

Robin Adèle Greeley

**Modernism:
What *El Norte* Can Learn from
Latin America**

When it comes to modernism, the United States continues to suffer from a distressing provincialism. We still presume to share modernism's cultural patent between ourselves and Europe—before World War II belongs to that side of the Atlantic; post-WWII goes to us. (In case you are thinking “beating a dead horse” as you read this, try the following exercise: count the major references to non-European/non-U.S. works in the splashy new textbook by Hal Foster, Rosalind

Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*.¹ Even for those who really ought to know better, modernism still adds up to an overwhelmingly Eurocentric phenomenon.)

A provincialism underwritten by the world's biggest military budget cannot, however, be easily shrugged off with a nod to “multiculturalism.”² Merely adding cultures of the other five continents + subcontinents + archipelagos + etc. to the modernist mix does not fix the problem. And this deficiency costs us dearly. What we understand—or don't—about, say, China's cultural relationship to modernity may spell the difference between an actively collaborative future with Asia's colossus or antagonistic blundering. And, as any glance at the daily news will show, the knowledge gap between hegemonic U.S. interests and Islamic culture adds exponentially to political tensions and human misery both here and abroad.

The essays collected in this forum, analyses by contemporary scholars of six key Latin American and Chicano/a critics, are part of a larger effort to address this problem with regard to Latin American modernism. Stemming from a 2003 seminar in Bellagio, Italy, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and aimed at publishing a double-volume trilingual anthology, this effort examines the seminal contributions of Latin American and Chicano/a art critics to our understanding of modernism's development at the interconnected levels of the regional, national, and international. Sharply nonprovincial in their thinking, all the critics discussed here demonstrate the impossibility of extracting any notion of modernist or postmodernist aesthetics from their implication in postwar economic and political shifts throughout the Americas and worldwide. Indeed, even conventional distinctions between “modernism” and “postmodernism” are thrown open to question. Positioning themselves against predominant art criticism in the United States and Europe, Latin American critics take an often radically different stance on the intricate relationship among modernism, modernity, and modernization. What might modernism look like, they ask, in contexts where the dreams and desires of modernity are fully developed but modernization is not yet wholly established? What might a modernist aesthetics be, when generated from an understanding that Latin America's “peripheral” status has nothing to do with a purportedly inherent backwardness and everything to do with increasingly harsh, neoliberal socioeconomic policies?³

The critics discussed here by no means completely agree on art's relation to these issues. José Gómez Sicre opposed the irritating U.S. tendency to see only the folkloric in Latin American art, yet championed the Museum of Modern Art's view of capitalism as essential to the advancement of international, hemispheric modernism. Mário Pedrosa, by contrast, argued that modernism could provide a realm of freedom outside the clutches of such patronage. Pedrosa's writing energized such ground-breaking artists as Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Mathias Goeritz who rejected the art market's network of consumption in favor of modernist

1. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

2. E. Sköns et al., “Military Expenditure,” in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook 2004: *Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. Dependency Theory economist Raul Prebisch, head of the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (1948–62) inaugurated the use of the terms “center” and “periphery” with regard to the effects of capitalism on developing nations.

abstraction as a socially embedded, experimental practice. Marta Traba and Jorge Romero Brest, on the other hand, both changed their minds in mid-career. Romero Brest advocated abstraction as the culminating moment of modernism, until political critiques of this Greenbergian position by 1960s artists—notably in the 1968 exhibition *Tucumán Is Burning*—forced him to reconsider. Traba dropped her early argument for modernism's inherent apoliticism, shifting radically to the Left as she began to comprehend the dangers of the U.S.-backed free-market strategies of Latin America's elites. But unlike Pedrosa, she remained wary of cultural ventures such as Conceptual art that focused on process and viewer engagement. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains have pioneered a conceptual and visual analysis of what had largely been thought of as purely a social category: Chicano/a culture.

Despite their differences, however, the writings of all these critics offer provocative—indeed essential—perspectives on modernism's development in the Western Hemisphere, from the nationalist era of the 1930s and 1940s, through the Cuban Revolution, the cold war, and a plethora of right-wing dictatorships, to the rise of the New Left, recurrent debt crises, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, and increasing globalization. To read these critics is to learn how Latin Americans see their own art, in opposition to the often uninformed—even biased—interpretations from El Norte. Even more important, the dialogues engendered by these and other Latin American critics offer indispensable insights into facets of modernity largely unavailable elsewhere.

Robin Greeley is reviews editor for *Art Journal* and teaches Latin American modernism at the University of Connecticut. Her first book is *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (Yale, 2006). Her second book project, *The Cultural Face of State Nationalism: Post-Revolution Mexico 1920–1952*, won a Rockefeller fellowship.

The young artists of America know that international centers of art are being born in their own continents, and they already have as points of reception New York and Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Lima, Mexico City and São Paulo, Caracas and Washington.

—José Gómez Sicre, 1959

Alejandro Anreus

José Gómez Sicre and the “Idea” of Latin American Art

The epigraph is from José Gómez Sicre, “Editorial Note,” Pan American Union *Boletín de Artes Visuales* 5 (Washington, DC, May–December, 1959): 2.

1. Gómez Sicre was born in Cuba and educated at the University of Havana. He advised Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in the preparation of the 1944 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters*. He studied art history at both New York University and Columbia University.

2. José Gómez Sicre, “Trends—Latin America,” *Art in America* 47, no. 3 (1959): 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 23.

José Gómez Sicre (1916–91), chief of the Visual Arts Section at the Pan American Union, published an article in 1959 entitled “Trends—Latin America” in the magazine *Art in America*.¹ Pointedly describing the limited conception of Latin American art in the United States and Europe as “carnival-type, descriptive, and superficial pictorial chronicle of South American people and customs that appeal to visiting tourists.”² He argued an opposite viewpoint: “Just as in the United States in the last 20 years there has evolved a magnificent art movement of very high quality and extreme importance, so in Latin America there are many artists—with more or less the same intentions and the same ambitions as the modern United States painter—who have been working in a progressive manner and with deep intellectual feeling.”³

With this article Gómez Sicre was addressing, in the Latin American context of the 1950s and 1960s, the placement of the region's modern and contemporary art on the international stage. This text was part of a twofold strategy. First, he promoted a new generation of artists with a diverse yet decidedly modernist



José Gómez Sicre (right) with Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Fidelio Ponce, Matanzas, Cuba, 1942 (photograph by Mario Carreño, provided by Alejandro Anreus)

4. José Gómez Sicre, interview with the author, March 17, 1989, Washington, DC. This and all other translations from the Spanish are by the author.

5. The activities of his agenda included nine to eleven yearly exhibitions at the Pan American Union/O.A.S. headquarters in Washington, DC, his articles in newspapers and magazines in both North and South America (Spanish and English), his editorials in the Visual Arts Section's *Boletín de Artes Visuales*, and his informal advice to U.S. museum directors in their acquisitions of Latin American art. His "cultural anti-communism" became more aggressive after the Cuban Revolution declared itself Marxist-Leninist in the early 1960s.

6. The Washington, DC, jury that gave first-, second-, and third-place awards by category and region consisted of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (MoMA), Thomas M. Messer (Guggenheim), and Gustav von Groschwitz (Carnegie Institute). Although some of the Latin American works from the corporate collection were deaccessioned, a majority of them were later donated to the Lowe Art Museum in Miami, Florida.

7. José Gómez Sicre, "Introduction" in *Salón Esso de Artistas Jóvenes*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Pan American Union, April 1965).

8. Fernando de Szyszlo in Alvaro Medina, "An Interview with Fernando de Szyszlo," *Art Nexus* (January 1994): 48.

aesthetic (basing it on the paradigm of international modernism espoused by his mentor, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., at the Museum of Modern Art). Second, he rejected and criticized "the style and politics of Mexican mural painting, which was *retrograde*, academic, anecdotal, and folkloric and at its worst moments an instrument at the service of communism."⁴ Since Gómez Sicre's most active and influential agenda at the Visual Arts Section took place at the height of the cold war, it is important to see his "warrior" role in attacking the Mexican school's style and politics with an "international" modernist alternative as very much a part of the "freedom versus communism" discourse of the time.⁵

Beyond the specific (and at times sinister) politics of his role, Gómez Sicre was among the first, if not the first, critic/curator to travel all over Latin America and comprehend the art of the region as a series of hemispheric visualities, with both common links and divergences. He presented emerging artists at the São Paulo Bienal and introduced both established modernists and contemporary artists to United States audiences (private collectors as well as public institutions). In 1965 he organized the ambitious *Salón Esso*, an "Inter-American" event that selected and made awards to artists under forty years of age from all over the Americas. The selected work was exhibited in the gallery at the Organization of American States headquarters in April 1965. All of the awarded works entered the corporate collection of Esso (which grew from Standard Oil and was the precursor of today's multinational ExxonMobil).⁶ In the exhibition catalogue, Gómez Sicre's words reaffirmed his agenda of both capitalist patronage in a free world and the enduring value of modernism: "Of singular significance was the fact that it was private industry—the capitalistic initiative of a free world—that was thus seeking to foster the things of the spirit by an undertaking with broad cultural repercussions." He concluded, "Behind these compositions one can perceive the ferment of the youth of our hemisphere, who agreed to measure talents in fair combat, whose champions have now made themselves known. For those concerned with lasting values, the most significant lesson to be derived is that, with freedom of expression, with liberty to accept or reject direction, art continues its forward progress in the Americas. In the best tradition of the past, it confidently awaits the challenge of the future."⁷

In spite of the triumphant tone of his words in 1965, Gómez Sicre's agenda would cease to be effective by 1970—partly due to the emergence of a pluralistic aesthetic on the part of the New Left in Latin America, the radicalization of artists throughout the region, and his own lack of interest in conceptual, installation, and performance art. He was a cold-war modernist in an increasingly postmodern world where clear political identification was becoming increasingly fragmented.

Gómez Sicre sublimated modernism into "enduring and universal" values in order to make his cold-war politics more palatable. Yet what remains is his aesthetic judgment; his ability to find and promote new, genuine, and important talents; and his hemispheric vision of the arts of Latin America. In the words of the Peruvian painter Fernando de Szyszlo, "The person who really promoted the idea of Latin American art was Pepe Gómez Sicre. Before him, there was Argentinean painting, Colombian painting, Venezuelan or Mexican painting. It was Gómez Sicre who was the first to speak of Latin American painting."⁸

Alejandro Anreus is associate professor of art history and Latin American Studies at William Paterson University. He is the coeditor of and a contributor to *The Social and The Real: Art and Politics in the Americas* (Penn State Press, 2005).

In 1980, at the age of eighty and soon before he died, Mário Pedrosa helped found Brazil's Labor Party (the new leftist party governing today). At that time he abandoned the conventional practice of art criticism (we will see why later on) and rediscovered the active militancy of his youth. While a committed social conscience is a trait of many Latin American critics, for Pedrosa the combination of political and critical radicalism was especially meaningful, as the trajectory of his aesthetic ideas is indistinguishable from his political trajectory. Among political exiles (and they were many, from a variety of countries), Pedrosa the militant transformed himself into a critic, and the critic became a cultural activist. The radicalism of one position lent itself to the other, resulting in Pedrosa's becoming a key figure with an innovative role in the history of Latin American art criticism.

Francisco Alambert

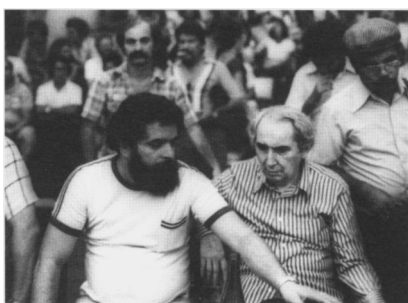
1001 Words for Mário Pedrosa

In 1925, the young Pedrosa joined the newly founded Communist Party of Brazil. In 1929, he set off to study in Moscow, but stopped in Germany where, abandoning his Moscow plans, he made common cause with Trotsky's rejection of Soviet Stalinism. It was during this sojourn that Pedrosa experienced modern art in Expressionist and Bauhaus Berlin, though he had yet to become completely consumed with the subject. Upon his return to Brazil in 1933, he founded a Trotskyist group, and at the same moment presented his first critical work—an address on the German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, the first truly Marxist study of art in Brazil. Because of his strong ties to Trotsky, Pedrosa became secretary of the Fourth International—a position that took him to New York in the 1940s, where he became familiar with North American modern criticism and art, particularly that of Alexander Calder.

Mário Pedrosa was thus a militant of the revolutionary Left who became an art critic through realizing that the artistic forms and conditions of the twentieth century sprang from its recurring social crises. In consequence, Pedrosa never dissociated world revolution from vanguard art. From this moment on, his critical practice overtly sketched out the utopia of modern art, as well as its impasses and insights. His critical activity was a continual exercise of redefinition and postulation, of various forms of reflective analysis, and of a pedagogy of art aimed at keeping alive the ideal of a revolutionary vanguard art. This ideal would later influence postmodern concepts of environmental art as well conceptual art.

Indeed, Pedrosa could not conceive of modern art without revolutionary politics—and vice-versa—even while arguing that art should in principle be autonomous territory. He famously defined “emancipated” art, with its creative and critical challenges, as the *experimental exercise of freedom*. “Exercise” because art is, above all, an attentive making of things; “experimental” because artistic effort, in a world in which social classes are alienated from labor, enables a freer, more open relationship between the individual and the material—a relationship that constantly reinvents the world in order to keep from losing it; “freedom” because the role of the artist (and the critic) is to spill into the living world that which freedom requires in order to flow according to its own properties. Art is thus possibly the best experimental laboratory for creating a socially emancipated utopia.

For Pedrosa, the liberating potential of the work of art comes from the possibility of *making differently* or *making freely*—an action that may dislocate the reification of alienated subjectivity, enabling the renewed individuals to regain their



Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Mário Pedrosa, and Manuel da Conceição at the founding meeting of the Workers Party, October 2, 1980, Colegio Sión, São Paulo, Brazil (photograph © Jesus Carlos/Imagenlatina). Da Silva was elected president of Brazil in 2002.

This essay was translated from the Portuguese by Jay Telles.

own “destinies.” But making “freely” does not mean doing just anything, because an act that is not reflected upon or carefully considered merely repeats the reified world. Therefore, according to Pedrosa, not all forms of art are valid exercises of freedom. Rather, the critic must focus on the criteria that cannot be appropriated into the alienated linearity of culture. The critic here is neither the organizer of bourgeois taste (nor agent of the “market”), nor some kind of educator or judge. With the experimental exercise of freedom as a baseline, he or she must reflect upon and question the course of aesthetic movements at the same time as anticipating actions and meanings.

At this point we might compare Pedrosa with Clement Greenberg, a contemporary to whom he was connected through various links. Greenberg fashioned his criticism from an “abstractionist” prism, centered in the concept of planarity then prominent in the abstract art of North America. For Pedrosa, however, the issue of two-dimensionality was never the most decisive. Contrary to Greenberg, Pedrosa’s concept of social totality (a Marxist trademark that the Brazilian critic never abandoned) kept him from analyzing the history of art from an entirely internal or endogenous angle. This position significantly distanced Pedrosa from the “formalist” positions and from the euphorias and raptures of the Abstract Expressionist movement, thus bringing him closer ideologically to conceptual art.

For Mário Pedrosa, the meaning of art lay in liberating a repressed and alienated society, in being negative and antibourgeois, in seeking to cross from the living world to the realm of art and back again. Knowing this allows us to understand his interest in art produced by the insane and by children, as well as his constant valorization of “primitive” art, especially by pre-Columbian peoples.

For Pedrosa, the essential thing was the utopia of an autonomous art, progressing through ruptures, engaged in the most intense transformation of society. Nevertheless, while he pursued this utopian conception, he also saw in the course of history the configuration of its crises and impasses. At the end of his life, when he witnessed the shipwreck of the constructive utopias of modern art and of Latin American societies as well as the liberal turn of international capitalism, he perceived the relative failure of the forms of intervention that modern art represented: “Mass consumer society does not encourage the arts,” he argued. And it especially does not encourage “modern art, with its mandates for quality against ambiguity.” That harsh realization brought back Pedrosa’s desire for direct political intervention, his return to a politics of socialism as a means of saving the utopia that art could no longer contain in itself nor exercise freely and experimentally.

Francisco Alambert is professor of art history at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) and also writes art criticism. He is coauthor, with Polyana Canhête, of the 2004 *Bienais de São Paulo: Da era do Museu à era dos Curadores* (São Paulo: Boitempo Press, 2004).

Until the 1960s, Marta Traba (1923–1983) was a key figure in the consolidation of international modernism in the visual arts of Latin America. But when the cultural influence of the United States began to spread throughout the hemi-

Florencia Bazzano-Nelson

Marta Traba: Internationalism or Regional Resistance?

sphere—along with the most experimental artistic modes—Traba became one of the most resolute critics of this homogenizing process. She understood better than most the potential danger such influence could represent in the semideveloped and semidependent context of Latin America.¹ In this regard, the now-dominant

concern regarding the effects of globalization on subaltern cultures demands of critics a new consideration of Traba's critique of the cultural imperialism of the North.

Traba left an important legacy in her writings primarily because they addressed many pivotal cultural events in the history of Latin America from the 1950s through the early 1980s. Moreover, she was among the first scholars to consider the art of Latin America as a whole, thereby transforming her texts into fascinating documents of the theoretical horizons existing at different moments of Latin American art criticism.

Traba's forty-year art-critical practice began in her native Argentina in the mid-1940s when she joined Jorge Romero Brest's influential art magazine *Ver y Estimar* and continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Colombia, her adoptive country, where she became a national celebrity and the leading arbiter of the arts. Then, at the very moment when her power was at its peak, she took an unexpected public turn to the political Left that ultimately resulted in a life of political exile in various countries, including Uruguay, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, the United States, and France.

Until the late 1960s, Traba's support for high modernism aligned her with colleagues such as Jorge Romero Brest and José Gómez Sicre. In Colombia, her aestheticism—shaped by her readings of European scholars like Benedetto Croce, Herbert Read, and René Huyghe—encountered strong resistance from the very beginning. She considered art an autonomous practice and the artist a "genius" who was, as she wrote in 1956, "eminently apolitical, asocial, disinterested in the contingent, a being that is in the midst of history as a disquieting island and for whom words like progress, civilization, justice, have no meaning whatsoever."² Her articles were a forceful attack against those who believed art should "express" a local and regional identity or a political stance. She was particularly critical of Mexican muralism, which had served as a conceptual paradigm for the first generation of Colombian modernists. Her internationalism lent support to young modernists like Alejandro Obregón, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, and Fernando Botero. However, she irritated well-established nationalists such as Gonzalo Ariza and Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo, who made themselves heard through a number of heated but revealing public debates. Traba always seemed to win these battles, but her aesthetic project only prevailed as long as it remained politically neutral and supported the modernizing discourse of the Colombian elite.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in an exile marked by political persecution, Traba turned to Marxist theory and the work of cultural critics such as Herbert Marcuse, Henri Lefebvre, and Umberto Eco whose writings were becoming increasingly influential among Latin American leftist intellectuals.



Marta Traba, Caracas, 1972 (photograph by Zigala, provided by Gustavo Zalamea)

1. Marta Traba, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas 1950–1970*, ed. Andrea Giunta (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005), 65.

2. Marta Traba, "Crítica de arte. El genio antiservil," *Intermedio* (Bogotá, June 26, 1956): 5. All translations of Traba's writings are my own.

This shift resulted in her formulation of a theory of an “art of resistance” in her best-known book, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas 1950–1970* (1973). Inspired by Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, Traba argued that industrialized nations were dominated by an ideology of technology that resulted in the fragmentation and loss of meaning of general communication codes. In the field of culture, the ideology of technology supported on an international level an “aesthetic of deterioration” that fragmented cultural systems and neutralized specific local meanings, a strategy necessary to assure the continued technological domination of all forms of communication.³

For this reason, Traba profoundly distrusted experimental art, such as Pop art, Conceptual art, and Happenings, which she considered examples of the “aesthetic of deterioration” and associated exclusively—and erroneously—with the United States. She believed that these art modes could only critique culture in an explosive manner, creating cathartic experiences that satisfied artists but were powerless to stop the tyranny of technology over industrial and nonindustrial societies alike. Furthermore, for Traba, these experimental art modes could neither fit into nor express the underdeveloped context of Latin American societies. Ironically, she found in the experimental approach of the prestigious Instituto Di Tella of Buenos Aires, directed by Romero Brest, a leading example of the aesthetic of deterioration in the Americas.⁴

For Traba the only way Latin America could overcome its status as a cultural colony of the United States was to resist all artistic modes that weakened the signifying and ideological functions of art, as well as its permanence and uniqueness. While she never abandoned the primacy of the aesthetic, she began to favor the work of Latin American artists whose ideological edge and ability to produce critical meanings required stronger links to their communities of origin. She found the best examples of the art of resistance in the works of Obregón, Botero, and Beatriz González (Colombia), Fernando de Szyszlo (Peru), Enrique Tábara (Ecuador), and José Luis Cuevas (Mexico). They had rejected what she saw as the errors of muralism and shared an important emphasis on mythical and atemporal elements that she found comparable to the mythification and cyclical time in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. These artists had shown, in Traba’s words, “the capacity to pull the national reality from its underdevelopment and transpose it to a magical, mythical, or purely imaginative level, which is considered far superior to . . . the imitation of tasks proposed by highly industrialized societies.”⁵ She also considered important aspects of the art of resistance the reemergence of drawing as a viable artistic medium, the exploration of humor and eroticism in art, and the “nationalization” of Pop art, which tied this art mode to specific contexts.

While Traba discussed artists from different countries, she seemed to find the most definitive examples of the art of resistance in Colombia, the country she knew and loved best. One might even argue that she constructed an artistic model that privileged Colombian art as the paradigm that the rest of the continent should follow. The fact that radical artists elsewhere in Latin America, such as Leon Ferrari, Hélio Oiticica, and Diamela Eltit, could successfully combine a powerful aesthetic with the critical articulation of community voices suggests that Traba had an incomplete understanding of how experimental art could be meaningful to the communities that had generated it.

3. Traba, *Dos décadas*, 57–63.

4. *Ibid.*, 63–70.

5. *Ibid.*, 99.

Perhaps the most telling sign of the value of Traba's writings is that even "mistakes" such as these are often more interesting than many critics' truths. Far from rendering her theories irrelevant, such errors demand a more critical reading of history.

Florencia Bazzano-Nelson is currently an assistant professor of Latin American art history at Georgia State University in Atlanta and was a 2004–05 J. Paul Getty Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Art and the Humanities. She is preparing a book on Marta Traba's art criticism in the context of inter-American relations since the 1950s.

Andrea Giunta

**Jorge Romero Brest and the
Coordinates of Aesthetic
Modernism in Latin America**

Both influential and controversial, the sixty-year art-critical practice of Jorge Romero Brest (1905–1988) was fundamental not only for the introduction of the idea of modern art in Latin America but also for the problematization of its crisis. Romero Brest is usually associated with the culminating point of his public career, when he directed the Centro de Artes Visuales (CAV) of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT) in Buenos Aires during the 1960s. This center for cultural and scientific experimentation was noteworthy in Latin America for its exceptional interdisciplinary approach integrating advanced research in fields such as the visual arts, music, theater, economics, and medicine. Romero Brest's directorship of the CAV during those years helped crystallize aesthetic thought that had been intensely shaped by the political and intellectual history of the period.

Although trained in physics and law, Romero Brest decided early on to dedicate himself to the study of art history, which he complemented in the 1930s with his first trips to Europe and extensive readings in philosophy. Argentina's political situation during that period triggered his own interest in politics. He soon approached the work of Marx, Engels, and Lenin but would not join the Socialist Party until 1945, and then only in response to the rise of Peronism.¹ In 1937 he published *El problema del arte y del artista contemporáneos: Bases para su dilucidación crítica* [The Problem of Contemporary Art and Artists: Bases for their Critical Analysis], in which he addressed the social agency of art.

Romero Brest's role as an educator and lecturer in different Latin American countries had an influential, formative role in the art criticism of those nations. Between 1939 and 1947 he taught at the Universidad de La Plata, until he was fired due to his opposition to Perón's government. In 1941, he created the class "Orientation and Artistic Research" at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores de Buenos Aires. In the 1930s, he also lectured at Montevideo's Universidad de la República.

Romero Brest did not produce art criticism in a systematic manner until 1939, when he came to see it as a way of shaping public criteria for historical and aesthetic valorization. His essays appeared regularly in the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* (1939–40), the antifascist periodical *Argentina Libre* (1940–46), and the well-known magazine *Ver y Estimar* (1948–55), which he published with the collaboration of students such as Marta Traba and Damián Carlos Bayón, and a network of international correspondents such as Mário Pedrosa, Fernando García Esteban, Mathias Goeritz, Lionello Venturi, and Max Bill, all of whom were themselves extremely influential. This magazine, characterized by its support for

1. The authoritarian populist government of Juan Perón (1945–55) mobilized organized labor in the service of a centralized state.



Jorge Romero Brest, Mar del Plata, Argentina, 1981 (photograph by Juan B. P. Mastropascua)

modernization in the visual arts, had a central role in the formation of postwar art criticism and in the dissemination of the idea of modernism in Latin America.

In 1952 Romero Brest published *La pintura europea contemporánea (1900–1950)* in a popular and amply disseminated edition. This history of European modern art, written in Spanish by a Latin American, not only explained the poetics of each movement but also pointed out its successes and limitations according to a formalist paradigm that indicated a progressive evolution toward abstraction. Both the book and *Ver y Estimar* implicitly supported a project of renewal for Latin American art and its advancement in the evolutionary map of modernity that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., had defined in 1936. For Romero Brest such progress was represented by abstraction.

The years of Peronism were for this Argentine critic particularly regressive and marked by international isolation. Once Perón was deposed in 1955, however, Romero Brest became the director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, curating exhibitions that advocated the future of art as residing in abstraction. In this regard, both his exhibition of Brazilian painting and of Victor Vasarely's work functioned as legitimating spaces for abstraction. However, Romero Brest did not initially support Informalism, since this would have represented a regression with respect to geometric abstraction and the paradigm of the integration of the arts with architecture and design, which for him indicated a new path for art.

As professor of aesthetics and director of the Instituto de Estética in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (1956–61), Romero Brest read in depth the work of existentialist philosophers such as Martin Heidegger. These readings greatly influenced the most celebrated and controversial period of his professional practice during the 1960s. From this philosophical framework—for instance he examined the “being” or “essence” of Pop art using Heideggerian concepts—Romero Brest interpreted Argentine and international art of the period, formulating an interpretation of the crisis of modernity in Western art alternative to the one that dominated hegemonic criticism.

In 1963 he resigned as director of the Museo Nacional to become the head of the newly founded CAV. From this center he supported artistic experimentation and promoted the dissemination of Argentine art. He organized national and international competitions, invited the most prestigious figures in the art of the time, and cocurated for the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis the exhibition *New Art of Argentina*, which traveled to different venues in the United States in 1964 and 1965.

Despite Romero Brest's faith in abstraction, his ideas began to shift during the 1960s in response to Pop art. For him, understanding Pop art was not a simple matter. At the beginning, his position was similar to that of Clement Greenberg, for whom Pop art was nothing more than kitsch. Romero Brest, however, was ready to reconsider the fundamentals of his aesthetic in order to comprehend and follow the art of his time. His understanding of aesthetic change implied a reformulation of genealogies from which he reconceptualized the paradigm of visual modernism with the help of the philosophical instruments of existentialism. In the 1970s, he even embraced an aesthetic of kitsch and everyday consumption when, after the closing of the ITDT, he created the cultural-commercial company *Fuera de Caja: Centro de arte para consumir* [Outside the Box:

Center for Consumer Art]. This company was dedicated to the design of cups, tablecloths, and all kinds of everyday utensils. The design, which was not intrinsically related to the function of each object, was merely decorative and characterized by a strong naïf influence that included images of little clouds and kittens.

During the 1970s, affected by the debates of the period, Romero Brest focused primarily on Latin American art. Although the word “politics” began to appear with greater frequency in his writings about art, he never considered art in relation to political revolutionary ideas, and in that sense, the intense debates about the relationship between art and politics of those years were a territory excluded from his critical practice. Since the 1950s, the critic had pointed out the representational limits of politics in art, and these had been defined by Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. Beyond this painting, art risked dissolving into politics.

For more than sixty years, Romero Brest faced the most profound aesthetic transformation of the art of the twentieth century with a dynamic intellect. Until the 1950s, his version of modernism ultimately argued for a unified genealogy that integrated the art of Latin America to the central narrative of European art. With the 1960s, Romero Brest considered that, in part due to his support for the most experimental art, Argentine art had acquired enough maturity to take its place at the forefront of international art along with the art made in Paris or New York.

Andrea Giunta is a professor of Latin American contemporary art at the University of Buenos Aires and the editor of the series *Arte y Pensamiento* for the publisher Siglo XXI. She has received numerous grants and fellowships, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and a J. Paul Getty Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art and the Humanities. She has published and edited several books on Argentine art of the twentieth century.

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains have written extensively over the past three decades on the history and criticism of Chicano/a art. The corpus of Ybarra-Frausto’s writing has focused on defining and exploring the complexities

of Chicano/a art and culture, from his early work with Joseph Sommers on modern Chicano writers to his historical overviews of Chicano art and history, written solo or with Shifra Goldman. Two of his most significant essays address the multiple roles of the vernacular in Chicano/a art: “Arte Chicano: Images of a Community,” and “*Rasquachismo*, a Chicano Sensibility.”¹ Ybarra-Frausto’s

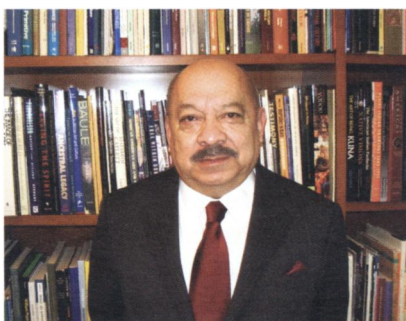
background is as a literary scholar and professor at the University of Washington and Stanford, and a former member of the Seattle-based Teatro del Piojo [Theater of the Head Louse]. He is currently associate director of the humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation.

Mesa-Bains is most recognized as an installation artist and cultural critic. She is also a psychologist, former public school educator in San Francisco, and a 1992 recipient of the MacArthur “genius” fellowship. Currently she is the director of the Institute of Visual and Public Art at California State University, Monterey Bay. She writes primarily about feminine and feminist creativity, particularly among Chicanas and other Latinas. From her early articles in the alternative Bay Area press on Mexican and Chicano/a art to her essays on the work of Judy Baca, Carmen Lomas Garza, Ester Hernandez, Patricia Rodriguez, and Patssi

Holly Barnet-Sanchez

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains: A Critical Discourse from Within

1. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Arte Chicano: Images of a Community,” in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, ed. Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez (Venice, CA, and Albuquerque: Social and Public Art Resource Center and University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 54–67; and “*Rasquachismo*, a Chicano Sensibility,” in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 155–62. An earlier version of “*Rasquachismo*” was published in 1988.



Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 2005 (photograph provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, New York)

Valdez, she has analyzed artistic practice within the contexts of memory, cultural recuperation and resistance, family and community, activism and spirituality. Her essay “*Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache*” expanded on Ybarra-Frausto’s analysis.²

Historically, these writings on *rasquachismo* and *domesticana* are unique in the small but expanding bibliography on Chicano/a art, art criticism, and art history. They are unique because—although written as recently as 1988 and 1995—they provide the first analytical mechanisms by which to interrogate the specificities of what we see when we look at certain kinds of Chicano/a works of art from an expressly formal perspective. The essays also provide a means for formal analysis that is completely integrated with the content of these works of art and with the historical, economic, political, and cultural particularities of the Chicano/a lived experience as primarily working class, bicultural, bilingual, and resistant to assimilation within the United States. They are also unique because the vast majority of writings about Chicano/a art have, until very recently, sidestepped a direct approach to looking specifically at form and its conjunction with content and context.

The virtually untranslatable term *rasquache* is not perceived by Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains as kitsch, but is often incorrectly defined by others as its equivalent. Ybarra-Frausto described it as “the aesthetic sensibility of *los de abajo*, of the underdog,” as a “visceral response to lived reality” that began as a strategy of survival among working-class Mexicans and Mexican Americans and was later transformed into an overarching attitude expressed in much Chicano/a activist art-making. Further characterizing it as an “attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability, yet mindful of stance and style,” he asserted that it continuously undermines the ideas of aesthetic autonomy.³

According to Ybarra-Frausto, being *rasquache* “is to be down but not out (*fregado pero no jodido*).”⁴ Responding to a direct relationship with the material level of existence or subsistence is what engenders a *rasquache* attitude of survival and inventiveness. Mesa-Bains summarizes:

In *rasquachismo*, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least . . . one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. . . . In its broadest sense, it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*. . . . [It] is an obvious, and internally defined tool of artist-activists.⁵

Mesa-Bains perceives *rasquachismo* “as a survivalist irreverence (‘based on sustaining elements of Mexican tradition and lived encounters in a hostile environment’) that functioned as a vehicle of cultural continuity.”⁶ Ybarra-Frausto posits two ways by which *rasquachismo* is translated into specific approaches to art-making and formal elements of Chicano/a art through “recuperation and recontextualizations of vernacular sensibilities. . . . It can be sincere and pay homage to the sensibility by restating its premises,” or it can be evoked through self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography.⁷

In 1996 Amalia Mesa-Bains particularized Ybarra-Frausto’s basic structures

2. Amalia Mesa-Bains, “*Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache*,” in *Distant Relations: A Dialogue among Chicano, Irish, and Mexican Artists*, ed. Trisha Ziff (New York: Smart Art Press, 1996), 156–63.

3. “*Rasquachismo*,” 156.

4. *Ibid.*

5. “*Domesticana*,” 156.

6. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. “*Rasquachismo*,” 161.



Amalia Mesa-Bains, with a detail of her 1993 installation *Venus Envy Chapter I: First Holy Communion Moments before the End* (artwork © Amalia Mesa-Bains, photograph by Idaljiza Liz-Lepiorz for the Bread and Roses Cultural Project of New York's Health and Human Service Union, 1199/SEIU)

within feminine and feminist Chicana representation as *domesticana*, a conceptual and formal sensibility through which certain women artists construct the domestic sphere as place of both paradise and prison, of “constriction, subversion, emancipation, and ultimately redemptive enunciation.” In exploring both “barrio life” and “family experience,” she included “home embellishments, home altar maintenance, healing traditions, and personal feminine pose or style” as the sites of representation in Chicano homes.⁸ *Domesticana* is positioned as a form of resistance within the domestic sphere to “majority culture” and as an “affirmation of cultural values,” yet it also serves as critique and intervention to change those structures of patriarchal restrictions placed on women within that same culture.

Rasquachismo and *domesticana* were not set forth as comprehensive structures applying to all Chicano/a art. Instead, they were offered as pathways for understanding conceptual and visual elements of certain art forms and their connection to the communities from which they came. To paraphrase Mesa-Bains, these concepts have assisted critics to understand how Chicano/a art contributed a means of constructing and redefining—not merely reflecting—identities, worldviews, and ideologies. Or as George Lipsitz wrote recently, Chicano art also constitutes a process of art-based community-making, not just community-based art-making.⁹

These analytical mechanisms have helped critics to recognize certain prominent and seemingly ubiquitous aesthetic and other visual properties and to theorize how and why they came to be privileged by so many Chicano artists. Perhaps most important, *rasquachismo* and *domesticana* provide the tools for connecting form, content, and context in an interplay that bounces back and forth among artist, community, work of art, and individual viewer. As a result, these concepts can also be instrumental for understanding processes of reception such as the often-instant recognition of Chicano/a art within Chicano/a communities, and its relative inaccessibility for—and frequent misrepresentation by—numerous critics throughout the Americas.

Holly Barner-Sanchez is an associate professor of Latin American and Latino/a, Chicano/a art history at the University of New Mexico where she currently also serves as associate dean of student affairs and technology for the College of Fine Arts. She has written on exhibition practices, civil rights/community murals, and Chicano/a graphic arts and is currently writing a book with community murals historian Tim Drescher on the Estrada Courts murals in East Los Angeles. In addition to being one of the coeditors for the proposed anthology *Latin American and Chicano/a Art Criticism since the 1940s: Between Modernity and Globalization*, she will contribute the essay on Shifra Goldman's Chicano/a art criticism.

8. “*Domesticana*,” 162, 160.

9. George Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Poster Movement: Poster Art and the *Movimiento Chicano*,” in *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, exh. cat., ed. Chon A. Noriega (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001), 71–87.