

Insular Areas of Media Creativity in Latin America

Initial findings on art, science and technology in groups and non-represented areas of Latin America

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/an initiative

ATA (Alta Tecnología Andina¹) has been working in Latin America for the last six years exploring its diversity in media art production as well as theoretical and practical relations between art, science and technology. In recent years ATA has been especially interested in developing relations, researching and producing information on areas that are not known as producers of new media art in Latin America. Beyond some important countries, such as Brazil, Argentina or Mexico, digital art production in Latin America is quite unknown, especially among Latin America countries themselves. However, expressions of new media art exist in the entire region and are continuously growing and interestingly they acquire different perspectives depending on each area, which makes them exciting and diverse.

Among the reasons of the recent exposure some initiatives are worth mentioning that offered visibility to the production in Latin America in recent years:

Festivals: The more active and constant Festivals in the region such as Videobrasil² (since 1985) had congregated great part of the Latin American productions thanks to the focus on the 'political south hemisphere'. Other initiatives worth mentioning are the Bienal de video y nuevos medios of Santiago de Chile³ (since 1993); in Buenos Aires the Muestra Euro Americana de Video y Arte Digital (since 1997); in Lima the Festival Internacional de Video/Arte/Electrónica⁴ (since 1998)..

Mailing Lists: Since 2000 the Lista de Interés Iberoamericana de Arte, Nuevos Medios, Ciencia y Tecnología mostly known as [iberoamerica-act]⁵ has congregated around 200 members that exchange information mainly about new

¹ <http://www.ata.org.pe/>

² <http://www.videobrasil.org.br/>

³ <http://www.bienaldevideo.cl/>

⁴ <http://www.ata.org.pe/festival>

⁵ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/iberoamerica-act>

media art in Latin America; since 2002 the list expanded and carries also some information in Portuguese. In a much more theoretical orientation, Nettime Latino⁶, the Spanish-language arm of Nettime mailing list for net criticism, has also served as a platform for discussion.

Prizes and Awards: The Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) organized during 2002/2003 the First Award and Exhibition of Video Art from Latin America, that for the first time reunited works from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, México, Paraguay, Perú, República Dominicana, Uruguay and Venezuela. Other regional prizes include Videobrasil, Concurso de Videocreación “Inquieta Imagen” (Costa Rica), among other National Awards (Peru, Cuba, Colombia, Chile, etc.)

This research is focused in defining the areas with low visibility in which a real development and interest in digital art exists, either because these are zones with an interesting original or creative development or for other reasons (cultural, educational, technological, social, etc.) that allow the progress of new media.

//Central America

Central America media art is practically unknown internationally. Nevertheless as a region has been quite active for the last years. One of the main activators has been the Concurso de Videocreación “Inquieta Imagen” organized by the Media Library of the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo⁷ (MADC) of **Costa Rica** and coordinated by the Cuban Ernesto Calvo. San José in that sense acts as the hub-city for media arts in the region. The MADC also runs an Award for Emerging Artists (Concurso Centroamericano de Artistas Emergentes) promoting a new generation of artists that thanks to an international jury invited every year get worldwide exposure progressively.

The works produced in **Panama** are technically the most impressive and pristine, which is due to the commercial relation with the United States and the fairly easy access to electronic equipment in comparison to the rest of the region. The recent exposure of the work “Aria” by Brooke Alfaro in the Venice Biennale (2003) and also as the winner of the first prize of the IDB video award has given a boost to the Panama art scene. Many artists have studied abroad, mainly in the United States, which implies also their interest in global thematics. Finally the Biennial of Panama has also launched since the beginning of the 1990’s a younger generation of artists working in new media.

Costa Rica has not only a diverse production, but it is also the country with more works being produced. Though the vast majority of the production is based on video by artists such as Jose Alberto Arce, Verónica Monestel, Andrés Carranza,

⁶ <http://nettime.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/nettime-lat>

⁷ <http://www.madc.ac.cr/>

Priscilla Monge, among the better known ones. The works range from performative, narrative, dance theatre, animation to experimental video. Other forms of digital art in the search of non-linear narratives are emerging, such as Jorge Alban's software art piece, based on QuickTime VR technology.

In **Nicaragua** media art is related with ways to reconstruct the country and preserve memory. One example is Ernesto Salmerón, a young artist who studied in Colombia and is developing the project titled "Documento1/29", a series of 29 media documents that are being reworked and manipulated by the artist.

In **Honduras**, as in the case of Nicaragua, media art deals with thematic of politics and human rights but there are also works in the new media poetry, such as those by Alan Omar Mairena. In the other cases, groups such as "Los artistas de la gente", a collective of five artists of different generations and disciplines: Regina Aguilar (coordinator of the collective and sculptor), Alejandro Duron (graphic designer and video editor), Eduardo Bahr (writer, scriptwriter and actor), Roger Rovelo (actor and theater director), Roberto Buddhe (journalist), responded artistically to the repressive government by developing critical art situations.

Guatemala is probably the only country in the region that tries to show a traditional and ethnographical perspective. With around 85% of its population being indigenous, their use of technology in the arts is heavily based on performance or as a way to preserve memory and local traditions. Works such as the ones by Sandra Monterroso analyze folklore stereotypes politically emphasized by media culture.

In **El Salvador** we could find works such as Cesar Danilo Girón in 3D animation or more in relation with a social context, such as Rodolfo Walsh. Nevertheless its participation in the recent new media movement is not as low as in other cases, which could be seen as unusual for such a small nation. The recent launch (2003) of the First Exhibition of Video in El Salvador (coordinated by Mauro Arias) has to be taken into account.

///Cuba

It is possible to state that in Cuba some areas of visual creation in very recent times have been clearly outstanding. The foundations for this outcome were provided by the Cuban visual arts 'move' which, since 1983, burst onto the Latin American and worldwide visual art context thanks to the Havana Biennial. But even before, Cuban cinema and graphic design had hit deeply during the decades of 1960 and 1970.

In its present form, the Cuban Digital Art scene reaches visibility for the first time thanks to the Salón de Arte Digital⁸ of the Centro Pablo de la Torriente Brau⁹, which since 1999 includes three main activities: 1) Award for Cuban Digital Art creators 2) International Hall and Symposia of Digital Art and 3) Promotion and Dissemination of Digital Art in events inside and outside Cuba.

The acknowledged point of origin is the experimental work of the plastic artist Luis Miguel Valdés (now resident in Mexico D.F.) in the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) of Havana in 1986. The Laboratory of Computation Applied to the Plastic Arts (Laboratorio de Computación Aplicada a las Artes Plásticas) was inaugurated in the ISA and Valdés was in charge of the first workshops. The first digital graphics work exhibition produced thanks to these workshops took place in 1988.

It is important to indicate that when opening its program of Digital Art, the Centro Pablo fulfilled, the hopes of young artists, between 25 and 30 years old, creators who used the electronic means but who were not familiar with the atmosphere of the visual arts scene of Havana. Eduardo Moltó, winner of the 2nd edition of the Salon (2000), is one of the artists who have grown thanks to the Centro Pablo. Angel Alonso Blanco, winner of the audio-visual section in last year's Salon de Arte Digital (2003) is another.

In the particularly exciting 2003 edition, a feminine figure finally appeared: Glenda Leon was awarded the prize for an audio-visual work. Hopefully this will mean the appearance of more women authors in Cuba.

Video performance by Cuban artists has developed mainly abroad, supported by different institutions at which the artists had been in residence.

Alquimia Peña, director of the Fundacion de Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano has been compiling information to establish a resource center for cinema and video in Latin America, supported by UNESCO. A new trend in digital cinema has appeared in Cuba in the last three years and surely this together with the existence of the Salon de Arte Digital has prompted their interest.

Public awareness of the Salon de Arte Digital is very good, especially since it receives very important support from national Cuban television and radio, which broadcast publicity spots as well as interviews with international guests and local participants. Centro Pablo is also working towards disseminating Digital and Electronic Art to Cuban cities beyond Havana (one can say that the capital-provinces dichotomy applies here after a fashion).

⁸ <http://www.artedigital.cubasi.cu/>

⁹ <http://www.centropablo.cult.cu/>

///Ecuador

The visual arts in Ecuador have three major cultural and geographical centers: Quito (the capital), Guayaquil and Cuenca. The difference between them lies in their geographical location, which is tendentiously read as an index of modernity: Guayaquil is the main port on the Coast and the financial hub of the country, and therefore sees itself as 'modern' in comparison to Quito and Cuenca, which are Andean cities.

Cuenca is the seat of the stimulating Cuenca Biennale¹⁰ since 1989 (in a city where there is no private gallery activity). This event has grown steadily and surely is now very much on the agendas of foreign curators and gallerists (though mainly Latin American ones). Local public awareness of it is clearly growing and the local press has understood that it adds to the city's profile as a more specialized tourist attraction. The 2004 event reunited recent Latin American art proposals –some remarkable ones among them–, selected by appointed curators from the different countries involved. Videos from Colombia, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Martinique, Venezuela, Perú and Ecuador were shown. The Biennale is therefore the place for young aspiring video artists from Ecuador to acquire first-hand knowledge of significant video works from other Latin American countries. Cuenca-based art critic and one-time Biennale curator Cristobal Zapata is a good contact with local new media artists.

Quito is, however, the place where the most interesting and noteworthy video artists in Ecuador come from. They are the artists who tend to represent the country's video art scene abroad. Among these creators are artists like Ulises Unda, whose works are basically single-channel video, though he has created video installations occasionally. Other younger artists like Cesar Portilla, Giovanni Zapata and Miguel Alvear are in the process of defining their new media proposals, but unfortunately, due to the lack of events related to new media do not derive the benefits that usually arise through confrontation with the work of others. It is among visual arts and design students that the interest in new media is growing, almost with the character of an alternative scene, where the creators remain basically self-taught and their work is self-financed.

As capital city, Quito offers the possibility of important institutional art spaces for the presentation and promotion of new media works, such as the Centro Cultural of the Universidad Católica de Quito.

Though women do not figure much as authors or creators of video works, they are important in activities concerning research and curatorial practice. Video performance in Ecuador has been followed in its development by Guayaquil-based art critic and curator Jenny Jaramillo. Also, María Belén Moncayo is

¹⁰ <http://www.bienaldepinturacuenca.org.ec/>

developing a research on the cultural standing of cinema and video in Ecuador today.

/////Bolivia

As in the case of Ecuador, Bolivia has three main cities: La Paz, Santa Cruz and Cochabamba are the main centers at which artists are producing new media art pieces. The tendency in Bolivia is related to performative arts, cinema, digital photography and video.

Unfortunately none of the three country's art schools (two in La Paz and one in Santa Cruz) work with new media. For this reason artists leave the country to study abroad. This is the case of Narda Alvarado, now at the Rijksakademie and Marcelo Santorelli (previously at the KHM in Cologne). Other artists such as Valia Carvalho (Santa Cruz), Joaquín Sánchez (La Paz) and Maria Luisa Ramirez work with video, performance and digital photography.

In Santa Cruz one must also mention Raquel Schwartz who directs a gallery of contemporary art. Worth mentioning is also Rodrigo Bellot, who studied filmmaking at Ithaca College and has directed four short films and one feature film ("Sexual Dependency") that won international recognition.

Cochamba seems a very active city too: recently, La Fabrica, a new cinema school was founded; Gonzalo Ordonez works in digital photography and is currently developing a local network of artists called Asociación N.A.D.A. that will for the first time integrate mixed media practices in contemporary art projects.

Probably the only exhibition that has been open to new media happens also in Cochabamba: the Bienal del Concurso Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo (CONART) now coming to its second edition (2004) with around 30 works from photography, public intervention, installation, performances, videos developed by curator Angelika Heckl and the Oficialía Mayor de Cultura de Cochabamba. In relation to work with engineers, there are people in La Paz working in projects related to art and cybernetics.

/////Peru

It could be argued that the beginnings of electronic art in Peru coincide with the International Video Art Festival organized by the Peruvian art critic and art historian Alfonso Castrillón, and Jorge Glusberg, of the Art and Communication Center in Buenos Aires. This event was accomplished in September of 1977, in the Gallery of the Continental Bank (Lima). Rafael Hastings presented on that occasion some of the first local videos created in Perú. On the other hand

Francisco Mariotti¹¹ during in the late 1960's exhibited at Documenta IV of Kassel an enormous, penetrable, light pail of seven meters, whose sound and light effects answered to the interaction of a keyboard. After this first and auspicious moment, however, the electronic art stopped almost completely in Peru for about two decades.

In 1998 the 2nd International Video Art Festival is accomplished in Lima, organized by ATA (Alta Tecnología Andina). Fortunately, and thanks to a small media laboratory installed at ATA, local works were produced and presented within the Festival. Since then, the Festival Internacional de Video/Arte/Electrónica (VAE) is accomplished annually, with a massive response of the public, which confirms the great interest in the new manifestations that art and technology can produce.

The Centro Cultural de San Marcos, the Cultural Center of the Universidad de San Marcos (America's oldest University) has a unique infrastructure for Lima's Downtown area in relation to exhibitions and conferences and their artistic interests tend to be innovative and experimental and some exhibitions related to media art recently have been presented at the Center, some of them in collaboration with ATA.

The Festival has been the only constant event dedicated solely to the relations between art, science and technology, bringing at least 50 artists and theorists from abroad to Lima with the support of several Embassies and diplomatic legations. Its particular format of 1 to 2 months of duration makes it possible for the guests to share time with local creators and develop new relationships that usually in one-week-short events are difficult to establish.

During the last years the use and presentation of new media art has expanded and at least two generations during the last 6 years have been driven by this consolidated platform of new media. The first group of artists worked basically with video, video installation and performance, such as Roger Atasi, Rafael Besaccia, Angie Bonino, Alvaro Zavala and Iván Esquivel. A much younger generation interestingly uses more sophisticated ways of production such as Diego Lama and Carlos Letts.

The history of the development of the Internet in Peru spans the last ten years following the creation of the Red Científica Peruana (Peruvian Scientific Network or RCP). The RCP did an invaluable contribution not only locally, but also in an international level in regard to the Information technology development thanks to their initiative of developing a communitarian framework based on public internet cabins. Certain projects using the Internet have also been accomplished, principally the web site 7sabores.com created by Iván Lozano commissioned by ATA and the Worldwide Video Festival (Amsterdam).

¹¹ www.mariotti.ch

In 2001 of the ATALab in Lima opened with support from a grant from the Daniel Langlois Foundation to promote, disseminate and educate in a visual culture based mostly in the works created by the combination of art, science and technology in the hope of bringing about a change of attitude and knowledge in the public who wants to enhance the knowledge already acquired on those issues, or develop a new approach in the creative process by means of actively helping in or learning through seminars, workshops, conferences and several other activities.

Collaborations among engineers and artists do exist, such as the Interactive System for Exploring Audiovisual Harmony developed by a group of young electronic engineering students led by Enrique Mayorga. Recently, Mayorga and José Carlos Martinat developed at ATALab the project “Stereo-Reality Environments” which handles a computer processor as a matrix for public intervention.

Finally, the electronic music scene is worth mentioning with occasion of the 5th Festival Internacional de video/arte/electrónica (2001) a public space experience of 168 hours of continuous sound based on original electronic compositions brought together for the first time more than a dozen of Peruvian musicians such as Jose Javier Castro (coordinator), Félix Arias, Ensamble, 5 Esquinas, Johnny Collantes, Omar Lavalle, Theremyn_4, Unidad Central, Naylamp, Ivo Draganac, Christian Galarreta y Kiko Mayorga. During the last two years the Contacto Electronic Music Festival organized by the Centro Cultural de España has also been an important venue for workshops and performances on electroacoustic music.

There are three main centers outside of Lima, traditionally Trujillo in the north, Arequipa and Cuzco in the South. Quite unexpectedly after twenty years of an acutely difficult human rights situation Ayacucho in center southern Andes has been the ‘meca’ of a grassroots Andean digital cinema move.

In Trujillo new media art is mainly represented by video, ranging from installation to single-channel screening, from fiction to new documentary forms. The authors are principally graduates from Communication Study Programs of the Universidad Privada del Norte (UPN) and Universidad Privada Antenor Orrego (UPAO). They are basically self-taught in video and their formal field of study in the visual arts has been photography. Jano Cortijo won one of the five prizes awarded by an international jury at the II National Arts Biennial of Lima (2000) and went on to show his completed project at the III Iberoamerican Biennial of Lima (2002). Alice Vega won a Goethe Institute Video and New Media Contest (in cooperation with ATA) as part of the 200 anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt’s travels in South America. In Trujillo there is also an Independent Video Festival held every year that congregates practically all the video production of the city as well as chosen works by authors from Lima and perhaps some international works

In Arequipa video creation is an option recently favored by visual artists trained in the traditional Fine Arts Schools (Escuela de Arte de la Universidad Nacional San Agustín and Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes “Carlos Baca Flor”). There have been no initiatives at all concerning the organization of a Festival or any kind of similar projects.

In Cuzco, obviously the main tourist attraction of Peru, the visual arts are in general torn between traditional practices and radical new departures. The city is in many ways cosmopolitan in a way that Lima isn't, but only rarely is there any contact between visiting international visual artists and Cuzco artists.

The Fine Arts School (Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes “Diego Quispe Tito”) students engage in independent production but in contrast with Arequipa, Cultural Centers in Cuzco are not open to video and new media (although it must be said that most presentations are amateurish). There has been no local initiative about a Festival or similar event.

In Ayacucho in the last five years a burgeoning independent film movement has commanded attention from Lima. Some of the films have been shown 'commercially' briefly in Lima film theaters with unexpected 'success'. It is mainly a digital cinema movement and the authors once again come from the visual arts field (there is a Fine Art School in the city, Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes “Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala). This is fascinating taking into account that Ayacucho saw the embodiment of the finest expressions in Andean popular art, ranging from song and dance to pottery until 1970. This creative atmosphere came to an end in early 1980's due to an increasing violence in the region that resulted in the context of an internal civil war. Ladislao Parra, Painting and Ceramics lecturer at the Fine Arts School is an invaluable contact in this film scene since he has participated doing camera work for several of the projects.

/////still a lot to be done...

As it is clear from the previous account, many zones are represented poorly since their production is scarce, in that case, a regional approach that involves several countries of the region should be taken into account, to make visible a group of proposals and promote new media creation at a regional level, which will also induce competition, thus stimulating production of more forceful works.