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DO WE REALLY KNOW SOUTH AMERICAN ART?

Mme Andrée Paradis, O.C.

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The social and political problems of South Americans are better known to the North Americans than the artistic heritage of these countries. Specifically the activity made manifest by the demands of the 20th Century artist, with the human side to art with which he is experimenting, with his search for the absolute and for the plot woven as he drinks from the original sources.

Carla Stellweg, who founded and directed the magazine, Visual Arts, from 1972 to 1981, and who lives today in New York, in an article published in the magazine, Flue, asks herself about the space or the place occupied by the Latin American artist in the international scene and, specifically in an artistic capital such as New York. She refers to all of the difficulties which result from the occupation of that space. Art that can become transnational, that is, which prevails in several countries, generally speaking, has deep roots in the milieu from which it springs. Be it the baroque art of Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, or Brazil represented by artists such as Armando Reveron, Joaquim Torres-Garcia and the Mexican muralists, or the surrealist art of Tamayo, of Matta, of Freida Kahlo, in every case it is transnational art which reaches different publics under the banner of the common values they transmit and which takes its strength from its own characteristics of cultural, national or historic identity.

Outside of New York and two or three centers more, the activity of South American artists is little known in North America. For example, in Canada, the museums rarely organize exhibitions of South American art. We had to wait until the 1967 Montreal Exhibition until we finally realized the wealth of the cultural heritage which we knew so little and which is part of our hemisphere. Even today, when so much is said about the political relations between the North and the South, art and culture are excluded from these concerns.

At the level of cultural exchanges, the language difficulties do not facilitate the approximations. Most of the catalogues of the exhibitions of South American art are not translated into English or into French, which further complicates the task of the investigators. The journals we consult are published in the national language. In several American universities there exist very active departments dedicated to Latin American civilization which attempt to fill the gaps by facilitating translations, but they are still too few. And there is another difficulty: it seems that Latin American

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art is still not studied according to the rules and we are still lacking art documentation centers which would allow for the establishment of a genuine history of art. Therefore we must be content with a series of appreciations, sometimes, perfectly valid ones, where speculation bears the same weight as mythology and fantasy.

On undertaking the study of South American art, it is important to establish the form in which contemporary art has penetrated South America, and the influence it has had on the artists. Side by side with the lack of translations we suffer through with texts on South American art, we find translations into Spanish and into Portuguese of literature on the works of Western art. Nevertheless, some complain of the poor quality of the translations and of the distortion of reality which we are always at risk to find. And another question is how this Western art is viewed through a deformed mirror, resulting from the European colonization of America. This vision might contain a certain degree of originality, it all depends on the attitude of the artist. Nevertheless, it is very different from the results obtained by Latin American artists who have lived or have been trained abroad and then later return to their countries. There are two of these artists who confess to have been influenced by Marcel Duchamp: Alvaro Barrios from Colombia and Ismael Vargas from Mexico, although in very different ways because their respective works are to be found on opposite poles. In the case of Barrios, it is a question of doing art for art's sake, aware of the peril of suffering a scarcity of content, until they are reduced to mere mechanics, whilst for Ismael Vargas, the roots are important, as well as the need to join the past, the present and the future with a circular movement where the spirit of the Aztec calendar is always present. This young artist finds the voice of his people in the practice of craftsmanship and he attempts to codify it.

In Venezuela, just as in the other countries of South America, the existence of the same situation is evident, but we must admit that we are only beginning the analyses and the inventories. Among the important contributions made to international contemporary art by Soto, Cruz-Diez and Otero, and by the investigations of a man like Jacobo Borges, for example, an attempt is made to provide a presence, a face, to the man from their milieu, but it seems to contain a flagrant opposition. In reality, it only attempts to state what is discovered in movement and in the perpetual beginning anew which cannot be captured by the artist except in the space in which he moves, where he lives, where he is impressed with the images and the sensations that he then attempts to translate.

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In the first Biennial of contemporary visual arts organized in Venezuela in 1981, we acquired an awareness of the dynamism of the creation in a country where art is grounded on tradition at the same time that an attempt is made to transform it. The influence of the masters of kinetics are evident, but the South American sensitivity tries to express itself through various currents, the strongest of which is magic or imaginary realism. An imaginary realism supported by a great erudition.

The wealth of the South American artistic experiences is not easily accessible and the challenge posed should be overcome by the international critics, who would then find clues to new interpretations to enrich the pictoric vocabulary. Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "For the time being, the act of reading follows that of writing, more resigned, more courteous, more intellectual". To begin with, we are invited to read South American art.