create healthy communities through organizing, education and community development" mirrors Artigas' commitment to forging relationships to create new avenues for social change.³²

The video and lambda prints included in "Escultura Social" evoke the artist's previous sports-themed project, *Rules of the Game* (2000), which consisted of two parts that use sports as a vehicle to critique a militarized border and binary, divisive politics and to

provide a window into two culturally and geographically disparate groups working collaboratively for collective success. The first component of the *Rules of the Game* project involved creating a *frontón* ball court on the Tijuana side of the U.S.-Mexico border directly flush with the border fence, where adolescents played handball over the corrugated metal barrier. The second part depicts adolescents from four teams simultaneously playing basketball and soccer on the same court, in a San Diego gym. As in *Ball Game*, the participating youth seem to enjoy the opportunity to venture outside socially constructed norms for an admittedly entertaining yet challenging experience that has larger implications for social change. Rather than constructing community "a la" Helguera, which is tenuous at best, or using the master's tools to ridicule, if not dismantle the master's house, as with Okón, Artigas' strategy involves collaborating with communities to create fresh and radically different experiences out of familiar contexts, i.e. sports.³³

*Mechanics of "Escultura Social."
Collaboration & Appropriation*

Expressing diverse but concurrent veins in contemporary art, all of the exhibiting artists either deliberately or symptomatically reflect generational currents in terms of art making. Examining the conceptual tactics of collaboration and appropriation reveals that, beyond the geographic nexus of Mexico City, the

30. Ibid., p. 66.

31. <http://www.resurrectionproject.org/display.aspx?pointer=3825> (accessed December 2, 2008).

32. Ibid.

33. The concept of the inefficacy of the oppressed using the strategies of the oppressor to take down the oppressor originates with Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," in *Sister Outsider*, 1984.

transnational artists of “Escultura Social” are bound more by their use of conceptual approaches which traverse identity politics in time-based, three-dimensional and two-dimensional media.

Collaboration

If we view the localized production of “Social Sculpture” from Mexico City artists with Joseph Beuys’s (1921-1986) credo in mind that “everyone is an artist,” it is clear that a degree of organization and contextualization separates art from life in multi-authored works known as collaborations, or co-operations. In the case of “Escultura Social,” not only are there collaborative projects by Carlos Amoraes with Nuevos Ricos, and Los Súper Elegantes with Miguel Calderón; but the “Escultura Social” group as a whole can be considered a cooperative body united by conceptual ties and their interlaced histories. Widholm comments that—consistent with the generational factor—some of the artists have known each other since grade school and that many have worked together to forge new venues for contemporary art. She acknowledges that the “Escultura Social” grouping is a product of artist-driven and collective practices in the 1990s and that the subsequent grassroots infrastructure is a result of the “DIY approach” to curating, promoting, fund-raising and criticism because of a lack of dialogue, galleries and government support.³⁴ In 1993, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, and Damián Ortega among others transformed an urban mansion slated for demolition, known by its address as Temístocles 44, into “a space for

self-education [...] and a space for experimentation, since its future destruction permitted all sorts of direct interventions.”³⁵ Through collective endeavors, the artists in “Escultura Social” have resourcefully and collaboratively built new cultural platforms increasing the visibility and access of art from Mexico City.

Nearly twenty artists comprise the group exhibition, bringing their relationship into question. Are the artists exhibiting as a school or movement? Are they contractually bound by their galleries to exhibit together? What are the conditions of their categorization? Are the only unifying factors the generational link and the somewhat tenuous connection to Mexico City? To shed light on these questions necessitates charting their current gallery representation and a brief history of early projects. Operating as an exhibiting corpus (more than as a space) with an international reputation in the global art market, the Kurimanzutto Gallery represents nearly half of the “Escultura Social” artists including Amoraes, Cruzvillegas, Calderón, Lakra, Guzmán, Damián and Fernando Ortega, and Gabriel Kuri, brother of co-founder José Kuri.

In addition to their current creative practices, the artists’ early educations, both formal and informal, were also collective experiences. World-renowned artist Gabriel Orozco taught Cruzvillegas, Kuri and Dr. Lakra (Jerónimo López—whose father is the Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo), during his in-home Friday workshops, known as the “Taller de los viernes,” in which the artists developed their conceptual foundations. Through these weekly sessions, Orozco exposed the artists to the

34. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 10.

35. Olivier Debroise, “Temístocles 44,” in *The Age of Discrepancies*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006, p. 404.

pedagogy of Beuys, more than a decade before Widholm's seemingly forced adoption of Beuys's Social Sculpture as an influence.³⁶ In the 1990s, many of the artists who had been under the conceptual wing of Orozco created their own artist-run spaces and collectives. Among them, Temístocles 44 emerged in 1992, Okón and Calderón founded La Panadería in 1994, the Guadalajara-based collective Jalarte a.i. appeared in 1997, and Gabriel Orozco, José Kuri, and Mónica Manzutto organized Kurimanzutto in 1999.³⁷

Appropriation

Clearly attempting to come full-circle with the influence of Beuys through Orozco, who curated an exhibition in homage to the influential and mythic German artist in 1987, Widholm not only hispanicizes Beuys's concept of social sculpture by linguistically transforming Social Sculpture into "Escultura Social," but also contextualizes the exhibition under Beuysian topics; "Nature and Culture," "Social Engagement and the Function of Art," "Transforming Everyday Materials and the Word as Image" organize the work of the twenty artists.³⁸ In essence, Widholm transplants Beuys's strategies for contemporary art in order to thematically curate the exhibition in an updated geographic and generational context. Providing the scaffolding for the theoretical and spatial organization of the exhibition, Beuys is more than referenced; his ideas are appropriated to didactically interpret the conceptual artworks.

Beyond the scope of social sculpture as defined by Joseph Beuys, the tactic of appropriation was explored in the 1980s by artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. Under the auspices of feminist artistic strategies, appropriation was more than a critique of ownership and originality. The appropriationists sought to examine marginalized authors (women in particular) in the ultimate form of masquerade; a seamless theft and adoption was similarly explored in Brazilian modernism (1920s-1930s), specifically in Tarsila do Amaral and Osvaldo de Andrade's concept of Anthropophagy, where the idea of ingesting dominant culture surfaced as a critical and undermining form of representation. Appropriation gave artists a new tool for exploring subjectivities under the guise of a dominant authorship. When Sherrie Levine photographed the 1925 works of Edward Weston in 1980, representing them as hers, not only were the ethics and value of art put into question, but also a new conceptual strategy had become available for artists to undermine existing power relationships.

Considering the role of appropriation in "Escultura Social," this conceptual tactic diverts attention from the maker, to larger cultural and historical frameworks. In other words, the exhibition does not present the artists as contemporary masters from Mexico. The exhibition deemphasizes the artists' level of skill and biographies instead of lauding their talents as artists and assigning their place in the pantheon of Mexican artists. The exhibition, its curatorial statement and the democratically rationed space focus on social engagement, rather than a hierarchy of artists and media. At the Museo Alameda, the idea of sharing space was twofold, as artists who engaged in appropriation also shared their cultural platform with the source of their appropriations.

36. Debroise, "Temístocles", p. 392.

37. Widholm, *Escultura Social*, p. 32.

38. Debroise, "Temístocles", p. 384.

Behind the walls of Artigas's videotaped and photographed inner-city basketball game, Yoshua Okón's project engages viewers to imagine other's imaginations in the previously mentioned *Lago Bolsena*. Shot in the impoverished Santa Julia neighborhood, Okón's home-made production appropriates the National Geographic formula of representing tribal communities. It should be noted that Okón's appropriation does not function as *indigenismo* or *neoindigenismo*, claiming or re-examining pre-Columbian cultural inheritance. Appropriating documentary in tongue-and-cheek ethnography, the three-channel video installation simultaneously provides manufactured glimpses of the "primitive" willing participants of Santa Julia. In no way do Okón or the residents of Santa Julia create a representation for tourists. *Lago Bolsena* is a critical self-reflection demystifying, through humor and in broad daylight, the feared neighborhood of Santa Julia.

Moving beyond the unauthorized intellectual theft implicit in the term, appropriation is a useful conceptual approach that does not function as shock value in the work exhibited in "Escultura Social." The technique is most subtle in the work of María Alós, whose two videos and opening performance incorporate official voices (hired greeters) to carry out an experiment in sincerity.³⁹ While not participating in the performance herself and thus removing the pathos of the artist, Alós directed the actors to incorporate standard cordial language, systematically maintaining public relations by welcoming and wishing everyone well upon arriving to and departing

39. According to Ríos, the performers were hired by Jump Start, a local non-profit arts organization in San Antonio, Texas. Eliseo Ríos, interview with Rebecca Gómez and Edward Hayes Jr., digital recording, December 2, 2008.

from the exhibition. Beyond the institutional appropriation, Alós removed the human interaction completely, looping a greeting and farewell statement at the respective points of entrance and departure. Verging on the possibilities of invasiveness, and between sincerity and insincerity, her project charts the institutionalization of customs and the ambiguity of museum-patron relations.

Appropriating Text and Language

Located among the artists under Widholm's "Transformation of Everyday Materials" category, Gabriel Kuri could have been placed under "Text and Language." Kuri's *Untitled (Gobelino empalmado)* of 2006 is text and textile, data and object, form and information. The information from a pharmacy receipt was transferred to a Gobelin, twelve feet in height. In producing the work, Kuri outsourced the seventeenth-century French tradition to master weavers in Guadalajara, transforming the everyday document into a fine, hand-woven tapestry. Once an impermanent record of a monetary transaction identifying Kuri as the consumer, the pharmacy receipt paradoxically hangs as an enduring commodity.

Appropriation, a lynchpin of post-modern experiments in contemporary art, intertwines the text-based works of Julieta Aranda, Stefan Brüggemann, and Mario García Torres with the Kurimanzutto-based artists of "Escultura Social." Operating in a similar vein, Brüggemann's neon scribble crowns the modest and insignificant marks with objecthood. Using the commercial tubes for neon signage, the scribble, not unlike Kuri's receipt, paradoxically overcomes banality though its transformation in durable materials. The second textual work

by Brüggemann synchronizes its font and materiality with exhibition text by using black vinyl appliqué. In *Explanations* (2002), declarations in capital letters and, significantly, in British-inflected English with no Spanish translation, read ALL MY IDEAS ARE IMPORTED, ALL MY PRODUCTS ARE EXPORTED and (ALL MY EXPLANATIONS ARE RUBBISH). Interestingly, the bilingual Museo Alameda does not translate any of the English texts into Spanish. Perhaps expecting their work to be translated from their native language, all of the artists who incorporate text have taken this task upon themselves. The act of appropriating a dominant language reflects decisions that lie between targeting foreign audiences (us-American collectors) and acts of self-determination, definition, and translation.

Continuing the theme of appropriation, Julieta Aranda exhibited *Untitled* (2007) [fig. 1], also known as *Coloring Book*, or “fill in the squares with the indicated color.” Although “untitled,” the artwork ironically consists of a collection of appropriated commercial paint titles applied to the exhibition wall in black vinyl in a similar appliqué of the medium as Brüggemann’s *Explanations*. Left-aligned below the lower left-hand corner of each empty rectangle, a few of the 48 references to titles of house paint in English read: *Dark as Night, First Light, Heart’s Content, Siesta, Cityscape, Fond Farewell, Rain Drop, Just Barely, Vanity, Submarine, Mom’s Lipstick, Sweet Nothings, Innuendo, and Honesty*. *Untitled*, in photographic terms, is a collection of indices and an exercise for the mind (confounded or imaginative) with its absence of colors. What does an “Echo” look like? How can one ascribe a color to the phrase “*Bon Voyage*”? The confusing lexicon plays with what Aranda refers to as society’s “logic of

desire.” In a recent artist statement, Aranda explains that “since circulation networks tend to follow the logic of desire, I think that by interfering in them it is possible to complicate the exchanges and interject a measure of productive confusion into the prevalent modes and models of operation.”⁴⁰ Appropriating the names from a color chart, Aranda proposes an inverted nomenclature. Through this collection, Aranda takes ownership of didactic text and semantically, through a subtractive intervention, disrupts the logic of desire for an anarchic moment.

Conclusion

Rather than clinging to an irrelevant and dated sense of nationalism, “Escultura Social” reflects the tenets of trans-nationalism and post-colonialism in a global contemporary art context. The works are not bound by an entrenched relationship to *mexicanidad* or the semiotics of Mexican identity despite the labeling of the exhibition as “Mexican art.”⁴¹ Interim Executive Director Ríos asserts that the artists move beyond the notion of national identity into trans-cultural discourse. Ríos emphatically recalls the scene of the exhibition’s opening, in which a predominantly young and Latino crowd of 1 400 interacted with the Alós performance and grooved to the rhythms of a rooftop DJ. Acknowledging communities as creative bodies, capable of

40. Julieta Aranda, “Galerie Michael Janssen Berlin presents Julieta Aranda,” 2008. Re-title.com: International contemporary art listings guide and directory of artists worldwide: <http://www.retitle.com/exhibitions/galeriemichaeljanssenberlin.asp> (accessed October 7, 2008).

41. Robert Fitzpatrick, *Escultura Social*, p. 9.

overcoming token representation through the conceptual tactics of collaboration and appropriation, the artists in “Escultura Social” utilize their work to demonstrate how they have moved beyond the geographic nexus of

Mexico City into a global artistic paradigm. The transnational artists included in “Escultura Social” overcome the trappings of identity and express the innovative trends of the post-millennium contemporary art world.