

OVER, UNDER AND ALONG: LIFE ON THE HYPHEN

Video Trans Americas: From New York to Chile

Between 1973 and 1975, Chilean artist Juan Downey travelled the continent of the Americas from north to south starting in New York and making his way through Texas, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia and Chile. While on route, he made videos of the indigenous communities to show the isolation of cultures. His aim was to create a holistic perspective by editing all the interactions into one work of art. The resultant installation comprised thirty-one videos and was first screened in an exhibition curated by David Ross at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1975.

Downey's piece was called *Video Trans Americas* and is the namesake chosen by Cassandra Getty and Dianne Pearce for this exhibition. Our *TransAMERICAS* united fourteen Latin American artists who live and work in Canada and the United States. This essay will share works from *TransAMERICAS*, which was structured around the themes of language, travel, bridges and community.

Language: The Artist as Translator

In contrast to Downey's desire to unite indigenous communities by bringing their cultures out of isolation, Pablo Helguera visited an autonomous region seeking independence from Brazil: Rio Grande do Sul, located in the southernmost part of the country bordering with Uruguay.

In the twin cities of Rivera and Santana do Livramento, inhabitants speak a dialect known as *Portuñol Riverense* or *Uruguayan Portuguese*. It is not a mere mix of the two; rather, it has a variety of words and a more ample phonetics developed to express specific connotations. Contact languages such as this arise on borders where inhabitants of different mother tongues need to interact. In this context, *Portuñol*—as depicted in Pablo's *Suite Riverense*—references lexical borrowings and invented vocabulary to bridge the gap between the two languages so communication can be carried out.

In his 2013 piece called *Conservatory of Dead Languages. Solo for Two Voices*, Pablo writes that "it is believed that there are around 6,000 languages. Fifty-two percent of them are spoken by less than 10,000 people, and twenty-eight percent by less than 1,000. It is estimated that during this century about half of these languages will disappear ... Language survives because of need; whenever it is not useful, other than to communicate to the older generation, it is abandoned... [Statistics estimate that] approximately every week the last speaker of a language dies." (Helguera 1-3)

The naming of America as a continent was a European invention, as was the *Latin* in Latin America, which refers to those countries whose languages have Latin roots. In *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter Mignolo writes that the name was first used in the 1830s to differentiate

“Latin” from “Anglo” Americas. (Mignolo 50) But the term is problematic because not only does it exclude the indigenous Native American population, it also excludes Africans brought to the continent as slaves. He wonders if Indo Latin America might suffice but *Indo* is also a European term produced by Columbus when he thought he had reached India. To complicate things, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed arrivals of immigrants from all over the world, so it becomes clear that naming by racial origins is impossible.

Néstor García Canclini, in his seminal book of 1989, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, writes that Latin America has always been a hybrid construction in which contributions from European Mediterranean, Native American and African migrations merged. These fusions were then further amplified through interacting with the English-speaking world.

Cuban artist José Seoane, on the other hand, takes a more tangible stance and offers us the object itself that is used for enunciation: the tongue. The ornately sculpted tongues reference the nuances of language in today’s world of transculturation. For example, the golden finishes and silver touches are metaphors for colloquial sayings in both English and Spanish: in English we say ‘to be silver tongued’ while in Spanish the saying is ‘to have a golden tongue’. Both, however, mean the same thing: to be elegant and persuasive.

The title—*Lingua Franca*—is Latin for a common idiom adopted between speakers whose native languages are different. Critic Gerardo Mosquera warns, however, against codification: for him, it results in a defective lingua franca that creates a hegemonic global meta-culture. Rather than multilateral codes, he supports a multifaceted structure of differentiated cells—a multicultural plurality. (Anthropophagy) Seoane says that his own double identity has inspired him “to move over, under and along cultural boundaries”.

Artist Juan Ortiz-Apuy scrutinizes these kinds of linguistic inadequacies. *A Map of the Empire of Language as a Place of Struggle* is a take-home topological blueprint of what he calls a kind of “fantasy library”. Dividing the map into four geographical regions—Violence, Representation, System and Things—the mind wanders through a labyrinth of titles by such illustrious thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco and Edward Said, to name a few. An absurd document, his cosmological chart provides a network of associations about communication, meaning and value.

To ease the tension, the artist uses language as a system for ordering thoughts, ideas and objects. In this way, the tension associated with vacillating boundaries is lessened. The viewer is led from a signifier to an idea to a fact and then back again, left to assemble the pieces into a hybrid system of meaning. Ortiz-Apuy’s *Map* shares the anxiety provoked by the hybridization of language, one he knows well, having migrated from Costa Rica to Quebec.

Mosquera has written at length about hybridization. In *Beyond the Fantastic*, he points to the political and social destabilization of the 1960s and 1970s that led to subsequent migration and displacement of culture, as well as the expansion of North American multiculturalism. The shift

towards de-centralization resulted in a hybrid approach that replaced Latin American fundamentalism with a polymorphic view of identity.

This shift in identity has been referred to by Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat as “life on the hyphen”: much as a bridge allows transit between locations, that small dash between words connects cultural concepts. *Life on the Hyphen: the Cuban-American Way* is a must read: the heavy topic of “one-and-a-halfers” living in a hyphenated culture is shared via a witty analysis of pop culture from the lyrics of Gloria Estefan to the I Love Lucy show. (3) In short, however, Pérez Firmat’s book is not about assimilation or opposition; it is about two cultures talking to each other.

Travel: The Artist as Explorer

José Luis Torres creates *The Ultimate Map* using measuring tapes to show it as—in his words—“the construction site of our everyday lives”. He delineates the contour of each continent around the world, flattening the globe into a single plane. The border around each continent is not just a political barrier that demarcates sovereign regions; rather, it is also a locus of negotiation between those who come and go, and those who monitor it. Furthermore, the measuring tapes that form José Luis’s globe are left dangling so that landmasses are not circumscribed entirely, which alludes to potential entry and exit points.

José Luis’s installation forces us to question our relation to the world. In “Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization and Cultural Dynamics”, Mosquera coins the term ‘glocal’ to refer to the blurring of the global with the local. He says “we are living in an era of ‘roadrunners’ that has broken down the idea of fixed identities and generated post-national subjects who find themselves in constant physical and cultural movement.” (Anthropophagy 3) As seen in the work of José Luis, Manolo and Clarissa, Mosquera writes that such external migrations “are redrawing the ethno-social maps within receiving countries, unraveling heterogeneous cultural dynamics.” (4)

Manolo Lugo does something similar but using technology to systematically remove references to location. The artist takes electronic maps of cities that straddle the Mexico-United States border and meticulously erases regional place names and landmarks, as well as symbols, legends and colour. Manolo goes even further by removing the border entirely, turning the cities into clean minimalist line drawings.

Assuming the role of cartographer, Manolo’s decision as to what remains or is removed from these minimalist maps heightens the abstract nature of geographic and political boundaries. The abstracted cities now merge, nameless, as a unified territory devoid of national distinction.

In *When Two Places Look Alike*, Clarissa Tossin approaches similar themes by crossing borders to document identical man-made towns located 7000 kilometres apart: Belterra, Brazil and Alberta, Michigan. Both of these towns were founded in the 1930s by Henry Ford who was

eager to ensure raw materials for automobile manufacture: wood from Alberta and latex from Belterra.

Both cities share a common architectural style called Cape Cod: devoid of ornamentation, dwellings sport low, broad frames that are generally a story and a half high. While standing in front of a house in one city, Tossin holds out a photograph of a house from the other and aligns them exactly so as to flatten not only the geographical distance between the two cities, but also the cultural differences.

All three of these artists cross borders where one must show passports as proof of identity. And yet their artwork does not seem to have an identity at all. In his 2002 “Good-Bye Identidad, Welcome Diferencia”, Mosquera writes that Latin American contemporary artists no longer reveal their identity through a folkloric or exoticized aesthetics as they once did. National folklore was often used to reveal an integrated and identifiable nation, but Latin American art of today is doing just the opposite. In fact, Latin American art of the last twenty years continues to cross borders and influence international trends.

Almost a decade later, García Canclini writes that art practices based on object-making have been replaced with those based on contexts so that “work is now inserted in mass media, urban spaces, digital networks and forms of social participation where aesthetics are diluted.” (Sociedad 17) Through an analysis of visual production by contemporary Latin American artists, he finds them occupying a place of imminence—that is, avoiding traditional representations and the marketing thereof in favour of an intercultural posture.

Bridges: The Artist as Architect

Growing up between Colombia, Venezuela and Panamá, Alexandra Gelis believes “landscapes can be seen as the intertwining of cultural and bio-political constructs in which our sense of place and memories reside.” She turns her lens to the Panama Canal, a shortcut that vastly reduces the time it takes for ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The once contested zone was controlled by France and then the United States before being taken over by the Panamanian government in 1999.

In her single-channel video *Bridge of the Americas*, Alexandra explores notions of international commerce as well as the migration of people. The Bridge is a major thoroughfare where, day and night, numerous vessels and vehicles pass under and over it respectively, either entering or departing the Canal. There are also wide access ramps at each end, and pedestrian walkways on each side. Of her video, Alexandra writes that “the persistent background of life in the Panama Canal Zone are these passing ships crammed with waving travellers, the most temporary of citizens.”

In *Genealogy*, Dianna Frid also portrays a bridge but she contrasts the solidity of steel and concrete with the supple material of fabric and thread. Much as a bridge is constructed by assembling and securing building materials, Dianna stitches a connecting structure that

continues page after page so that the physical action of turning the pages replicates crossing from one side of the bridge to the other. Bridges are uncontested symbols of transition and, coupled with the title *Genealogy*, Dianna comments on heritage, relocation and displacement.

As we 'read' her book, words have been translated into image and texture that unfolds sequentially to recount a story. Seeing a connection between the structure of books and buildings, her fabric manuscripts are often sketches for architectural installations. *Genealogy*, for example, is a sketch for a forty-two foot textile installation called *Structure/Bridge*.

Both Alexandra and Dianna's bridges displace migrants to foreign lands, to what Homi Bhabha calls a "third dimension" (50) and it is here—on the boundaries in-between difference—where the most creative forms of cultural identity are produced. The third space, or gap, makes present something that is absent. This can be an uncomfortable zone of absence or invisibility activated by the anguish that results from vacillating boundaries.

In *Absentia*—or absence—photographer Laura Barrón communicates this through abandoned buildings, empty swimming pools and transitional spaces encountered during sojourns in Latin American cities including Cali, Buenos Aires, Quito, Mexicali and Lima. Begun in 2012, *Absentia* is an on-going archive inspired by Laura's experiences of relocation, including the sense of loss and lack of belonging.

Embarking on nomadic travels, she documents empty and abandoned urban spaces in a state of transition, seeking out sites that contain marks of what once was. These sites are superimposed with floor plans of relatively affluent residential homes that include patios, gardens and swimming pools, harking back to times of comfort and stability. The photographs of ruin and decay create a tension between what evidently remains and what has disappeared, and are testaments to histories of violence, upheaval or decadence.

Community: The Artist as Social Worker

The subtitle of *TransAMERICAS—A sign, a situation a concept*—is taken from Frederico Morais, a Brazilian art critic who, in 1970, organized Sundays of Creation, a series of six participatory community events held the last Sunday of every month on the grounds of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. He wrote about these in an essay called "Against Affluent Art" and declared "the work of art no longer exists. It is a sign, a situation, a concept." (45) With this statement, Morais conceptualizes art to allow for a broader range of analysis.

Elena Shtromberg, writing about Morais in *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s*, views "partnerships between the artist and the viewer as catalysts for the building of a better world. By assimilating activities into the artistic experience, aesthetic situations would ... stimulate a collective consciousness from which collective progress was fathomable." (2)

Taking their name from the Mayan bat god of twilight, crossroads and transformation, Z'otz* Collective meets weekly to collaborate on works that tell surrealistic tales of transition,

displacement and evolution. Nahúm Flores, Erik Jerezano and Ilyana Martínez describe their objective of 'being together' in an ever more complex social, political and cultural environment.

They also organize community drawing sessions in which they often create 'exquisite corpses'. This was a chance-based game used especially during the Surrealist movement: each participant draws an image and then folds the paper to conceal it before passing it to the next player for their contribution. When opened, the resulting compositions are often absurd or nonsensical. Indeed, the Collective's murals are created using a similarly ludic process and the audience is then left to imagine their own narratives inspired by the compositions.

Argentinian sociologist Roberto Jacoby (b 1944) was one of the first in Latin America to form groups in which artists worked together. In 1966, Jacoby co-published the "First Manifesto of Media Art" with Eduardo Costa and Raúl Escari: they proposed a dematerialized art genre that made use of communication structures and the mass media.

Since 1998, Jacoby has been involved in conceiving and developing networks of artists and non-artists. Most notable was Project Venus, running between 2000 and 2006. It was defined as an experimental society with a network of almost 500 people with diverse social backgrounds and education. Using a currency called the 'venus', these people exchanged symbolic or material goods to undertake a variety of projects together. Project Venus drew its force from the conviction that a collaboration between two or more people resulted in, for them, the formation of a post-individual identity, a collective intelligence that was richer in possibilities.

Performance artist Eugenio Salas also references informal economies: he highlights the issues of trade between countries and, in particular, speaks to the challenges of unregulated import and export, including smuggling and contraband. Instead of monetary currency, he encourages trade and exchange in a market where, for him, social interaction should predominate.

In his performance *YYZGRU Express*, Eugenio assumes the role of a courier offering his services to transport parcels between the two cities. He delivered twelve parcels in total, containing various items from photos and postcards to a hair straightener and a helmet. Acting as a service provider, Eugenio documented the participants and their packages in an activity that coincided with the Hemispheric Institute's 2013 "Encuentro" symposium at the University of São Paulo.

The curators of *TransAMERICAS*—Cassandra Getty and Dianne Pearce—decided that it was pertinent to create their own participatory project that would run the duration of the exhibition. The community photography project called *Click! Panoramic Americas* solicited photographs from the public and then printed and mounted selections in the exhibition space. A website was specially designed to receive the images at www.transamericas.click. Documentary filmmaker Juan Andrés Bello was hired to oversee this community wall.

Click! asked people what they would like others to know about Latin America by sending photographs they have taken that fall within one of five themes: people, places, practices, conflict and diversity, and knowledge. This international project aimed to be inclusive,

transcending ideas of borders and categories by indicating underlying concepts of movement, change and identity.

Life on the hyphen as “public lodge” and “technology of friendship”

In 1969, Jacoby gave up working as an artist and began researching social conflict and politics after participating in an exhibition called *Tecumán is Burning* the previous year. Meant to protest the Argentinian government, the exhibition shed light on the social injustices of the time. But the controversial nature of the era meant the artists were in danger of persecution so the work was quickly destroyed to protect their identities. The exhibition met a premature end and could not be documented; little is therefore known about who the participating artists actually were.

This marked Jacoby’s departure from art to focus on politics and social conflict—from here on in, he focused on producing work that would reach as large an audience as possible. The Venus Project mentioned above was the result of this shift. Toni Negri, upon learning of the project at a barbecue hosted by Jacoby in Buenos Aires in 2003, aptly called it a “public lodge” (Sainz): there are no requisites for taking part in the game; rather, the proposal is open to anyone willing to participate.

The public lodge brings us back to “life on the hyphen”, the term proposed by Pérez Firmat and the title of his book. The hyphen connects members in a public lodge so they can “transmit their values by infiltrating the presumed centre of the social body.” (5) The Translation Bureau at Public Works and Government Services Canada expounds that two words begin separately, next become hyphenated, and finally become a single word written without a space or hyphen. The hyphen denotes a relationship between A and B. (Translation Bureau)

Mariana ‘Kiwi’ Sainz and Cecilia Sainz—collaborators of Jacoby’s—were quick to recognize that such a hyphenated public lodge is not a spontaneous process: “it takes the right environment for a relationship to sprout, a common playground where people can meet and get to know what do they have for each other [sic]. ... Fears, prejudices and limitations are against it.” (Sainz) Curators Cassandra Getty and Dianne Pearce, in collaboration with Rita Camacho Lomelí, sought to hyphenate communities with the exhibition *TransAMERICAS: A sign, a situation, a concept*.

The exhibition—or public lodge, if you will—united fourteen artists whose work examines relationships formed between people and places, and presents them through themes of language, travel, bridges and community. Much in the same way Argentinian sociologist Roberto Jacoby’s Project Venus encouraged an art of connecting people, the artists in *TransAMERICAS* interweave networks, cross symbolic borders and multiply opportunities for fertile encounters. Their work is a catalyst for global dialogue through what Jacoby calls a “technology of friendship”.

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