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36 ASAMBLEA GENERAL**

ARDS AN ARTISTIC AWARENESS IN LATIN AMERICA

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Any attempt to glimpse the milestones that lead us to a profile of the limits of artistic awareness in Latin America will reveal various viewpoints.

All of these viewpoints have relative degrees of validity, which make them worthy of our attention and, thus, also reflect the different philosophical positions that lead to that self-awareness which concerns us.

Our proposal is meant to collaborate in an attempt to visualize those artistic milestones which make up those levels of continental consciousness.

In our understanding, the agenda of this Congress is meant to trace a space which we call Latin America, in its historical and projected functions through artistic manifestations. This idea goes beyond a topographical aspiration, since there is a desire to know what levels of self-awareness we Latin Americans possess. In other words, we shall attempt to establish the limits of that identity which we consider to be our own, and to enunciate the elements which characterize what we consider to be non Latin-American. This dual proposal must necessarily be expanded, since it is also necessary to outline the band within which the identity structure glimpsed is fundamentally historical, and thus, dynamic and changing.

We are aware that proposing a search for identity involves participating in a traditional debate, such as that revolving around nationalism or regionalism and universalism. Nor do we fail to admit that these poles are identified with more or less traditional positions, on one hand, and with vanguard movements, on the other.

More than a decade following Jorge Manrique's statement in Quito, compiled by Damian Bayon, regarding the polarity between identity and modernity, we believe that it is valid to take up the subject again, expanding on the scope of observation.

This new evaluation should depart from a clear criterion of revision, covering both art criticism and historical and philosophical essays. That is to say, the need for a historeographic criticism at all theoretical levels of Latin American art is imposed.

We understand that only from the basis of that revision does the new artistic awareness in Latin America become useful as the focus of controversy.

Because in the measure to which we attempt to establish a profile of Latin American art and to characterize those



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common elements which condition our individual or regional identity, can we emphasize those characters which make our continental identity and , thus, gather self-awareness both in regional and general terms.

To the measure to which self-awareness does not occur, there is no identity. In this sense we should reflect on the need for a review of historical, critical, and aesthetic aspects.

The complexity of the process of awareness in this, our specific environment, is due to the fact that it is inserted within a social, and therefore historical, process.

Concepts of identity and universality have an ingredient which is not always visible, and which plays its major role in the range of cultural interaction. This component, called cultural dependency, is simply the manifestation of cultural hegemony on the part of the large cultural centers, and has its equivalent in political and economic hegemony.

Thus, it is a matter of showing how to detect within that range wherein cultural interaction occurs between the hegemonic centers and the dependent peripheries in the process of individualization, of constant dynamics; how this process relates to levels of awareness, and when identity breaks off, as well as the tie with other levels of social analysis.

This opening in the historical redimension leads us to return our gaze to methodological paths already covered, and to attempt to trace future roads.

It is only through this new historical redimension that those milestones can be profiled, reflecting those essential parts of our regional and continental identity and which are inserted within the humanistic principles of a universal nature.

The methodological search and assumptions it implies does not deny the ideological component, but fits it within the specificity of the artistic realm.

In this attempt to try to create a certain self-awareness of our Latin American identity, it is necessary to identify and gather artistic production and the evolution of taste on the continent, so as to point out their essential characteristics and significant ties with the universal context.



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A history of art and taste, as a scientific discipline, and art criticism as well, join to themselves a series of aspects which are also typical of other specialties.

The protagonistic role of man within this particular process of his cultural production, is what makes this disciplinary interaction so complex. However, the artistic event as such, and all that it implies, should always be kept in mind.

Otherwise, we should generate new theoretical formalisms which reduce the understanding of artistic affairs to the field of history and art criticism. These partializations are what make the process of awareness and consciousness difficult in the regional and also in the subcontinental area.

#### ANTONIO BERNI: A MILESTONE IN LATIN AMERICAN ART

The desire to redimension the history of visual art in Latin America obliges us to take concrete examples from artists of this continent.

The search for examples which illustrate that process of formation of the continental consciousness leads us to consider artists and movements which may be relevant in this sense.

We believe that the plastic production of Antonio Berni constitutes an example worthy of being considered, because his work becomes a certain reflection of the formation of a Latin American identity and awareness, at the same time that it allows understanding the makeup of that identity in constant movement.

The analysis of Berni's art gives rise to the need to use parameters which make possible a view of the levels of self-awareness as a regional and continental community.

In this sense, we have backed the historical analysis with a concept taken from the field of aesthetics, which is that of realism as a category. Its scope allows us to apply it to the specificity of the artistic event, conserving its relative autonomy.

This tendency improves upon the traditional framework of style, which may represent an epoch, and establishes a constant, which is the conscious character of artistic production, complemented by the attempt to create poetics. These characteristics cannot be appreciated, but are rather faced through the historical context of their country of origin and subcontinent, with universal insertion. The integration of these characteristics reveals a new stroke, i.e., the degree to which the art is typical, a result and reflex within which the artist interacts.



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In mentioning as an example Antonio Berni's plastic production, we wish to point out the ambiguousness of Jorge Manrique's statements. In Antonio Berni, the elements of tradition and vanguard are not antagonistic, but rather are integrated as a function of an image which correctly reflects the future of an entire decade in the history of Argentina and of Latin America.

#### POETICS OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The historical events which make up the framework within which Antonio Berni's plastic production takes place, and which--to our understanding--constitute a good example of that range of cultural interaction, may be summarized as follows.

Between the mid-50's and the beginning of the 60's, there occurred a series of revolutions and popular movements in Latin America and Argentina, whose culminating point was the triumph of the Cuban revolution. Another element which we should point to in this picture is John Kennedy's activity as President of the United States, with his "Alliance for Progress." At that time Pope John XXIII was preparing to reveal his encyclical "Mater et Magistra." With the fall of the Peronist government in 1955, a process began in Argentina which led to Arturo Frondizi's presidency, heading the industrial development movement and the beginning of a strong cultural push.

Only through this context, although described in broad terms, can we explain the rise of the figure of Antonio Berni at the Venice Biennial of 1962, where he obtained the Prize of Honor for Engraving.

Paradoxically, while this distinction was being granted, the government that had destroyed the road toward international recognition of his merits, fell due to military and political conflicts.

Berni's art coincided ideologically with the national and international political situation, and it should be pointed out that the image which led to his triumph was a subject taken from daily characters and situations, beyond whose content we find integration with form, with the private conversational language in which he expresses himself. In that unity of form and content is the key to his triumph in Venice and the validity of the poetics of underdevelopment.

Berni's triumph should not be seen as a circumstantial event caused by the "aggiornamento" of conversational language, but as a result of his coherent artistic career.



In Forma, the magazine of the Society of Plastic Arts, Berni wrote in 1951:

"The new Realism tries to represent the new hero and the new drama."

Juanito and Ramona are, then, the protagonists and the heroes of the American drama, with its underdevelopment, in which the "Villas Miserias" are the scene where the infrahuman life of its inhabitants is reflected.

Diverse elements of industrial waste are used in his plastic language. He calls their use "recycling," since such materials are given new uses and loaded with different contents. It is in this action that the subject was co-substantiated with its content, and projected itself beyond the topic dealt with, to include a context which makes the reality it reflected objective. The "panacea" of uncertain industrial development operated as a polarity which had at its opposite extreme real manifestations of underdevelopment. Juanito Laguno and Ramona Montiel are the human heroes of the drama of Latin America.

Antoni's or Berni's plastic production becomes a milestone of Latin American art because it has been able to amalgamate aspects of objective reality, from an every-day basis, using a plastic language which is fitting to the movements of occidental vanguard. In this sense, it is an example of that intermediate zone in which traditional and vanguard currents interact.

Within this process of configuration of Latin America's artistic awareness, Berni's production acquires meaning, since it has a strong self-awareness that creates poetics which lead to a certain reflection of his country's objective reality and that of the American subcontinent.

In his work the forms of plastic language are present which constitute the Latin American visual tradition. A nearly constant "horror of vacuum" is observed ; he leaves no free spaces, the use of color generally tends to planimetrics. Furthermore, the chromatic scale is limited, and there is some enjoyment in using objects such as cloth, paper, cartons, wood, plastic, and metal. The use of these elements constitute visual language and they are traditionally used in a conceptually different manner. This is where agreement occurs with the so-called contemporary "vanguard" movements.

With the work "Juanito and the Cosmonauts," a collage 2.4 x 2.4, from 1962, we can exemplify the Berni characteristics indicated above which make him an artist representative of that path of formation of a Latin American self-awareness.



Over half the plane of the work is covered by what represents the facade of the "Villa Miseria." In closeup, a series of persons, both adults and children, reflect different attitudes before the observation of the space ships and cosmonauts. In this construction, the figures and objects of the lower plane are counterposed with the cleanness of the upper plane, where only the spaceships rising from the roofs of the housing appear. This visual counterpoint has a symbolic significance between the achievements of underdevelopment and the maximum exponent of technological development. The dramatic levels are emphasized by the elements which make up the plastic language; wood, cloth, metals, cardboard, to which is added the particular human representation appearing in the lower right hand corner and the embrace of two children and expression of fear on their faces, which counterbalance the astronauts' smiles seen in a photographic montage.

The work stands out because of its own plastic values and human significance, and can be classified as realistic because of the qualities described.

We find similar characteristics in the work "A World Promised to Juanito Laguna," a 1962 collage measuring 3 x 4 meters.

The characters become archetypes of a decade not yet ended. Its drama is not lacking in fantasy, and the polarity is reiterated between manifestations produced by high technology, with nuclear-explosion-produced mushrooms, and the certain world of no alternatives pertaining to Juanito and his companions.

At a time in which the vanguards which encouraged high-consumption societies tended to dissolve the human figure and favored abstraction and visual experiences, the death of painting and of art was foretold, yet Berni recomposed the representation of man using wastes generated by the industrialized consumer society. In this art, his characters are also waste, because they belong to the periphery of contemporary development.

The coherence of his plastic development is enriched because he has also known how to implement subrealistic elements which were present since the beginning of his creative work. This constant is integrated with the best plastic traditions of Latin American art, and is also expressed in the 60's with the series "The Monsters" (1962) and "The Innocents" (1971).

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The oneiric elements mesh with the aspects of objective reality and result in works of a rich content in their plastic aspects and testimonial which are, thus, human.

We consider valid the artistic production of Antonio Berni in the framework of this Congress, as a function of our understanding that this is one of the milestones marking the awareness of Latin American art.