





























































The Organization of American States, founded in 1948 and operating from 1951, was the linchpin for the Inter-American System. The mandate of Gómez Sicre, director of the Visual Arts Section of PAU, was to use the resources at his disposal to foster amity and understanding among the nations and peoples of the hemisphere by encouraging frequent interchanges of artists and critics, by issuing publications on the arts, by lending support to the most promising and original creators of the region, by sponsoring exhibitions in the United States and abroad, and by advocating in miscellaneous ways for freedom of expression.<sup>55</sup> With the financial resources and network of contacts of OAS behind him and by dint of his personal drive and intelligence, in the 1950s and early 60s he reigned as the most important North American critic and curator of Latin American Art.

Gómez Sicre is occasionally dismissed as a mere agent of US diplomacy, and the art he promoted as an instrument of Cold War politics, or even of North American imperialism.<sup>56</sup> However this portrayal is quite unjustified. Although an opponent of Communism, he was an individual of refined sensibilities, respectful of artistic and critical independence, and one who had no wish to impose North American artistic styles on the diversified cultures of Latin America or to force the artists of the region into a condition of dependency on North American patronage and critical taste; although he did recognize the United States' role as "natural center" within an emergent

---

*Panamericanismo*, Buenos Aires, Roque Depalma, 1961; Gordon Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, London, Oxford University Press, 1966. For the movement in its earlier period, see Ricardo Pérez Montfort, "Indigenismo, hispanismo y panamericanismo en la cultura popular mexicana de 1920 a 1940," in Roberto Blancarte (ed.), *Cultura e identidad nacional*, pp. 343-383; and Sebastiaan Faber, "La hora ha llegado: Hispanism, Pan-Americanism, and the Hope of Spanish/American Glory (1938-1948)," in Mabel Moraña (ed.), *Ideologies of Hispanism*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2005, pp. 62-104.

55. The Department of Cultural Affairs of PAU contained two sections: Visual Arts and Music, and two divisions: Philosophy, Letters and Sciences, and Education, each with their own subsections.

56. For example, in Alejandro Anreus, "Gómez Sicre and the 'Idea' of Latin American Art," *Art Journal*, vol. 64, no. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 83-84. The internationalization of Abstract Expressionism in the interest of Cold War politics is argued by Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, University of Chicago Press, 1983, and Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 10, June 1974, pp. 39-41; cf. David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to 'American' Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, pp. 44-63, and his *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

hemispherical culture.<sup>57</sup> He thought broadly about the region and its art, and hoped to encourage a lively and fertile dialogue among the artists and critics of the Latin countries. Marta Traba called him “the prime defender of a continental art and the first one capable of conceiving it panoramically, as a conjunction of sentiment...”<sup>58</sup>

Admittedly there exists an element of truth in the argument that Gómez Sicre, even if not a chest-thumping imperialist, served through his actions to place Latin artists under US cultural hegemony and weaken national art movements.<sup>59</sup> Despite his broad mindedness he made no bones about his anti-Communism and openly wished to break social realism’s hold on Latin American art, not only because he thought it restrained creativity but also for the reason that it tended to support leftist political movements. It may further be observed that Gómez Sicre held an important post at PAU and subscribed to the fundamental goals, which included the spread of political rights, freedom of expression and other tenets of democracy, and the development of an international civic society in the Americas. But the idea that anti-Communism,

57. José Gómez Sicre, “Trends—Latin America,” *Art in America*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1959, p. 23: “Whether figurative or non-objective, the new Latin American painters are in search of a style that can be shared by the entire hemisphere. The United States, as the richest and most developed country, must be a major source of leadership and the natural center in the culture that will benefit all nations of the continent.” The Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo claimed that among the crucial factors in the development of a new Latin American artist was the support of progressive critics, and identified Gómez Sicre as the most prescient guide along this route; De Szyszlo, cited in Damián Bayón (ed.), *El artista latinoamericano y su identidad*, Caracas, Monte Ávila Editores, 1977, p. 37. For Cuevas’s defense of Gómez Sicre, see Cuevas, *Cuevario*, pp. 112ff., and his *Cuevas por Cuevas*, pp. 112-114.

58. Marta Traba, “Nueva versión del lobo y Caperucita” (1975), in *Marta Traba*, p. 334: “No puedo dejar de mencionar en calidad de motor de impulso de la década, el trabajo prolijo de Gómez Sicre en la Unión Panamericana, quien fue el primer defensor de un arte continental y el primero capaz de concebirlo panorámicamente, como un conjunto de sentido...” Traba connects the decline of Gómez Sicre’s influence in the 1960s to the more general erosion of the authority of OAS in the hemisphere. Traba’s own cosmopolitan perspective is studied in Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, “Marta Traba: Internationalism or Regional Resistance?”, *Art Journal*, vol. 64, no. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 87-89.

59. Eva Cockcroft, “Los Estados Unidos y el arte latinoamericano de compromiso social,” in *El espíritu latinoamericano: arte y artistas en los Estados Unidos, 1920-1970*, New York, Museo de Artes del Bronx, 1989, pp. 184-221. She highlights the importance of OAS in introducing Latin American art to the United States and places it within Cold War politics as a mechanism for the construction of North American hegemony.

democracy and interdependence are simply code words for imperialism, as some have argued, or that OAS functioned merely as a tool of US foreign policy, are highly debatable positions, as is the inference that Gómez Sicre and Cuevas were obliging stooges of the North Americans in their grab for power.

One may rather set Cuevas within a web of institutions that took shape in the 1950s and promoted a hemispheric artistic culture, at the center of which sat Gómez Sicre, with tentacles on the many strings. For PAU was only one piece, albeit a crucial piece, within a consortium of institutions that contributed to the cultural unification of Latin America. Brought into the fold were numerous art galleries and museums spread around the hemisphere, beginning with the PAU Art Gallery, and extending to such institutions as the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Art at Houston, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Walker Art Center of Minneapolis, Museo de Arte Moderno of Bogotá, Instituto de Arte Contemporáneo of Lima, Taller Libre de Arte of Caracas, and in Buenos Aires the Galería Bonino, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella and Museo de Arte Moderno. In Mexico there were the private galleries Prisse and Proteo, plus those of Antonio Souza (est. 1956) and Juan Martín (est. 1961), the briefly lived El Eco, directed by Cuevas's close friend Mathias Goeritz, the Casa del Lago, and the Museo de Arte Moderno.<sup>60</sup>

Many of these institutions were wholly or partly independent of government, and beholden to private industry for financial support—IBM, General Electric, W. R. Grace & Co., Acero del Pacífico, Alcoa Steamship Company, and particularly the oil conglomerates, most of all Esso corporation (today's ExxonMobil) and its Latin American affiliates, were strong supporters of the modern art movement.<sup>61</sup> The Rockefeller family, which controlled Esso and stood behind MoMA, was enormously influential. Nelson Rockefeller, in addition to being a patron and collector of Latin American art, was one of the key architects of the Inter-American System; and in 1965 David Rockefeller

60. During the Second World War, Lincoln Kirstein toured Latin America as representative of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Department of State, laying the groundwork for future collaborations. Exhibitions from MoMA's collection were occasionally sent on tour to the South; see Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 9, May 1973, pp. 43-54, and Shifra Goldman, "La pintura mexicana en el decenio de la confrontación: 1955-1965," *Plural* (Mexico City), no. 85, October 1978, pp. 34-44.

61. IBM Corporation assembled a significant collection of Latin American art and presented at PAU in April-May 1955. Other corporations formed collections, among them Braniff Airlines, with whom Cuevas's father had been employed as a pilot.

founded the Center for Inter-American Relations, New York, now operating as the Americas Society, which ran an important exhibition space.<sup>62</sup> Philanthropic organizations (e.g. Guggenheim Foundation, American Council of Education) as well as universities and colleges in the United States and Latin America distributed grants to progressive artists, exhibited their work, and gave them employment—for example, Cuevas held solo shows at the Universidad de Costa Rica (1967), Museo Universitario of Mexico City (1970), and Museo de Arte Moderno attached to the Universidad de Bogotá (1973), taught for brief periods at the Philadelphia School of Art, San Jose State College (now University) and Fullerton College, was supported by the Ford Foundation in 1965, and received private grants for residencies in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington and New York.

Gómez Sicre, as one of the presiding figures in this hemispherical art system, together with Traba and Romero Brest, was often asked to organize exhibitions or sponsor meetings and exchanges, and gave special attention to a select number of artists from different countries whom he considered most representative of the new progressive spirit (besides Cuevas, others within this privileged circle were Fernando de Szyszlo of Peru, Alejandro Obregón of Colombia and Armando Morales of Nicaragua). Exhibitions curated or facilitated by him were circulated in the US and Latin America and often funded by private corporations.<sup>63</sup> Among the larger shows of this type were the

62. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Nelson Rockefeller each amassed collections of Latin American art and underwrote the Museum of Modern Art's Rockefeller Fund and Inter-American Purchase Fund. In August 1940 Roosevelt created the Office for the Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics, soon renamed the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), headed by Nelson Rockefeller. This office closely cooperated with the State Department's Division of Cultural Relations. Rodman Rockefeller's Inter-American Foundation for the Arts, established in 1963, co-sponsored and exhibited "Magnet: New York" at the Bonino Gallery, featuring Latin American artists living in New York. For David Rockefeller's Americas Society, see Beverly Adams, "Latin American Art at the Americas Society: A Principality of Its Own," in José Luis Falconi and Gabriela Rangel (eds.), *A Principality of Its Own: 40 Years of Visual Arts at the Americas Society*, New York, Americas Society, 2006, pp. 24-41.

63. Federico Morais, "Ideología de las bienales e imperialismo artístico," in *Arte latinoamericano (etapa republicana): selección de lecturas*, Havana, Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1987, pp. 221-243, argues that international exhibitions overwhelmingly favored the artists and critical standards of imperialist nations, such as the United States, and served to perpetuate their cultural supremacy.

international competition sponsored by the Alcoa Steamship Company, with a series of local exhibitions in cities where the sponsor maintained port facilities, and culminating in an exhibition at the National Academy of Design, New York, in September 1955; the Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition, financed by the engineering firm of Brown & Root, Inc., which opened at the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, April-May 1956, and then traveled to several venues in the United States; the three American Biennials of Art (*Bienales Americanas de Arte*), 1962-66, underwritten by *Industrias Kaiser Argentina* and held in Córdoba, Argentina, the home base of the corporation, before being taken to the PAU Art Gallery in Washington, and from there to other U.S. sites;<sup>64</sup> and the 1962 exhibition titled *Three Thousand Years of Colombian Art* (*Tres Mil Años de Arte Colombiano*), funded by the International Petroleum Company, and shown in Bogotá, Miami and Washington. However the most ambitious of these enterprises was the *Salon of Young Artists* (*Salón de Artistas Jóvenes*), 1964-1965, sponsored by the Esso companies of Latin America. This exhibition of artists under forty years of age from eighteen countries marked the 75th anniversary of the Inter-American System. The process of selection took place in two stages: the first involved local exhibitions and the awarding of national prizes, and the second a show of national prize-winners at PAU, in April-May 1965, and the bestowal of international awards. Over 300 artists participated in this “Inter-American event,” as Gómez Sicre described it, and in the catalogue he affirmed the private stimulus behind the project: “Of singular significance was the fact that it was private industry—the capitalist initiative of a free world—that was thus seeking to foster the things of the spirit by an undertaking with broad cultural repercussions.”<sup>65</sup>

64. Andrea Giunta, “*Bienales Americanas de Arte: una alianza entre arte e industria*,” in Gustavo Curiel (ed.), *Patrocinio, colección y circulación de las artes*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1997, pp. 725-756.

65. José Gómez Sicre, “Introduction,” in *Salón Esso de Artistas Jóvenes*, Washington, D.C., Pan American Union, 1965, quoted in Anreus, “Gómez Sicre and the ‘Idea’ of Latin American Art,” pp. 83-84. The catalogue also contained a prefatory letter by Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson, wife of the U.S. President, which expressed the same sentiments. The jury consisted of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (Museum of Modern Art), Thomas M. Messer (Guggenheim Museum), and Gustave von Groschwitz (Carnegie Institute). Among the conferences organized by Gómez Sicre was the Second Symposium of the Inter-American Committee of 1963. It convened in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, and brought together creative individuals from many countries of the hemisphere, among them the painters Motherwell and De Szyszlo and the graphic artist Cuevas. Some of the participants, Cuevas being one, were later flown to New York and



Mexico's preliminary show was held at the Museo de Arte Moderno in early 1965, as Competition of Young Artists of Mexico (Concurso de Artistas Jóvenes de México), but more popularly called Salon Esso. Today most historians identify this show as marking the full arrival of avant-garde art in the country. However, at the time the event stirred up blistering controversy. To begin with, there was the charge of favoritism in the awarding of first prize to Fernando García Ponce, brother of one of the judges. But in fact no group appeared very satisfied with the exhibition. Leftists such as Raquel Tibol and Luis Arenal denounced the attention it gave to non-political artists, while conservatives such as Federico Cantú and Francisco Moreno Capdevila, along with Francisco Icaza of the Nueva Presencia group, bemoaned the display of non-representational art and the honoring of García Ponce, who was an abstractionist. Amid the almost palpable tension at the award ceremony, Cuevas impulsively yelled out that García Ponce was greater than Orozco, provoking a hostile group to surround him. "Go back to Washington, traitor!" (*¡Lárgate a Washington, traidor!*), "Sold to the OAS!" (*¡Vendido a la OEA!*), they screamed in his ear, as he and Icaza got into a pushing match. Soon after the incident, the journal *Político* issued an editorial portraying Cuevas and Gómez Sicre as unwitting agents of imperialism.<sup>66</sup> This was not the first time that this charge had been leveled. Cuevas felt the sting of the same insult in earlier exchanges with Siqueiros and during visits to South America; and Gómez Sicre had been similarly condemned in 1959 by Celestino Gorostiza, head of the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), who asked the government to investigate his activities "en contra de la pintura mexicana."<sup>67</sup>

---

Washington, where they met with Senator Hubert Humphrey and President Kennedy; see Juan García Ponce, "De nuevas y viejas fronteras (crónica de viaje)," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, vol. 18, January 1964, pp. 6-12.

66. Anonymous, "Una pintura para la 'Standard Oil,'" *Política*, February 15, 1965, clipping in Cuevas Archive.

67. Cuevas, *Gato macho*, p. 145. Leading the attack against Cuevas were Leopoldo Méndez, José Chávez Morado, Raúl Anguiano and Sánchez Arriola, who noted his close connection with the United States and Pan American Union. Siqueiros repeatedly charged Gómez Sicre with plotting to undermine the mural movement; for example, in a lecture titled "The Yankee Imperialist Conspiracy Against the Mexican Pictorial Movement," given at the Universidad Obrera de México, Mexico City, October 16, 1953, typescript in the Archive of the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City, published in his *La historia de una insidia, ¿quienes son los traidores de la patria?: mi respuesta*, 2nd ed., Mexico City, Ediciones de "Arte Público," 1985 (originally published 1960).

At stake was an autonomous national art dedicated to the interests of the Mexican people, which for many of Cuevas's critics included the socialist program of the Revolution, itself under threat from a succession of pro-capitalist governments and conservative leaders. Thus the rebuke leveled at Cuevas and Gómez Sicre represented an attempt to hold onto a political ideal. But the tide of events was inexorably driving this ideal out to sea, as the revolutionary outlook and the social art it commanded became increasingly untenable under the pressures of modernization and internationalization. Although this process was clearly abetted by North American institutions operating under the requirements of Cold War politics, it is unlikely that Mexican isolationism in politics and the arts could have been sustained deeply into the late twentieth century even had there been no such direct and coordinated intervention.

*Internationalism, independence and art of resistance*

Access to modern means of transportation—particularly travel by air—helped artists transcend national boundaries (fig. 11). Gómez Sicre drew attention to the importance of travel, arguing that it put artists in contact with one another and opened new markets to them, so they could begin to pry themselves loose from governmental patronage. He further pointed to the complementary growth of public and private art institutions that fostered diversity, openness and cross-fertilization.<sup>68</sup> Cuevas was exemplary in taking advantage of these opportunities. As we have seen, he traveled widely in Europe and the Americas and exhibited at a variety of sites. However he was by no means the only Latin artist to venture from his home base. Many members of the avant-garde, such as Botero, Ramírez Villamizar, Del Villar, Negret, Grau and Obregón, made frequent trips abroad. In the decade of the 1950s, Latin artists routinely traveled to the European art centers of Paris and Madrid, and to New York and other points in the United States.<sup>69</sup> Just as significant was their circulation within their own region, which allowed them to share artistic and critical

68. José Gómez Sicre, "Nota editorial," *Boletín de Artes Visuales*, vol. 5, May-December 1959, pp. 1-3.

69. For Latin American artists in the United States, see *El espíritu latinoamericano: arte y artistas en los Estados Unidos, 1920-1970*, New York, Museo de Artes del Bronx, 1989.



11. Photograph of Cuevas with the artists Ramírez Villamizar, Enrique Grau and Edgar Negret, Bogotá, Colombia, March 1958. Photo: Museo José Luis Cuevas, Mexico City.

ideas peculiar to Latin America, and to form a Latin consciousness and a more positive self-estimation.<sup>70</sup>

Cuevas was well served by the art market and able to make a living by selling his art through commercial galleries, which freed him from reliance on governmental support. This gave him the liberty to say what he wanted, to criticize official institutions without putting his livelihood at risk, and to be

70. Notwithstanding the new possibilities for cross-border travel and exchanges, Traba, in 1965, would still complain of a widespread parochialism in Latin American art: “La revisión de la cultura debe convertirse, hoy día, en una actitud general americana. Todos nuestros países han seguido el mismo proceso de cierre de fronteras culturales, en parte, alegando con razón que en Latinoamérica los países son geográficamente comunicables, lo cual levanta vallas definitivas entre cultura y cultura, pero en parte también por otro motivo menos claro y confesable, tal vez hasta involuntario: por el temor de que las confrontaciones pusieran al descubierto fallas provinciales, debilidades flagrantes que dentro de los inciensados ámbitos locales no eran ni siquiera perceptibles”; Marta Traba, “Proposición crítica sobre el arte colombiano” (1965), in *Marta Traba*, p. 139.

the self-governed creator that the character Juan in the parable of the Cactus Curtain had set out to become.<sup>71</sup>

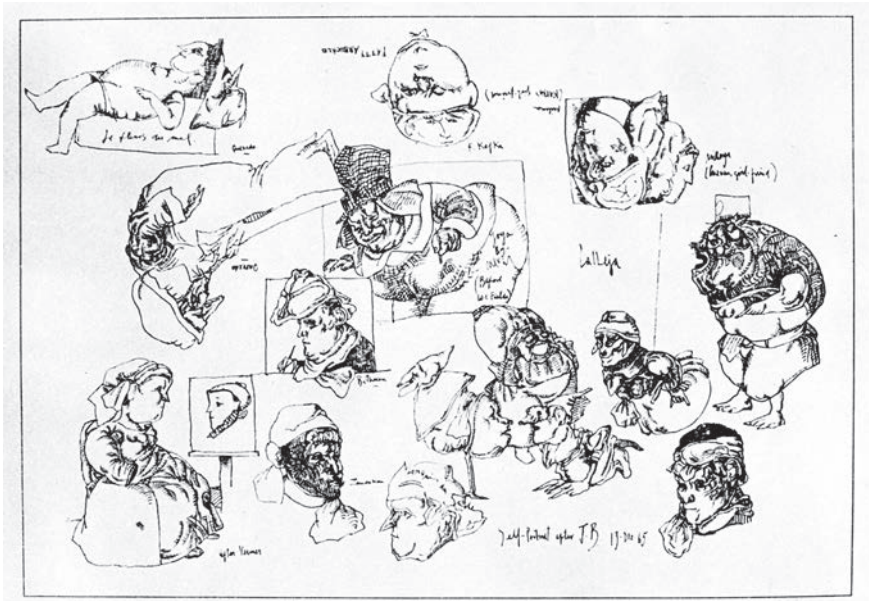
Ever the subject of controversy, he attracted criticism for this very independence and freedom of movement, and found himself unfairly accused of being an essentially foreign artist who had gained wealth and fame from external sources of patronage and had become demexicanized in character and art. While it is true that he prospered abroad as much as at home (for instance, his illustrated books from 1959 to 1972 were all published outside Mexico), he strenuously insisted on his Mexican roots and emphasized the local origins of his art, declaring in one interview: “While I paint, I am an eminently Mexican painter, and in my work there appears in an obsessive manner the personal mythology created as a result of my Mexican experiences.”<sup>72</sup>

Fully Mexican in his style of life and personal investment in the local culture, Cuevas nonetheless felt a troubling ambivalence about his native land. Continuing in the same interview quoted above, he announced, “However, in addition, for me Mexico is a world of terror and of horror, and to give it life in this world I need the perspective of distance. Before the monster, I cry, I become agitated, but I don’t work. Instead, from afar, I have the tranquility necessary to create.”<sup>73</sup> Mexico exercised an oppressive effect. There he felt under pressure, under scrutiny, assailed by hostile critics and required to live on the defensive—“Kafkahuamilpa” was his original epithet for the country’s inquisitorial climate. As noted by Alaíde Foppa, in conversations with her he frequently alluded to Mexico as a source of frustration and torment: “Mexico suffocates me” (*México me asfixia*), “I can’t tolerate this country” (*Ya no tolero este país*), “I feel closed in like on an island” (*Me siento encerrado como en una*

71. This point is stressed in José Gómez Sicre, “Para la pintura,” and by Cuevas himself in an interview with Sonia Iniesta, “José Cuevas: el pintor rebelde, apasionado,” unidentified periodical, March 20, 1963, clipping in Cuevas Archive.

72. Cuevas, interview with Malkah Rabell, “Cuevas siendo la ‘vendetta,’” *Excelsior* (Mexico City), December 16, 1962, clipping in Cuevas Archive: “Mientras pinto, soy un pintor eminentemente mexicano y en mi obra aparece de manera obsesiva la mitología personal creada como resultado de mis experiencias mexicanas.” Similar affirmations were made in a letter to Raquel Tibol of May 15, 1964, published in his *Cuevas por Cuevas*, pp. 98–102, and in José Luis Cuevas, “Ataque con virulencia el arte folklórico, superficial y ramplón,” in *Ruptura, 1952-1962*, Mexico City, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1988, p. 83.

73. *Excelsior*, ibidem, “Pero, por lo demás, para mí, México es un mundo de terror y de horror y para darle vida a ese mundo, necesito la perspectiva de la distancia. Frente al monstruo, grito, me altero, pero no trabajo. En cambio, de lejos, tengo el sosiego necesario para crear.”



12. José Luis Cuevas, *The Phantasms of Charenton* (*Los fantasmas de Charenton*), 1965, lithograph. Museo José Luis Cuevas, Mexico City. Photo: Museo José Luis Cuevas, Mexico City.

*isla*), “I think I’ll never return” (*Pienso no volver*).<sup>74</sup> Further complicating this relationship were his physical maladies, for in Mexico City he suffered from the smog, altitude and changeable climate, making daily life a misery and prodding him to flee to a more salubrious locale. Yet Mexico was his inescapable home and point of origin, and the constant wellspring for his work. Though his art was one of fusion and appropriation and his imaginative worlds filled with characters from world literature and diverse streams of popular culture—Kafka and Rembrandt, the Marquis de Sade and Fatty Arbuckle cohabit in the vacant spaces of his drawings (fig. 12)—at root was a deep feeling for Mexican society and vivid memories of early experiences in the country; these were ever present no matter which subject he chose to illustrate.<sup>75</sup>

Much as Cuevas benefited from patrons and sponsors in the United States, he refused to assimilate to North American culture or conform to its artistic

74. Foppa, *Confesiones*, p. 115.

75. Cuevas’s interest in local traditions is studied in José Gómez Sicre, “Cuevas y la tradición mexicana,” *El Imparcial* (Guatemala), June 1, 1957, clipping in Cuevas Archive.

trends. Quite the opposite, he resisted actively and with characteristic pugnacity the totalizing and dominating discourse issued from the North. In 1959 he began a campaign against abstractionist tendencies imported into Mexico and Latin America, and urged artists of the South to develop a figurative art that would best represent their independent culture.<sup>76</sup> In this desire to strengthen the Latin American voice, he allied himself with Traba's notion of a "culture of resistance," which opposed equally the parochialism of local taste and the homogenizing effect of global discourses.<sup>77</sup> Traba argued for the development of authentic regional languages of art criticism, which can evade the reigning meta-language that originates in and is addressed to a non-Latin social context. And she asked artists to invent modes of representation that were original to the continent and suitable to the culture and experiences of the region. With these positions Cuevas was in full accord.<sup>78</sup>

76. Cuevas spoke out against abstraction in a lecture at the Escuela de Historia del Arte of the Universidad Iberoamericana, May 1960. Dr. Alvar Carrillo Gil defended the abstract artists against this challenge in the pages of *México en la Cultura*, and a polemical exchange between the two ensued; see Alvar Carrillo Gil, "Carta abierta a José Luis Cuevas," *México en la Cultura*, supplement to *Novedades* (Mexico City), July 10, 1960; José Luis Cuevas, "Respuesta de Cuevas al Doctor Carrillo Gil," *México en la Cultura*, July 17, 1960; Carrillo Gil, "Vigencia y porvenir del arte abstracto," *México en la Cultura*, July 24, 1960; Carrillo Gil, "Vigencia y porvenir del arte abstracto, respuesta del Dr. Carrillo Gil a José Luis Cuevas. II y último," *México en la Cultura*, August 7, 1960; and (by an anonymous writer) "Pintura, realismo y abstraccionismo," *Política*, August 1, 1960, pp. 50-51; clippings of these articles may be found in the Cuevas Archive. Dr. Carrillo Gil had been an early patron of Cuevas, but after this disagreement he sold all the artist's drawings that he had collected.

77. Traba, *Dos décadas vulnerables*, offers a sustained critique—informed by the Marxist theory of Marcuse and Adorno—of North American cultural imperialism, and an argument for the recuperation of Latin American values. She writes: "Teniendo en cuenta que el proceso del arte moderno y actual ha sido fraguado en dos metrópolis, primero París y luego Nueva York, y ha servido incondicionalmente a un proyecto imperialista destinado a descalificar las provincias culturales y a unificar los productos artísticos en un conjunto engañosamente homogéneo que tiende a fundar una cultura planetaria, nuestra existencia artística ni siquiera se plantea como una probabilidad"; Traba, *Dos décadas*, quoted in *Marta Traba*, p. 12. Cuevas himself commented: "Marta Traba y yo, en cambio, defendimos un arte de 'resistencia,' o sea, un arte que resiste las influencias de las modas pictóricas que imponen Nueva York o Europa"; Cuevas, quoted in Bernardo Ponce, *José Luis Cuevas*, p. 27. Largely critical of Traba's thesis is Damián Bayón: for example, in various passages in *El artista latinoamericano*, and in his "El espléndido no-conformismo de Marta Traba," in *Marta Traba*, p. 13.

78. David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art," writes: "Progressive artists from Nicaragua, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America understood Abstract Expres-



The oddest thing about Cuevas's art is that it is extremely personal and introspective yet constantly touched by outer stimuli. The images are projections of private thoughts and by the same account reflections on a large range of sources, chiefly literary. The nodal point is located in the living consciousness of the artist, of course, which blends his own rich memories and moods with the thoughts, images and even the personalities of authors he reads; hence the fixation on his own biography and mental and physical processes, as evidenced in his immense archive of personal documents, in the photographs he has compulsively taken of himself on every day of his mature life, and in countless other eccentricities.<sup>79</sup> Cuevas is frequently accused of narcissism. But this is a mistaken view which takes in only one side of his art, the self-reflective part, when in fact the work involves both a projection outward and a reception inward, in such a way that the imagery is suspended between selfhood and otherness, identity and non-identity, being and non-being.<sup>80</sup>

There are points of correspondence between Sartrean existentialism and Cuevas's aesthetic and political position, and in fact it sometimes seems he may have consciously modeled his actions on existentialist principles. For the French philosopher, consciousness has no fixed or absolute definition but arises from our individual encounter with the world about us. We become ourselves through what we do and what we apprehend, and the wider our field of experience the larger and deeper the dimension of our conscious being. And so we choose to be who we are, and our selfhood is necessarily constituted in the

---

sionism in much more sophisticated terms than that of any monolithic 'cultural imperialism'. For these artists, many of whom are unquestionably revolutionaries, Abstract Expressionism signifies an *art of the Americas* grounded in the cultural practices of Native Americans, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics, as well as in those of the European avant-garde." Yet the fact that many abstract painters in the U.S. and Latin America were politically liberal or even leftist, did not prevent others from perceiving abstraction, particularly Abstract Expressionism, as a pernicious form of cultural imperialism.

79. Traba, *Los signos de vida*, p. 28, writes: "Parecería, en una apreciación superficial, que la obra se aleja de la vida, pero no es así. Los escritores existen por la mediación de la gente de carne y hueso que son sus amigos entrañables. Kafka es Gómez Sicre en la misma forma que Quevedo es Xirau, indivisibles. La personificación del mundo, para Cuevas, llega a tales extremos, que también las ciudades se convierten en gente concreta. En su geografía biográfica, para poner sólo un ejemplo, Caracas sería la crítica Clara Sujo y los pintores Alejandro Otero y Oswaldo Vigas. Las cosas quedan incrustadas a la gente, y la gente es la vida; porque no hay más vida que la humana."

80. These themes are discussed by the poet Manuel Ulacia, "Los diálogos de José Luis Cuevas," *Galería* (Madrid), vol. 3, March 1989, pp. 22-29.

realm of freedom. To deny or avoid this freedom is to resign ourselves falsely to another will or principle and to pretend that our selfhood is not of our own making; it is, in Sartrean terms, an act of “bad faith.” In agreement with these philosophical postulates, Cuevas maintained that it is the artist’s duty to strive for authenticity, to repudiate “bad faith,” and to enrich himself and his expression by exploring the world openly and profoundly.

Cuevas represented a neo-humanism that did not aspire to save humanity as did the social art of Siqueiros. He refused to work within the confines of any organized movement or interest group, and rarely entered into political discussions. Yet he interrogated the grand premises and collective thinking of ruling institutions in an incisive and comprehensive way. By exposing the fragility, weakness, and instability of human subjects, he put in doubt the ideals of personal virtue and social progress which stood behind the myth of Mexican greatness (*La grandeza de México*) and the national revolutionary project.<sup>81</sup> Of course, he was not the only artist to contest the reigning systems of art patronage and the parochial values they clung to. In the same period, fellow Mexicans—Gironella, Corzas, Vlady—and artists from lands to the south—De Szyszlo, Grau, Negret—similarly took new directions. But he was one of the most forceful polemicists of his generation, one of the most fiercely independent creators, and one who moved adeptly through the institutions that supported alternative modes of expression; and for these reasons he became exemplary of a “new” type of artist and identified with a new cosmopolitanism in Latin art.

On one occasion Cuevas declared: “I am the one Mexican who fights for the affirmation of the ‘I’ in the present, not in the future. The Mexican doesn’t like to speak in the first person, nor to look straight ahead. I live in the first person.”<sup>82</sup> This statement was both a declaration of independence and a positioning of the artist in relation to social conventions. Cue-

81. Cuevas, quoted in Traba, *Los signos de vida*, p. 21: “Todos los sentimientos (la soledad la angustia, el horror) y ninguno: pero como sentimiento afincado en mí, desgarrante y continuo, que anima mi obra, no hay ninguno que supere el asco. Siento asco por una humanidad limitada pequeña y miserable que pulula alrededor de uno y nos amenaza como gusanos de muerte. Es repulsivo ¿no? Pues bien, no puedo dejar de sentir así frente a nosotros, a tantos y tantos hechos de la vida cotidiana, de la vida diaria de nuestro país principalmente.”

82. Cuevas, quoted in Foppa, *Confesiones*, p. 46: “Soy el único mexicano que lucha por la afirmación del yo en el presente, no en el futuro. Al mexicano no le gusta hablar en primera persona, ni mirar de frente. Yo vivo en primera persona.”



was recognized only the sovereignty of the individual, and maintained the artist's prerogative to forge his own path, without surrendering to any ideology or social program, and without postponing or otherwise bracketing the search for authenticity in the name of the collective interest. In this respect his art is aligned with the "weak subject" proposed by the Italian philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, a subject who retreats from the "strong thought" of reason and ideology and throws off their transcendental signifiers, and instead applies himself to local and heterogeneous histories and adopts new, individual strategies to apprehend the world from a position of non-subordination.<sup>83</sup>

Cuevas was one of the principal authors of a de-centered Latin American artistic culture, which grew from the independent choices of creators who passed beyond the tissue of common knowledge and consensual politics (without however utterly erasing all forms of interpersonal, social and national affiliation).<sup>84</sup> This culture rested on the principle of untrammelled freedom of expression, which extended even to the concept of hemispherical identity; as Cuevas said, the trail blazers of modern art "learned to escape Latin Americanism" and acceded to a realm of liberty in which each could act and create on his or her own terms, and, unbounded, explore, interrogate, and drink copiously from local and global sources.<sup>85</sup> ❀

83. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds.), *Il pensiero debole*, Milan, Feltrinelli Editore, 1983.

84. Carlos Fuentes, *El mundo de José Luis Cuevas*, Mexico City, Galería de Arte Misrachi, 1969, esp. p. 41; Traba, *Los signos de vida*, esp. p. 44; Carlos Monsiváis, "Prólogo," in José Luis Cuevas, *Cuevas por Cuevas*, esp. p. 19.

85. Cuevas, lecture in Bogotá, 1964, quoted in Gloria Valencia Dingo, "Cuevas y su mundo visto por José Luis Cuevas," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), March 22, 1964, clipping in Cuevas Archive: "No creo que haya en el momento un arte con características latinoamericanas [...]. Creo que ellos [distinguished Latin Americans like Otero, De Szyszlo and Lam] han sabido escapar del latinoamericanismo..."

N.B. The author wishes to thank Beatriz del Carmen Cuevas, Director of the Museo José Luis Cuevas, Mexico City, for granting access to that institution's archive of photographic and literary material.

\*Artículo recibido el 30 de agosto de 2011; aceptado el 24 de agosto de 2012.