

**Sabotage: (Self-) Destructive Practices in Latin American
Contemporary Art**

Symposium

Friday 26th April 2013

Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre

UCL, London

Abstracts

--

Robin Greeley (University of Connecticut)

*'The Space of Appearance': Performativity, Materiality and the Ethics of Sabotage in the
Politicization of Public Space*

Bridging off Hannah Arendt's characterization of political action and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's model of the polis as the site of state/non-state struggle, this talk examines the question of the relationship between performative bodies and material spaces in constructing an emancipatory politics. I'll take Mexico City's Plaza de las Tres Culturas as my test case, looking at different contestations over the nature of that space (particularly Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta* [2008]), and how those contestations reveal the dialectical conditions of performative social engagement as imperative to mounting a non-spectacularized citizen reclamation of public space. Along the way, I will think about the pros and cons of "sabotage" as a conceptual framing device for the intersections among performative aesthetics, civil collectivities, and how they might be politically activated in the public realm.

Morning Panel

Stubborn Objects, Burning Acts, Twisted Tongues

Natasha Adamou (University of Essex)

Impossible Objects: Gabriel Orozco's 'Empty Shoe Box' (1993) and 'Yielding Stone' (1992)

To sabotage an institution and break up with tradition has been a long-standing strategy of the historical avant-gardes. This paper examines Gabriel Orozco's *Empty Shoe Box* (1993) and *Yielding Stone* (1992) first shown at the Venice Biennale in 1993. The two works were intentionally set up to resist spectacle in the historical and institutional context they were exhibited: a global biennial, at a time when the art world was dominated by large-scale installations and paintings. Orozco's 'slight' works attracted substantial criticism in the press surrounding the exhibition, because they were seen to undermine an internationally prestigious event. Art historian Guy Brett moreover observes the annoyance the *Empty Shoebox* has often caused, when museum registrars despair from insuring as an artwork a nondescript empty box that can easily get destroyed or thrown away. Francesco Bonami, the curator of that year's Biennale, recounts how the *Yielding Stone*, a lump of plasticine the weight of the artist, was heavily handled by the visitors during the exhibition, to the point of it being stabbed with a plastic fork. He explains that both works were "born to be destroyed, abused without pity," discarded, thrown away.

These objects, that David Joselit called "impossible objects," are at once subject to violence,

and inflict violence upon the institutional context they are presented. This paper then asks: What happens to an artwork when its function in the institutional context is violently disrupted by its own conditions? Furthermore, how do these conditions of self-sabotage affect and change the institutional context? To the extent that such strategies of violent disruption draw on the legacies of the historical avant-gardes, how can a relation between contemporary practices and its precedents be negotiated in terms of sabotage, a radical break with the past? Finally, what happens when these works gain in time a high visibility in the art world, both in terms of their photographic documentation and circulation, and through their presence in major international museums and exhibitions? How do they hold up to the conditions of their own historicization?

*

Lucia Vodanovic (Middlesex University)
Failure, Obsolescence and 'Non-Archivable' Art

In their essay “Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines” (1995), Guattari and Deleuze name a series of art pieces, including Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau*, that would fall under the category of “desiring machines”, that is, machines which differ from mere tools. Their method of operation could adopt the principle of parts within a multiplicity, or of a machine in relation to its residuals, or of an object that is constantly destroying itself; in this case, it is Schwitters’ machine-house, sabotaging and destroying itself. The *Merzbau*’s operation is the mere and grand succession of false steps, the *failing* rather than the *functioning*, the constant doing and subsequent covering up. This is not an arbitrary procedure but rather an attempt to uphold those objects as non-archivable, contingent possibilities.

This paper aims to explore similar subtleties between failure and a productive form of obsolescence (between sabotage and the ‘fear of appropriation’) by looking at contemporary Chilean art practices and how they have been theorised. Particularly, it would look at Nelly Richard’s encoded and hermetic writing in the book *Margins and Institutions*, for years considered the key document to engage with Chilean Art produced under General Pinochet’s dictatorship (particularly when it used to circulate in photocopies, before its more recent re-edition). *Margins and Institutions* addresses sabotage in a very programmatic way, as a conscious gesture of hermeticism that would prevent the appropriation of these art pieces and the closing down of potential readings of them. As a result, the text seems foreign in its language and in its visual form: it does not mention the material conditions of production during the dictatorship, its images do not depict any specific context or place, there are no references to fashion or lifestyles, there is none of the elements that make a city recognizable – the colour of taxis and public buses, police uniforms – or scenes of public revolts, protests, graffiti. Paradoxically, these works theorised as having a “non-functional meaning” where precisely the ones that became the canon and the subject of the history of Chilean art during the dictatorship, whereas others –potentially more interesting and politically engaged—have been relegated to a secondary, almost invisible presence.

*

Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra (University of Cambridge)
Shaman, Thespian, Saboteur: Marcos Kurtycz and the Performance of Institutional Profanation

In November 1979 the performance artist Marcos Kurtycz burst into the *vernissage* of a collective exhibition celebrating *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead) and publicly burned one of his painted canvases. The artist called his action *Potlatch*, for he searched to perform a ritual sacrifice on the basis of Georges Bataille's notion of *dépense*. His action was not only an attempt to sabotage a rigid institutional ceremony but an interrogation of contemporary (artistic) value(s). Kurtycz believed that by entering the art institution, the ritual aspects of loss and mourning, proper to the celebration of the dead, had become entirely instrumentalized and subjected to an utilitarian rationality. He therefore attempted to evoke the experience of loss in its cathartic and liminal dimensions, where the limits of that which is permissible become diffuse.

I will study Kurtycz's action on the basis of a prohibition, the prohibition to destroy or damage the work of art. My analysis posits this norm as being ontologically ungrounded, yet foundational in the production of artistic value and the entire web of institutional relations that sustain it. Kurtycz's performance and its reception reveal the conditions of artistic production in Mexico in the late 1970s: the privileging of the art object over the aesthetic experience, an emphasis on the projection of specific (marketable) notions of identity, the lack of a politics of spectatorship, and, most notably, a conflicting institutional rhetoric that endorsed iconoclasm but essentially proscribed it. Giorgio Agamben's reflections on profanation will guide this attempt to understand the interrelations between the acceptable limits of violence and its occult others.

*

Catherine Spencer (University of York)

Ensnare, Engulf, Overwhelm: Marta Minujín's Soft Sabotage

We might think of sabotage as an act of violent destruction, but what happens when it is reframed as a more insidious process of entrapment and gradual overwhelming? Marta Minujín launched her career with an act of blatant self-sabotage, when she destroyed all the work she had created while staying in Paris (*La Destrucción*, 1963). She subsequently claimed to have rejected the existentialist influences that prompted this approach, stating that she had 'exchanged torture art for fun art.' This 'fun art' included the *Colchónes*, a series of brightly coloured soft constructions made from mattresses begun in the 1960s, revisited in the 1980s, and remade in the 2000s, and *The Soft Gallery* first presented in Washington (1973), then Vienna (2000) and Los Angeles (2007).

Yet some of the *Colchónes* contain sharp, threatening elements, while the structures seem designed to ensnare and even suffocate the human body, as demonstrated by the many photographs of Minujín encased inside them. As a site for dreaming, the mattress powerfully instances the unconscious aggressions tracked by psychoanalytic formulations of (self) sabotage. Through the mattress pieces, this paper identifies an aesthetic of soft sabotage at the heart of Minujín's practice, defined as a sustained investigation of the ways in which the subject can become trapped, their space invaded, their minds and bodies overwhelmed with sensory input, instancing the struggle between the individual and hegemonic structures. This is particularly significant in terms of Minujín's ambiguous relationship with North America and the culture industry: do her contemporary re-stagings effectively sabotage the museum's prioritisation of the object? Or does the tendency to revisit works of the 1960s reflect a sabotaging of the avant-garde project by global capitalism? How is the act of sabotage re-formulated in a (soft) information rather than industrial economy?

Erica Segre (University of Cambridge)

Pictorial Eviscerations, Emblems and Self-Immolation in Mexico: Dissensus in the Work of Enrique Guzmán and Nahum B. Zenil

“La realidad en México es subversiva. Así están las cosas ahora. Casi diría que ni siquiera es necesario adoptar una posición política de izquierda.” (Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, *Unomásuno*, 22 junio 1978).

Enrique Guzmán in the 1970s turned the razor blade into a personal double-edged emblem that spoke of the self-embedded nature of his pictorial disassembly and desecratory splicing of a conservative image environment and its dogmatic nationalistic iconography. A recurrent motif in his work during the years that witnessed the ‘Guerra Sucia’, guerrilla activism and the emergence of gay and feminist militancy in Mexico, was the reconfiguring of the symbol of state nationalism and patriotic fervour, ‘Oh Santa bandera’ within a mythology of bodily relics, dismemberment, popular replicas and absenteeism. While retaining faith in the capacity of the figurative as a strategy of ironic and dissective self-inscription in a contemporaneity marked by state terror, censorship and the radicalization of art practices influenced by Fluxus, Arte Povera and non-conventional media, he gained notoriety through an act of seemingly spontaneous vandalism that sought to sabotage the operations of the cultural institutions controlling awards, exhibitions and the politics of visibility in the arts. In 1978 he attacked and sought to destroy the work of the winning entry by painter Beatriz Zamora at the awards ceremony and used the ensuing fracas (during which he was arrested) to make known through the media the contestatory agenda behind his ‘lucid’ act of sabotage (against what he regarded as imitative and instrumentalized). The paper will revisit this event to contextualize Guzmán’s multidimensional performance and its critique as well as to recuperate the specificities of Zamora’s own longlived practice (based on a continuing series of experiments in textures and pigments in black on black most recently included in a collective exhibition at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo). Interestingly, the MUAC’s permanent collections now include works by both Zamora and Guzmán. His conflictual relation with the canvas, representational regimes, art institutions and what he perceived as the hegemonic aesthetics of an international style had a reflexive dimension beyond the poetics of the blade and the pictorial gestures of self-harm that culminated in the destruction of part of his own corpus and finally in his suicide. Nahum B. Zenil’s self-referential and progressively explicit if ludic homoerotic desecration of religiosity, chauvinism and masculinist rituals deliberately sought to thematize affinities with Guzmán but in the context of the rampant Neoliberalism of the 1990s and the identity crisis prompted by the discourse of *desnacionalización*. His early interrogation of self and pictorial identities playing on the ‘En busca/Se busca’ (In search of/Wanted) of found and prescribed elements, like Guzmán turned on a preoccupation with figuration’s cannibalistic practices and acts of aesthetic self-estrangement and negation/denigration. In ‘Y el ver...dugo?’ (1993) a Joycean neologism twinned seeing with a form of execution, a punitive act of sanctioned violence. The painstakingly theatrical and performative phallocentricity of his paintings in the late 1990s, his prominent support for campaigning events such as the Semana Cultural Gay prepared the way for the themed mixed media exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, *El Gran Circo del Mundo* (1999) in which his irreverent and carnivalesque appropriations of sacred imagery through paintings, installation and intervened objects included a notable and controversial reprise of Guzmán’s ‘Oh, Santa bandera!’. Zenil’s homage took the form of a vertical *triptych* ‘Oh Santa bandera (a Enrique Guzmán)’ (1996) in which the artist portrays himself in a full length nude as a contorsionist whose anal orifice provides the support for a stately flag pole in all its pompous scale and phallic glory with the Mexican national flag hanging limply rather than with symbols dutifully displayed as envisaged by the outsized monumental flagmasts that began to be erected in civic landmarks during this period in

the capital to compete with the *espectaculares* or huge advertising hoardings dominating the city skyline . The scatological referencing of the profane body and its humours in the works on show made explicit the allusive and displaced but equally oppositional deployments of Duchamp-style ‘escusados’ in Guzmán’s intervened iconicity, where the hygienic objects (for processing the expelled and the impure) were rendered with finely observed but suspended and undeluded realism. In August 2000, Zenil hosted a burlesque collective act of obscenity in his religiously-themed home with the punning title *Tras-eros: homenaje a las nalgas. Todas contra la censura* that included a sadomasochistic performance which urged the public to defile the buttocks of a female artist before assembled photographers and journalists. The political agency of nakedness had been memorably enacted by miners during a strike in Pachuca, Hidalgo in 1985 in which they kept the characteristic implements of their labour (including helmets and boots) while baring their scandal-inducing bodies in an act of ribald protest captured most notably by photojournalist Pedro Valtierra. The theme of self-immolation in Zenil (persistently developed within the iconography of martyrdom and transfiguration that he admired in Frida Kahlo) acquires explicitly suicidal overtures to Guzmán with works such as *Suicida I (a Enrique Guzmán)* and *Suicida II (a Enrique Guzmán)* (1995 and 1997 respectively). The recent collective exhibition *Los irrespetuosos* in the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City (curated by Carlos Palacios), which included mostly non-pictorial works challenging art historical establishments, museum spectatorship and the normative styles of the contemporary art market adopted Guzmán’s self-lacerating razor blade as its rebellious emblem of choice for the cover of the show’s catalogue but apparently as a disposable and perhaps neutered retro object. Redeployed within an obtrusively tamed and scaled down terminology of opposition, play and critique that recalled the well-rehearsed infringements and derisions of the 1970s to the 1990s divested of political impetus (with curatorial allusions to sarcasm, parody and scorn as shared traits behind the defiance and indifference of most of the exhibits). The paper will discuss through the transgressive or playful figurations of Guzmán and Zenil (which they supplemented with acts of subversion and *inconformidad* in which their own aesthetic separateness and integrity was undone publicly) whether the carefully equivocal, sardonically low key and non-discursive provocations of *Los irrespetuosos* at the MACG seek to discredit the dissenting practices of non-aligned artists or merely evade the embarrassment of a more forthright and sustained critical engagement of their own beyond the precinct of artmaking’s knowing and recursive self- ironies. By revisiting Guzmán’s act of sabotage, alongside his eviscerations of surfaces and emblems and his self-subtractions, and by tracing echoes of painterly self-immolation in Zenil’s infractions of heteronormativity and metropolitan dominance, the paper will seek to assess whether the current figurative turn in contemporary mixed and multimedia artmaking (manifesting representation through its ordinary processes and materials such as drawing and doodling) can be regarded as an eloquent form of elective marginalization and dissent or indeed as an act of ‘reputational sabotage’ .

Afternoon Panel

Burn the Museum? Explosive vs. Implosive Postures

Francisco Godoy (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

Out of Context. Rebel women and the Performance of Silence

For the new millennium commemoration the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid organized an incredible big project in relation to Latin American art called *Southern versions*. The “grand show” that included more than 700 pieces was commissioned to five teams of curators: Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea presented their project *Heterotopias*,

Mónica Amor and Octavio Zaya *Beyond the document*, Ivo Mesquita and Adriano Pedrosa *F(r)ictions*, Carlos Basualdo and Octavio Zaya *Aesthetics of the dream*, and finally, Gerardo Mosquera *This is not what you see*. In this context, the Spanish curator Rafael Doctor organized three parallel projects in response to these blockbuster exhibitions. He invited two collectives whose practice is creative but not necessarily considered “artistic”: Mujeres Creando from Bolivia and RhR from Brazil. He also invited the Mexican artist Maya Goded, whose work is related to the representation of prostitution. All of them reflect and intervene in their hometowns in relation to the state violence with public interventions against the heteronormativity and the economic system. Both collectives along with Goded were invited to intervene *Space One*, an area of the Reina Sofia Museum dedicated, during that time, to the more experimental and contemporary proposals under Doctor’s direction, position that he had to quite after these experiences.

This presentation aims to explore the creative but, at the same time, diverse kind of aesthetic and politic disruptions of these initiatives in relation to the general concept of *Southern versions*. The focus of the presentation will present answer to these questions: The interventions organized by Doctor were a curatorial sabotage to the “celebratory” event? Why had Doctor to quite after these “sabotages”? How did these interventions operate in the Spanish context of the recovery of a “neo-colonial” relation with Latin American countries through economy? How does these interventions work as a kind of sabotage of the own notion of “Latin American art” in the margins of a gigantic exhibition initiative that also try to avoid some stereotypes?

*

Lourdes Morales (Independent Researcher)

Cantos Cívicos. A Delirious Narrative from Mexico City

Cantos Cívicos (2009) was an installation and performance by the Mexican-Puerto Rican artist Miguel Ventura that was selected to open the main gallery of the new Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), in Mexico City. Ventura built a gigantic rat-form labyrinth, and crammed walls and floor with representations of huge corporeal penises, money icons, swastika symbols, poop images, death-scenes of U.S.A. nationalized immigrants in the Iraq war, and socialite photos of the national art patrons taken from news papers, to name but a few. At the core of the space, trained living rats –which were taken care of by students from the Veterinary School at the University– had their home set for the time the exhibition was on display. Rats were trained to find chocolates in their own little labyrinth, and the artist related to that activity several concerts, so every time the rats found the sweetened food, a specific song was chosen. The institution tried many times to change the content of the piece before the opening. Nonetheless, the threat that the artist and the curator (Juan de Nieves) made to present the case at an international level stopped them. The show built up an acute institutional critique. It not only touched the ethical posture of the institution, but also unveiled a silenced pact that the contemporary art scene has established with certain specific interests of the ruling-class in Mexico. This piece confronted the aesthetical and moral roots of the status quo with the neo-colonial social pact that the dominant class still maintains in the country to this day. Located in a delirium – understood as the thing that is placed outside the order of the real – the piece opposed the biopower and the factual powers. It confronted them outlining a political subject that tried to escape its normalizing effects.

*

Sophie Halart (University College London)

Sabo-tag# - The narratives of conceptualism and materiality in Latin American contemporary art

The emergence of Happenings on the Argentine artistic scene of the 1960s and of performance art in the 1970s Chilean avant-garde illustrate the advent of practices positing the dematerialisation of the art object as a necessary condition to articulate a political critique of the military regimes in place at the time. Using the artist's body as raw material, zone of mediation and conceptual tool to perturb official discourses, these works operated an aesthetic sabotage that became a recognisable feature of avant-garde movements in the region and one subsequently centralised under the banner of Conceptualism.

This paper bears testimony to the saliency of such practices and engages with sabotage as a valid strategy to account for artistic modes of dissent in the Southern Cone. However, it also seeks to reveal how Art History's leanings toward periodicity contributed to overshadow the work of artists working on the margins of Conceptualism. Engaging with George Bataille's discourse on the *Informe* as 'a term that serves to bring things down in the world', this paper examines the production of Chilean painter Roser Bru and Argentine sculptress Lydia Galego whose works consider the body not so much as a conceptual given but as a precarious zone of shifting surfaces on the perpetual brink of collapse. As such, it argues that these artists' rejection of fixed forms puts in crisis not only established discourses on the avant-garde and the body but also historiographic attempts to unify practices into linear and coherent narratives of art.

*

Olga Fernández Lopez (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

Paths and Diversions: El Museo de la Calle and the Subversion of Bartering

This paper will examine *El Museo de la Calle*, an artistic project set up by Colectivo Cambalache that took place between 1998 and 2001, primarily in Bogotá. In 1998, just as Colectivo Cambalache started to work in El Cartucho's neighbourhood, Bogotá's mayor decided to demolish the area and replace it with a huge park (*Parque del Tercer Milenio* [Third Millennium Park]). This programme of urban regeneration involved house demolition and the eviction of working class residents. *El Museo de la Calle* came about in the changing artistic scene that took place in Colombia at the beginning of the 1990s, in which there was a specific interest in investigating its conflicted politics and the transformation of the urban environment. Common themes for artists to reflect on included violence, drugs, migration and displacement. This museum toured the streets in a push cart, around which the artists collected and bartered everyday objects. The exchange act and the cart constituted the basis for an ever changing museum, mimicking, questioning and subverting the unstoppable movement of commodities that characterises the streets of Bogotá and, at the same time, imitating and confronting museum conventions, through a process of transvaluation. The project was originally conceived as an intervention in the public space. However, it was later presented in institutionalised artistic spaces, inscribed in exhibitions that in the late 1990s brought about a broader reflection on economics in the artistic and curatorial field. When the project received the attentions of the international artistic world, it experienced several contradictions, including its spectacularisation and the romanticisation of creativity in informal economies, that we can read as a new way to fetishise difference. The paper will look at these double binds and reveal how the *El Museo de la Calle* might not have had such an unhappy ending.