

ON TECHNOLOGICAL TACTICS

Rodrigo Alonso

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*The only things that interest me are those that are not mine.
Anthropophagite Manifesto. Oswald de Andrade /01*

After a brief stay in the USA in 1966, the Argentine artist Marta Minujin arrived in Buenos Aires with a project developed along with two colleagues, American Allan Kaprow and German Wolf Vostell. It was a proposal for global collaboration: each artist would design a happening, and the three resulting happenings would be produced simultaneously in each author's countries and the whole event would be interconnected by satellite.

Marta Minujin's proposal, *Simultaneity in Simultaneity*, was an environment that gathered the communication technologies of the time, in order to produce an instantaneous and simultaneous media invasion on a group of participants. To achieve this, she used 60 television sets, the same number of radios, slide projectors, photographic and film cameras, sound equipment and voice recorders. The result was a complex multimedia environment composed of photography, television, telephone, mail, radio and satellite transmission /02..., so complex that neither Kaprow nor Vostell were able to reproduce it, as it was planned, because of their impossibility of obtaining in their respective countries all the required technology.

This episode of Argentine art history sounds like a bad joke with reference to the present situation of technological arts in the country. Today, artists have difficulty in trying to produce or exhibit their works when those involve technological media, because of the scarcity of technical means in public institutions, the lack of research laboratories for that kind of production and the limited private initiative in this field.

What happens in Argentina is not very different from what happens in the rest of Latin America with the exception of a few countries, or rather, some cities in a few countries. One of the big paradoxes of contemporary technologies—and definitely not the only one—is that they are supposedly global but are not evenly distributed.

This unequal distribution and its political and social consequences (power concentration, widening of the gap between those who have access to technology and those who don't, technological «illiteracy», working and social marginalization) constitute urgent concerns in our countries, at a time when world hierarchies are increasingly based on technology possession.

Thus the relationship between art and technology in Latin America has to be posed necessarily in political terms. Any similar proposal induces implicit tensions between imperative technological expansion and the unavoidable reality of local economies and cultures, dependent and marginalized. The quest for our place in this world is not an option but an absolute necessity.

THE PRAISE OF LOW TECH /03

*Simplicity of forms does not mean simplicity of experience.
Robert Morris /04*

Possible answers to that quest are not mere secondary propositions. A discourse generated at the periphery is not necessarily a discourse on the periphery, nor is it a peripheral discourse. It is a fallacy to think that possessing technology or participating in the process of technological development is the only way to reflect on the social and cultural impact of our technological world.

It may be important to remember that the origin of video art as an artistic manifestation is linked with critical and anti-cultural practices, with alternative proposals offered by groups such as Fluxus, Guerrilla TV and the founders of Performance art. Artists like Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, activist groups now almost completely forgotten, such as Videofreex, Rainedance or TVTV, and performers such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman or Martha Rosler, have laid the foundations out of which video emerged as an artistic expression. With the exception of Paik, none of those artists participated in the technical development of electronic imagery /05. Nevertheless, their names, their works and their formal and conceptual inquiries cannot be disregarded in any aesthetic consideration of video art.

Thus, and from the particular perspective of Latin American art, one of the most outstanding characteristics of its production can by no means be undervalued; I mean its permanent recourse to *low tech* systems, to the appropriation and elemental distortion of the media, to its working with

trash and technical malformations. The use of low technologies is a legitimate practice that generates a discourse engaged in the reflection on *hi tech* as well on the centres where these technologies are created, and which poses equally valid aesthetic and philosophical questions in order to comprehend to its fullest extent the status of art within contemporary para- and post-industrial societies.

The conscious option of *low tech* questions the political and aesthetical dominance that pretends to found itself on technical superiority. By using elemental or obsolete technologies, *low tech* works emphasise the aesthetical discourse, eluding the seduction and expiration dates of hardware, which transformed many works in the history of technological art into mere aesthetic essays, unable to survive the passing of time.

Low tech as a tactical /06 practice takes a multiplicity of forms. The word *tactic* is significant in the case of artists producing their works in technological centres, having access to sophisticated technical resources, who nevertheless highlight their problematic insertion in those places. In other cases, minimal proposals, with a very local character, mine with their intimacy, their regionalism and their radicalism, a circuit dominated by the logic of globalization, the erasure of regional features and stylistic homogenization.

The practices of intervention and appropriation –linked in many respects with *low tech* operations– possess a long tradition in Latin American art as tactics for analysing and re-signifying foreign discourses. From the reformulation of European models in Peruvian colonial painting to the appropriations of the 1980s encouraged by postmodern theories, passing by Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagite Manifesto*, those procedures have proved fruitful in promoting critical and reflective reading.

The variety and depth of *low tech* proposals in Latin America are extremely far-reaching, rich and creative. Approached as critical tactics, in a conscious and intentional manner, their reflective perspective in relation both to *hi tech* and to the crises and paradoxes induced by the technological race in Latin American countries are precise and evident. There still remains the task, incomplete and fragmentary, of binding these expressions to the work of those pioneer artists of Latin America who participated in the expansion of art frontiers while using incipient technologies. /07.

GLOBAL, LOCAL, TRANSNATIONAL

... *no loca, I'm not talking about Los Angeles or Dallas, I'm talking about myself, my inner city, la megalopolis de mi conciencia. «Here», words like «alternative», «peripheral» and «marginal» lost their meaning and moral weight long ago (Shit! Accidentally Deleted a Paragraph!)*
Guillermo Gómez Peña y Roberto Sifuentes. *Fragments from "Borderscape 2000"* /08

After the declared representation crisis of the 1980s, terms such as nationalism, localism, internationalism and globalisation have been strongly questioned, resisted and denied. The urge to neutralise any concept suspected of being rigid, hegemonic, essentialist or authoritarian, promoted the indiscriminate elimination of a large number of critical concepts forged during the years of modernism. After this movement, a tide of new or rapidly rearticulated words succeeded in dethroning previous ideas, but rendering sometimes difficult any possibility of thinking at all.

During the 1990s, it was fashionable to destroy the term «Latin America». Accused of being the result of a foreign, objectifying and oppressive glance, incarnating an essentialist vision of its object, the concept was uncritically questioned, leaving aside the question of whether its supposedly essentialist vision was not in fact due to the approach of its critics. Why think about Latin America as the place of ethnic or cultural essentialism? Why think that it is a concept unilaterally and externally determined excluding the possibility of rethinking it, appropriating it, or redirecting it? Why eliminate at a stroke and uncritically Jose-Carlos Mariategui's intellectual efforts /09, the vision of the authors of the *Anthropophagite Manifesto* /10 and of *Constructive Universalism* /11, the work of the *Third Cinema* and *Cinema Novo* militants /12 and the practitioners of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* /13 –to mention but a few local proposals– just to follow a theoretical fashion or to be of the intellectual avant-garde? Maybe it is time to reconsider this dejected concept in the light of new ideas and formulations, now that the solid elements, which had once vanished in the air, seem to be materialising again /14.

Even if it is true that terms as nationalism, localism, internationalism or globalisation have been strongly criticised, it is not less true that the balance of power incarnated in them have hardly been modified. To suppose that dissolving the term of Latin America would dissolve all its conflicts or would change its relationships with the rest of the world is as naive as to suppose that this dissolution would generate a *tabula rasa* from which a new, pure and immaculate concept would emerge.

The persistence of the aforementioned balance of power has led Gustavo Mosquera to suggest that we are living in a world of guardian and guarded cultures /15, a land where some assume the right to represent and others have only the possibility of being represented. Obviously, the Latin American countries occupy the second term of the equation. The weakness of national artistic circuits hinders the building of a true local vision that does not only respond to global expectations.

This unbalance of powers, this contrast between the pressure of countries that arrogate to themselves the construction of the global vision and others that only have access to the construction of local glimpses, is evident in the field of cultural institutions. But one could wonder whether this is also true in the field of cultural and artistic production, whether there are not any «ways of doing» /16 that might mitigate this situation.

I believe that the work of some contemporary artists could be the point of articulation where we could think about the relationships between globalization, localism, internationalism and situated experience, a place that eludes the abstraction usually attached to those terms in theoretical discussions, proposing instead their embodiment in concrete images and situations. A number of technological artistic productions by Latin American artists are nomad, developed by producers who circulate along foreign creative and exhibition centres or by artists of the Diaspora. This fact places these authors in that particular environment where the local and the global interpenetrate in multiple ways.

To analyse this scenery, I propose to have recourse to the Situationist concept of «*Drift*», since it is a horizontal and non-hierarchical model that prevents from thinking about the «influence» of the context «on» he/she who moves or lives in it. Situationists define urban drifting as «a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the living conditions in urban societies; a technique encouraging undisrupted passage through diverse environments» /17.

In the Situationist vision, the city is a confluence of atmospheres, of experimental units, micro-climates and living spaces. The drifting procedure allows one to move through these environments while rejecting their relative importance. In his *Drift Theory*, Guy Debord asserts that «the different unities of atmospheres and residencies are not delimited with precision from day to day, but surrounded by relatively large frontier margins. The general change that drifting proposes is the constant reduction of those frontier margins until their complete disappearance» /18.

A great deal of contemporary technological artworks share this nonhierarchical vision over a world ever more diversified. In their very formal structure, images from different backgrounds, cultural and geopolitical references, fragments of glances and discourses, supports, media and pieces of information, all this converges and mitigates the peculiarities, portraying a universe of multiple faces and evanescent margins.

Notes

1. Originally published in *Revista de Antropofagia*. 1(1). Sao Paulo. 1928.

2. More information about this work may be found in: Alonso, Rodrigo: «Las primeras experiencias de video arte en argentina» (Argentine First Experiences in Video Art). *Avances*. Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. Argentina. 1 (2). 1998-99; Alonso, Rodrigo: «Art and Technology in Argentine: The Early Years», *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. 13:4. April 2005; Kirby, Michael: «Marta Minujin's Simultaneity in Simultaneity». *The Drama Review*. Duke University Press, U.S.A.. 12 (3). Spring 1968.

3. This chapter is based in part on my essay «The Praise of Low Tech», published in Burbano, Andrés; Barragán, Hernando (eds). *Hipercubo(ok). Arte, Ciencia y Tecnología en Contextos Próximos*. Bogotá: Universidad de Los Andes; Goethe Institut, 2002.

4. Morris, Robert. «Notes on Sculpture», in Battcock, Gregory (ed). *Minimal Art*. New York: Dutton. 1968.

5. Maybe because these early works were not founded on technological innovation per se, but in an autonomous aesthetic discourse, most of them preserve their critical power, as is the case of Nam June Paik's and Muntadas' works, for example.

6. I use *tactic* instead of *strategy* following Michel de Certeau's ideas: «strategies are actions that, once they have postulated a space of power, are able to elaborate theoretical places (totalizing systems and discourses) capable of articulating a number of physical spaces where forces are delivered... tactics are calculated actions characterized by the lack of a space of their own. They must act within a space imposed and organized by the laws of a foreign power. In brief, a tactic is the art of the weak. Tactics are determined by an absence of power in the same way that strategies imply power as a precondition». (De Certeau, Michel: «De las Prácticas Cotidianas de Oposición», published in Blanco, Paloma; Carrillo, Jesús; Claramonte, Jordi; Expósito, Marcelo [eds]. *Modos de Hacer. Arte Crítico. Esfera Pública y Acción Directa*. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca. 2001).

7. There are many local pioneers in the field of art and technology, from artists within the modern tradition of technological optimism (neon works by Gyula Kosice and Lucio Fontana, and the kinetic art by Julio le Parc in Argentina; Roberto Moriconi, Efizio Putzolu, Mauricio Salgueiro and Abraham Palatnik's machines and environments, and *computer works* by Waldemar Cordeiro in Brasil) to the critical trend developed later on (Raúl Marroquin's and Jonier Marin's videos in Colombia; Rafael Hastings' and Francisco Mariotti's pieces in Peru; Juan Downey's technological installations and Enrique Castro Cid's robots in Chile; Edgardo Vigo's useless machines, Luis Benedit's pseudo-scientific experimentations and Victor Grippo's energetic systems and circuits in Argentina).
8. Gómez-Peña Guillermo & Sifuentes, Roberto, « Fragments from *«Borderspace 2000»*. From «The Chicano Stare Department Chronicles», in Druckrey, Timothy (ed). *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.
9. Peruvian theoretician, a key figure of Latin American left thinking.
10. Brazilian visual arts founding text, it suggests appropriating and reformulating european influences from a local perspective.
11. Aesthetic practice for Latin American visual arts proposed by Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres García.
12. Third Cinema was a political and militant film trend developed in Argentina during the 1960' and 1970', and Cinema Novo was an innovative and also political trend in Brazilian films at the same time.
13. Theatrical trend developed in Brazil during the 1970'.
14. This is the case of terms such as ideology (recently used again in a critical anthology by Slavoj Zizek) or utopia (used again for debate by Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson in a recent *New Left Review* issue, but also present in the work of innumerable contemporary artists, from Rikrit Tiravanija to Atelier van Lieshout, for example).
15. Mosquera, Gerardo: «Power and Intercultural Curating», *Trans*, Vol. 1. N° 1, 1995.
16. See De Certeau, op.cit.
17. In *Internationale Situationniste*, 1, Paris, 1958.
18. Debord, Guy: «Drift Theory», in *Internationale Situationniste*, 2, Paris, 1958.