



JUAN ACHA

DESPERTAR REVOLUCIONARIO
REVOLUTIONARY AWAKENING

JUAN ACHA, *ARTES VISUALES* AND THE PRIMERA BIENAL LATINOAMERICANA DE SÃO PAULO

CARLA STELLWEG

In 1972, Fernando Gamboa, then director of the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM) and deputy director of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), introduced me to Juan Acha at his office in the directors' department, which he shared with Mariana Frenk Westheim. At the time I was working on the first issue of the bilingual (Spanish and English) quarterly *Artes Visuales*. Later, in private, I asked Gamboa what had motivated Juan to come to Mexico, and he clarified that he had come that same year from Washington, D.C., where he had worked for a time with José Gómez-Sicre, and did not want to return to Peru for political reasons. Then he added that Octavio Paz had recommended that Acha worked with him at the MAM.

I was surprised not to have met him in New York, where a group of Latin American artists, filmmakers, poets and critics, either in exile or in self-imposed exile, came together in what we called *El museo latinoamericano*, a loose entity that went from loft to loft, and which was complemented, when we had disagreements about our *modus operandi*, by the Movimiento de Independencia Cultural Latinoamericano (MICLA), which organized and published the now much-analyzed book *Contra Bienal* in 1971, against the dictatorship in Brazil. The military government was using the biennial as a vehicle for international legitimation in order to hide the torture, repression and censorship that was growing with each passing day, supported by the US Embassy and Department of State. Recalling those years when we worked together at the MAM, those of us in the *Artes Visuales* team occupied the opposite side of that round building, with its immense dome in the Bosque de Chapultepec, facing out onto the Paseo de la Reforma. Juan came over to our side quite often.

Upon rereading its texts, interspersed with other contributions, what jumps out at me is the long list of personalities who paraded through its pages, many of whom are no longer with us, like Mário Pedrosa, Romero Brest, Walter Zanini and Ferreira Gullar, as well as Jorge Glusberg, Damián Bayón, Carlos

Monsiváis, Octavio Paz, Alaide Foppa and Marta Traba, not to mention the artists and so many others.

At our almost daily encounters at the MAM, Juan and I would discuss the museum's program and, with a particular emphasis, the need to move art criticism away from the Mexican nationalism that was still prevailing in most cultural institutions and publications, and more toward an "international," hemispheric perspective. We were both concerned by the lack of an art criticism based on the multiple and contradictory realities of the 1970's, and in Juan's case this problematic was unfurling into the elaboration of a possible theory of Latin American art, a small task that he developed in various publications like *Arte y sociedad: Latinoamérica. El producto artístico y su estructura* (1979). Our exchanges would give way to other aspects that arose from considerations specifically related to the editorial task of *Artes Visuales*, which were most often dealt with by sending questionnaires to colleagues in other parts of Latin America, Europe and/or the US, prompting and opening up a Latin Americanist discourse based on the political and economic conditions of production, distribution and consumption of that time.

Juan laid out this discourse from various perspectives, in particular from sociology and his readings of other Latin American as well as European and Anglo-American colleagues, which on many occasions resulted in our agreeing to disagree. For example, his theory of non-objectual art seemed to me too close to the dematerialization of art coming out of specifically Anglo-American socio-political circumstances of the era, like the invasion of Cambodia and the intensification of the war in Vietnam, various political scandals like Watergate, and technological changes like the first personal computers, Betamax and VCRs, etcetera. In retrospect, the goal was to turn dematerialized art into an act of transgression and an emblem of liberation.

We would discuss the ebb and flow of the histories of colonization, avoiding the generalization and homogenization of the different experiences of violence in the North and South and their effect on and in the processes of artistic practices and museum practices. And even though in those years Jorge Alberto Manrique invited Umberto Eco, author of *Opera aperta* [*Open Work*] (1962), and we had already read Roland Barthes's *La mort de l'auteur* [*The Death of the Author*] (1962), at *Artes Visuales* it seemed relevant to underscore the definitions of resistance and activism in the varied forms of conceptualizing Latin American artistic

practices during those years, and to put them face-to-face with conceptual art from non-Latin American contexts. At the end of the day, the magazine was not an academic journal like the ones published by the UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, but rather a *visual culture* publication that included comic strips, photo essays, film, video, architecture, photography, performance, genre [gender] art, artist's books, mail art, and combinations of these disciplines.

Artes Visuales was a vehicle for activating artistic dynamics and dialogue. Juan Acha's contributions testify to his enormous capacity for assimilating several tasks and realities at the same time, like ghost writing texts for Gamboa for most of the museum's catalogs and participating in conferences, symposia and colloquia, as well as running a good part of the correspondence for the museum's directorship. Most notable, though, is the vast legacy that Acha left through his classes about the plastic arts, design, art theory, sociology, aesthetics and philosophy, at both La Esmeralda and the Academia de San Carlos. This would be a good time to go to the Archivo Juan Acha to study the journal's networks of communication, in particular the episode of the first Bienal Latinoamericana in São Paulo, to which *Artes Visuales* devoted its twenty-first issue (March-May 1979).

Rereading testimonies, I remember the confusion generated both by the biennial and the symposium, organized by Acha with Aracy Amaral. In one of the texts from that issue, Mirko Lauer, writing about the theme of myth and magic, cites Acha's *El color como mito* [*Color as Myth*], in which the latter explains, "[...] the idea of the famous Mexican penchant for color [...] to what degree does it make sense to rationalize, in these times, the irrationality of color and to establish its mythical origins, as well as its collective existence." From the vantage point of today, one is tempted to return to the episode of the *Mitos vadios*, a series of controversial actions in the streets outside of the biennial organized by Hélio Oiticica and Ivald Granato with Claudio Tozzi, Ana María Maiolino, José Roberto Aguilar, Antonio Manuel, Julio Plaza, Regina Vater and Alfredo Portillos.

Hélio Oiticica conceived color not as myth but as essence and matter, particularly in an extensive series of participatory works called *Bólides* and *Parangolés*, which made up part of his *Mitos vadios*. Revolutionary concepts in which the work acts as a vehicle of meaning for the body and as bodies themselves, full of interventions by a group of invited guests, they stand out as

critical, unsettling works. Elsewhere, Maiolino made an installation out of a small table with a bag of beans and another of rice, tied with black tape and entitled *Monumento al hambre* [*Monument to Hunger*], and on the wall behind it she hung rolls of differently-colored toilet paper, exposing the critical side of hygiene habits, in an act resembling what we now call *relational aesthetics*. As an epilogue, one would have to mention that the “color as myth” followed its path, leaving the Bienal Latinoamericana de São Paulo and passing to the Guggenheim Museum, where, in 1979, a retrospective of Rufino Tamayo entitled *Mitos y magia* was being held, a show that also insisted on that peculiar way of understanding color, as a singularly Mexican identity, thus perpetuating the myth and the magic of color *ad infinitum*.



UM MITO VADIO

Hélio Oiticica é um dos "mitos vadios" que participam hoje, das 10 às 20 horas, de um happening num estacionamento da rua Amália, próximo à estação em Estados Unidos. Ali, ele e outros representantes da chamada "vanguarda de artes plásticas", como Ivanildo Gama, Regina Vaner, Lígia Figue e outros, estarão mostrando seus trabalhos, abertos a qualquer público autodeclarado.

Hélio, curador de 41 anos, há sete no exterior e há alguns meses de volta ao Brasil, foi presidente da Mangueira amigo de marqueteiros como Cezar de Carvalho, Napoleão do Lago, e tido de um líder respeitado, José Oiticica, e, além de todos esses, criou a "Tripeçaria", núcleo movimentado que inaugurou o Movimento Tropicalista. Seus históricos e instalações estão sendo expostos, de qual participaram Leon Fernando Indaiatuba, que foi do Grupo Odebre, e Jarys Maciel, o músico e compositor que deu início à conversa colocando na vitrina "Tempe", de Cezinha Veloso.

por Jary Cardoso

HÉLIO OITICICA - Com 41 anos, em 17 anos de vida, ele viveu o Rio de Janeiro como um mito. Foi presidente da Mangueira, amigo de marqueteiros como Cezar de Carvalho, Napoleão do Lago, e tido de um líder respeitado, José Oiticica, e, além de todos esses, criou a "Tripeçaria", núcleo movimentado que inaugurou o Movimento Tropicalista. Seus históricos e instalações estão sendo expostos, de qual participaram Leon Fernando Indaiatuba, que foi do Grupo Odebre, e Jarys Maciel, o músico e compositor que deu início à conversa colocando na vitrina "Tempe", de Cezinha Veloso.

"Tripeçaria" - um espaço político, artístico e intelectual. Foi criado por Hélio Oiticica, com o intuito de criar um espaço de encontro, de diálogo, de troca, de luta. Foi um espaço de encontro, de diálogo, de troca, de luta. Foi um espaço de encontro, de diálogo, de troca, de luta.

Mais de 40 anos de vida e já com 41 anos, Hélio Oiticica é um dos "mitos vadios" que participam hoje, das 10 às 20 horas, de um happening num estacionamento da rua Amália, próximo à estação em Estados Unidos. Ali, ele e outros representantes da chamada "vanguarda de artes plásticas", como Ivanildo Gama, Regina Vaner, Lígia Figue e outros, estarão mostrando seus trabalhos, abertos a qualquer público autodeclarado.

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