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HOW LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS IN THE U.S. VIEW ART, POLITICS AND ETHNICITY IN A SUPPOSEDLY MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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Three themes are married in this paper: the naming and mapping of America; the coming celebrations, or anti-celebrations, of the Columbus Quincentenary; and the significance of "multiculturalism" for second-classed ethnic groups of artists. All these themes are addressed in terms of art production by Latin American artists residing in the United States.

On the eve of the 1992 "celebration" of the Columbus Quincentenary, and two years before the 70th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine which gave political leverage to the U.S. concept of Manifest Destiny, it seems urgent to start this presentation with a consideration of the name "America." Not its "etymology" in the corrective solution given by Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci to Columbus' notion that he had arrived on Indian soil (thus misnaming the continent's indigenous populations), but its political/social usages. When Chilean conceptual artist Alfredo Jaar first came to the U.S., he, like many other Latin Americans, was shocked to discover that the United States had appropriated this continental designation as its national identification without allowance for the other countries which also inhabit the Americas. Jaar's testimony indicates that he considered himself an "American" (of Chilean nationality) as a matter of course, without thought or

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further embroidery; but he discovered in New York that he was an outsider, a foreigner in this America. The question was not one of semantics, but of hegemony; the usage reflected real power relationships. Challenging this appropriation with images and texts, Jaar located A Logo for America (1987) **(SLIDE-1)**, a computerized Spectacolor lightboard, in the public space of New York's Times Square, long known for its profusion of neon light signs and a famous moving light-strip of daily news headlines (seen below) that dates back at least to the 1940s. To counter-appropriate U.S. electronic technology in order to redefine First and Third World interaction, displays a fine sense of irony. "This is not America" **(SLIDE-2)** and "This is not America's flag" **(SLIDES 3-4)** are superimposed respectively on a map and the flag of the United States **(SLIDE-5)**; Jaar also spins the continental map of America - North, Central and South - on an axis of the letter "R" **(SLIDE-6)**.

Jaar is neither the first nor the only Latin American to employ an imaginative geography to reframe the American discourse. In 1936 Uruguayan constructivist master, Joaquin Torres Garcia, published a drawing which inverted South America (facing north to south, and vice-versa) to emphasize its autonomy from European aesthetics, and to justify the right of southern artists to recuperate the northern pre-Columbian cultures regardless of where the artist was located in the continental scheme.1 (A similar argument has recently been made by a Cuban critic concerning African sources.) Another aspect of the mapping process is the comparison between the 16th century Mercator map **(SLIDE)** "created basically to abet the imperialistic endeavors

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of European navigators in their discovery, colonization, and exploitation" of Third World regions; and the 1974 Peters map **(SLIDE)** which shows the Northern hemisphere to actually be half as large as that of the Southern2, thus reversing the earlier order. The Peters projection (upon which Jaar **(SLIDE)** has inscribed an image of Western toxic waste dumped in Africa) visually symbolizes, by its very creation and dissemination, the beginning of the West's loss of its dominant position vis-à-vis those countries it has considered peripheral and marginal.

Remapping projects have long interested other U.S.-based Latin Americans like Chileans Juan Downey and Catalina Parra. Downey's **(SLIDE)** fascination with maps that demonstrate the flow of invisible energies across space and the distinctions cartographers make between topography, national boundaries, travel and communication networks, is illustrated in this large drawing Twomaps (1985 - **read as two-maps)** and **(Slide)** World Map. In 1981, upon her arrival in New York, Parra **(SLIDE)** collaged text from the New York Times with clippings of football players that raise the specter of the football stadium in Santiago which the Pinochet coup d'etat turned into a concentration camp and killing field in 1973. The enclosing frame (whether intentionally or not) suggests the long narrow shape of Chile turned horizontally, while the text The Reunited States of America emphasizes the close relationship of U.S. power (symbolized by the Times headline) to disastrous events in South America. Distances are eclipsed on this political map which unites two American states.

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Finally, Brazilian Jonas dos Santos **(SLIDE)** emphasizes the complicity of both Americas in the destruction/salvation of the ecological and human environments. Focusing on the Amazon rain forests and their aboriginal inhabitants, who bond with each other without shame, the artist mirrors himself in performance with two horizontally-reversed maps within the installation of Brazil via New York: Oxygen Share of 1989.

Multiple are the ways in which Latin America artists globally have addressed the question of the Spanish conquest, and of successive neo-conquests up to the present. Obviously some of the works mentioned earlier can be seen as overlapping into this related discourse. New York artist Fernando Salicrup **(SLIDE)** fictionalizes the gentle pre-Hispanic Taíno Indians of Puerto Rico peering through the leaves like shy wild creatures in his painting Once More, Columbus, or Before Discovery, (1976) while Argentine Leandro Katz **(SLIDE)** puts an ironic spin on the conquest with his 1982 installation, Friday's Footprint. Based on the 18th British allegory Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, the novel is as impregnated with colonial ideology as any that one can find. Set in South America near the Orinoco River, the wrecked mariner Crusoe survives on an uninhabited island for twenty-four years. With the most primitive means, and by reading his bible, he lives alone in rude comfort until he discovers the naked footprint of a "native" whom he names "Man Friday" and whom he rescues from cannibals. Friday is converted into a companion and servant. The cannibals (who miraculously made no appearance for a quarter of a century) are again defeated, while

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Crusoe and Friday find the means to return to England. Crusoe, said a book reviewer in 1948,3 is a manual of the qualities that have won the world from barbarism - courage, patience, ingenuity and industry - qualities much admired in the industrializing capitalist world for many centuries. Recast from the Renaissance to a later period, the story seems to repeat that of Shakespeare's Tempest: Man Friday takes the place of Ariel as a native servant devoted to his master, while the cannibals represent the coarse and unfaithful Caliban, an anagram constructed by Shakespeare from the word "cannibal." This is not the moment to review the literature, but Latin American intellectuals have been involved in a central (often metaphoric) discourse about identity since 1900, stretching from the essay Ariel by Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó to Cuban Roberto Fernández Retamar's (1971)4 Calibán - or Man Friday - in which Shakespeare's monster is taken as a more appropriate symbol of America's people. Calibán allegorically rejects the colonialism that Columbus brought to the New World; while Man Friday, in Katz's installation, is superceded by another image. Directly above the footprint is reflected an extremely sophisticated stone carving from the Maya civilization. Neither pliant servant nor barbaric cannibal, Katz seems to say, was the true condition of the autochthonous American peoples. Both the footprint and the epithets were European constructions. Puerto Rican Rafael Ferrer **(SLIDE)** makes more direct references to the Caliban persona: in his tent installation, El gran canibal (the Great Cannibal) of 1979 he erects a pseudo-primitive residence on whose surface games with words reflect the European/American semiotic

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encounter.

Multiculturalism is an idea whose time has been coming since the early 1980s when the feminist and civil rights movements for Blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans, generated in the 1960s and culturally activated in the 1970s, achieved a certain visibility. Demographic changes across the U.S. resulting from revised immigration laws which brought increasing numbers of Third World peoples to North America, made the handwriting on the wall much clearer. By the mid-1980s, a series of blockbuster exhibits of modern Latin American art, related to the art market, prompted me in a 1988 Art in America article to compare the "art boom" to the 1960s Latin American literary boom. Two recent books - one a 1990 catalogue for "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s"; the other, Lucy Lippard's Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America (1991) fixed this phenomenon and its exciting new conception in the public eye. No longer would North American art be dominated by white Anglo/European males; the cultural, national and gender diversity now characterizing the United States must be given equal place and time. To which we said "Hurrah!

Unfortunately, multiculturalist discourse coexisted with the most conservative/reactionary political agenda imaginable as the Reagan/Bush administrations increasingly signaled a return to 19th century codes and the subversion of all gains made since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. Racism, sexism, anti-semitism (against Jews and Arabs) ageism, homophobia, xenophobia and censorship accompany joblessness, homelessness, deepening poverty at

home, militarism and imperialism abroad. Increasingly the U.S. population is polarized and fragmented as the ultra-right leads its attack on all fronts.

In the arts, many of the groups under attack have made a certain amount of common cause. Thus "The Decade Show," curated by and exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum of Harlem (all of New York) represents a true multiculturalism, however chaotic and unfocused. Lippard's Mixed Blessings, while generally accepted, has been criticized for compiling only artists of the Third World. The problem with these sprawling outlays, however, is that while the concept is utopian, the reality is not. The true hybridization and cross-culturalism that can rally different viewpoints and aesthetic configurations around common issues; that can realistically define a multicultural American continent with comprehension of the confrontation that is taking place, and must take place, between the forces of power and the disempowered, has not yet ocurred. As a result, the hegemonic power is able to confuse and disorient this new inclusive democratic surge represented by the term multiculturalism. The symbolic and Realpolitik social meanings of multiculturalism are obscured: some use the term as a synonym for the discarded "minority" designation; others as a tool for a new neocolonialist manuever to contain, c' ıde and defeat; the idealists don't always understand that inclusion is not sufficient - that access to power, decision making and funds must be included. A retranscription of past cultural history is simply not sufficient.

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NOTES

1.The Torres García drawing was published in his magazine Círculo y Cuadrado, 1936. Brought to the author's attention by Mari Carmen Rámirez-García.

2. Madeleine Grynsztejn, Alfredo Jaar, La Jolla Musum of Contemporary Art, CA., 1990, p. 35.

3.William Rose Benet, Reader's Encyclopedia, 2nd Ed., New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co, [1948], 1965.

4.Published in Havana in 1979 as Calibán y otros ensayos.

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