

Latin America media art: Local Creation / Global Articulation *

By José Carlos Mariátegui

I

In geographic terms we usually think of Latin America as a region. But it is not easy to generalize as one the creative processes and information streams of different countries in a determined region. Though this notion of generalization tends to be taken out from the process of the so-called 'globalization', it could be questioned in a very critical but useful way. As a result, we can use this notion to analyze the differences among new media creation in Latin America and outline some tendencies in recent productions. Since all of us are suffering, on one way or the other, as well as representing, the processes of globalization in different levels and from different perceptions, it seems interesting to consider the space for action as an intersection between the global and local premises: a position that occupies a hybrid space, a platform of mixed realities, in an attempt to articulate the ideas within these two strong tendencies. This hybridism by which these identities are transported is reflected in today's ambivalent use of media art from the production and participation within a 'global popular culture' to the construction of local attitudes.

Its not just a question of identifying Latin America's local reality with tradition or modernity, new identities are not only generated by global or local means but from the complex articulations that occur inside an unstable equilibrium in the form of different visions of the same discourse out from a local contact which mediates its relation and response with the exterior (which doesn't necessarily means the global). For that reason

**Originally published in German in: "Bandbreite. Medien zwischen Kunst und Politik", (eds. Andreas Broeckmann y Rudolf Frieling), Kulturverlag Kadmos, Berlin, 2004, pp. 113-120 (ISBN 3-931659-65-8)*

it is much more open and 'friendly' to speak and analyze new media hybridism as a process of different identities or multiple perceptions in relation to specific contexts.

First of all, the problem of analyzing the different ways of creation in Latin America is that cultural distances exist, that is to say the South - South interaction is very complex and from a global perspective the regional sense could also be used as an essential analysis towards the real local situation, as we will describe later. This is an important point that we must take into consideration to be able to face the situation that the concept of 'nation' does not exist anymore.

From an easygoing perspective globalization could be seen as a way to try to use the same 'prescription' that worked well in some counties into others, that is to say, an attempt to recreate the same discourse into another language and culture. In this sense the analyses on the current development of media art in a global scale often has a sophisticated but empirically flat theoretical development, constructing polished conceptual arguments that little gather from (local) reality. Nothing is less original than this type of proposals. For that reason the articulation of intermediate process and getting-together different pieces from reality have a fundamental value in today's contemporary media art creation.

A central aspect that occurs to many people that live in highly populated centres, capitals or metropolis in Latin America is the approach and desire for a western lifestyle imitating it in the hope of being 'others': an unstable equilibrium of total subjugation. It is interesting that many of those global cities inside this complex space seem united or much more 'connected' among them than with their extremely quiet zones outside those cities, not knowing what happens there at a creative level. We believe that the scheme and condition of the premises and the relation with the centres that exist within the peripheries need to be reframed, taking into the discussion a concept that we can call the 'periphery of periphery': towns where in many cases the Internet hasn't yet arrived, where the digital is still in its infancy or not at all present, spaces in which if we want to 'innovate' it must be by the use of 'offline technologies', such as video. If we manage to

develop or to define a strategy in terms of South - South interaction this will open new possibilities to different forms of existing creation resisting the dominance of an imposed international post-modern language and generating new media spaces that would be part of a real 'networked space': much more near in cultural terms to a geographical one.

Although the subject can be focused from many representations, in the case of video and electronic art in Latin America in many cases it has tried to abstract to the city to turn it into 'another' space. There is no doubt that metropolis such as Sao Paulo, Mexico City or Lima, where in addition to decades of migratory displacement, turns out to be the picture of any modern city, are a portrait of the ideas of their inhabitants. As Nestor García Canclini comments: "as a result of this kind of situation national culture loose their influence in the social definition of identity and new modes of definition are accepted" [1]. In this sense popular or local culture acts as a depository of the official speech as well as of the popular narrative, creating a space where modernity and tradition converges by means of day-to-day practice.

Those global cities try to create the notion of a world that allows an open access to multiple layers of media information but does not argue on the expansion of individuality creating a 'false network' (though real in infrastructure and technological terms) just connecting people without seeking for a real community of thoughts, in other words, without being part of a process of composition of hybrid mixed realities.

After being largely ignored in traditional art discourses, and considered part of the marginal arts, today media art have a central position in our society, possibly thanks to the so-called information revolution new dogma: everybody could develop vital ideas. Media art discourse became associated with the post era (post industrial / post modern, post-etc). New media technologies are indeed in the progress of becoming the dominated economical and political force of the new century meaning that the role of media artists nowadays pays special importance. Cultural imperialism promotes media dominance, which has already proved that the electronic media has power not only in informational terms but also in artistic ones.

This practice reveals in many cases the intrusion of power and the persistence of tradition to demonstrate the social tensions that generates conflict. Local empowerment is still the most important movement in the present world because it is the application of concepts taken from global and local spheres. The political, social and mediated strategies force us to see the perspective within the contemporary creation using these definitions. Based on this idea, we can work on three types of attitudes towards new media art proposals in such contexts: *local*, *transregional* and *global*.

II

The *local* level is a movement of empowerment, solidarity but also of independence and critical vision. Works such as **Atipanakuy** of Alvaro Zavala, which questions the well know touristic – folkloric vision about Peru or other countries with a pre-Columbian practice are a strategy to promote the traditional culture to a new level in which technology and global icons take a central role. The interesting thing is that it explains the multiple relations that are established among the new and old forms of creation, among the Andean tradition and the influence of the Spanish conquest, foreseeing the present as a confusing mixture of ideals, social classes and questioning of identity.

By the means of a universalistic panorama, the folk-nationalist or ‘traditional’ content tends to put an emphasis in the difference between the creation and the real situation. In this way a sort of ‘critical bridge’ in which both ways of looking, the folklorist interpretation by one side and the real situation from the other, are compared and placed in relation with each other. Media art oriented in a vernacular way tends in vain to compress all the diversity available in a country typifying it as a single cultural reality, and by those means enormous differences will be ignored, specially the ones between the urban and rural zones. As a reaction to this vision, the traditional images are mixed with the modern global post-industrial ones showing them in satirical forms to demonstrate not

one reality, but a compendium of 'realities'. The confrontation is not used in a negative sense, but to connect modern culture and tradition.

The second level, the *transregional* one, is a mixture between local and global concepts but in geographic related terms. This is an 'integration movement' in which elements that are coming from the media are being re-worked making a re-interpretation of reality. In its topics there are some anti-global characteristics since it tends to use material from local media. Taking this visual reality as a threat towards an innovative reality, the new image is a way persuading the public of understanding things from other perspectives and creating awareness.

Works such as **Vacas (Cows VIR 611)** by Gabriela Golder or **The Image** by Angie Bonino are examples of the transregional level. **Vacas** intervenes visually a moment in the life of a group of people in the city of Rosario (Argentina) where 400 people slaughtered cows when a truck transporting them fell down. Since it was a spontaneous situation, a regional broadcasting channel was the only one that captured few minutes of this situation. The video deals with an extreme situation that reminds us how we can live without hearing the 'other': though we will never be interested in the actual daily life of the people in that area, just because of some images that could be touted as particular, bizarre or strange we become attracted to a local situation. In a similar way **The Image** shows a still image of a group of soldiers in a tank in which several digital effects (Photoshop-like plug-ins) are applied and mixed with the word "the image" in different languages. The still image transforms itself into a moving one that shows a sequence of the *Marcha de los Cuatro Suyos* (peaceful march against the Fujimorist regime in Lima on the year 2000) extracted from CNN. In this case the images are independent of the language, although also it would be possible circumscribe this work to the thematic of the war, not only to the *real* ones, but also the everyday mediatic ones.

Situations such as the ones intervened by Golder or Bonino makes us understand a piece of reality where images 'out from TV' are re-processed, re-arranged and re-peated to obtain an abstract loveliness compared to the original video recording, in some way there

are being re-created to tell a new version of a story, but in their own words. An acceleration of reality and the comparison of patterns communicating forms that approach to a transregional media culture are persistent in the re-valuation of symbols towards an internationalism and against tradition without leaving to be critical to the local context. This cosmopolitan ethnography to which the contemporary creation makes reference, offers a new definition from which we understand the challenge of a change: it is important to pay special attention to the definition of the media information more than to the media technology associated to it. In this respect TV could still teach us many things that could be useful as an insight to the future of the Internet.

The *global* level is a movement of peripherization, this means, that despite the fact that the distance between the centres and the peripheries are growing these projects tend to place themselves among global strategies to stay in a 'relative' centre.

Works such as **Power Animation** by Ivan Esquivel are a clear critical approach towards the state of art from a media artist point of view. In this case, using words written in English (today's international post-modern language by definition), Esquivel defines a recipe of how to become a media artist and creates a global critical reflection that sometimes is more serious than the one made by the former art critics. Art has become a prefabricated question, where everything is consequence of a great historical distortion, where perhaps the real innovators are not going to be considered like the 'best' ones. There is no more originality, just recycling. The intellectual exercise no longer has any value, because the people had become quick consumers that demand the 'hit' or 'cool' stuff. The interesting thing about works such as **Power Animation** is that it is impossible to define the authorship with a specific nationality, which touts these kinds of works are being *completely global*.

As Gerardo Mosquera pointed out: "it is necessary to cut the global pie not only with a variety of knives, but also with a variety of hands, and then share it accordingly. This is neither revolution not political correctness: it is a need for all is we want an endogamous culture" [2]

If we don't have clear idea of the plural cultural conformation of a country we will not be in condition to contribute to a social change that some societies demand as a historical imperative in order to confront the theory with the practice. For that reason though the important 'ones' could become unnoticed, the system is fast and forces to be very selective but not deep, is much more easy today to leave a track in Lima than in New York.

[1] Garcia Canclini, Néstor. "Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad", Grijaldo, México D.F., 1990.

[2] Mosquera, Gerardo. "Notes on Globalization, art and cultural difference", Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten and RAIN, 2001, pp. 26-36.

Images:

atipan04.jpg

Álvaro Zavala: "Atipanakuy", 1999, 7 min.

vacas.jpg

Gabriela Golder: "Vacas (Cows VIR 611)", 2002, 4 min.

theimage.jpg

Angie Bonino: "The Image", 2001-2002, 2 min.

poweranimation7.jpg

Ivan Esquivel: "Power Animation", 2003, 3 min.

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Published as: "Lateinamerikanische Medienkunst: Lokale Produktion/Globale Artikulation" in: "Bandbreite. Medien zwischen Kunst und Politik", (eds. Andreas Broeckmann y Rudolf Frieling), Kulturverlag Kadmos, Berlin, 2004, pp. 113-120 (ISBN 3-931659-65-8)