Transculturation: Representing/Reinventing Latin America

by Maria Clara Bernal

This essay was originally published in the exhibition catalogue Transit. Art from Latin America in the University Gallery published by the University of Essex in 2002 to accompany the exhibition of the same name. In this text Maria Clara Bernal discusses the work of Nadin Ospina in relation to other works within the exhibition, many of which were also selected from the holdings of UECLAA.

"Perhaps there's no return for anyone to a native land? only field notes for its reinvention."

(James Clifford, The predicament of culture)

The word 'invention' has haunted the conception of Latin America for many years. The West was accused of the 'original invention' which has been construed through travellers' accounts. In his Cartas de Relación Hernán Cortés's declared to Charles V, his incapacity to give an account of what he saw in America because he lacked the appropriate vocabulary to do so: 'Because I do not know the name of things I do not talk about them'. Cortés lucid concern for an appropriate language to describe the New World was soon overlooked by European explorers sent in the XVIII and XIX century to map, count and classify its resources. For them the appropriate language was the post-enlightenment scientific language introduced by Humboldt who, incidentally, was declared by Simón Bolívar to be the 'true discoverer of America'. This language consisted of concepts and definitions imported from a European context and applied in the description of Latin America. Just as a scientific vocabulary altered the representation of America, a sketch implemented by Humboldt to complement the descriptions had to be made in situ and then sent to Europe to be copied in a studio by an artist that generally had never set foot in America. This methodology introduced by Humboldt sheds some light on the problems of 'translation'. In the transcription from sketch to finished scientific engraving something was lost - or gained, depending on the perspective - The re-interpretation of an original sketch (that was itself an interpretation) was tainted by the expectations Europe had of Latin America. The New World's reality was pushed to coincide with the parameters set by Europe.

Within European representations Latin America stood for many different values. For heat and warmth but also for a dangerous and diseased environment; for superabundant fertility but also for fatal excess; for novelty of species but also for the bizarre and deadly; for lazy sensuality and sexuality but also for impermissible racial mixing and degeneration.

The disenchantment with Western civilisation brought by the First and Second World Wars led European opinion to embrace a more positive view of primitive cultures seeing them as the opportunity for a fresh start. Latin America was one. Having taken their education in Europe, many Latin American intellectuals adopted this conception and used it in their own cultural independence movements all over Latin America. The idea of the retrieval of lost roots presented them with the perfect opportunity to
create their own national identity, while stating at the same time their superiority to a troubled Europe. When Aime Cesaire wrote Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (1939) he became the standard bearer of a generation, that was blinded with enthusiasm. His dream of going back to Martinique and finding not only his culture of origin but also travelling back in time to a point of origin was a fantasy shared by many. However their arrival in Latin America made clear the importance of taking onboard the 'European language' the avant-garde - while keeping in touch with the local context.

One of the many responses to this predicament was issued by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, in his book Cuban Counterpoint (1940) in which he aimed to tackle the problematic of culture contact. Ortiz disagreed with the North American term acculturation used to describe the colonial relations between Europe and Latin America, considering it to be an ethnocentric word with a moral connotation. Its implications of uncultured people receiving the benefits of the Western culture prompted him to coin a new term: Transculturation. The neologism was proposed as a way to describe the process in which both parts of the equation were modified. 'It provide us with a term that does not contain the implications of a certain culture towards which the other must tend, but an exchange between cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality of civilisation.' (Bronislav Malinowski quoted in Ortiz 1995: ix)

In his book, Ortiz examined how cultures shape each other contrapuntally. (The term counterpoint comes from the Latin contrapunctus, properly punctus contra punctum, meaning note against note. The term is also used by Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism, 1993). Ortiz persistently displaced and re-placed home and exile, the national and the international, centres and peripheries, and showed how they are formed historically through constant interplay. In the friction created by the contrapuntal movement a space was opened up, neither indigenous nor European but as a third element it was the perfect backdrop for the advent of the new reality of civilisation so eagerly awaited, not only by Ortiz, but also by all his contemporaries.

Thus the emerging of the word transculturation marked a very important moment in the issue of cultural identity for Latin America. It materialised the process of adjustment from a sense of loss and need of retrieval of the roots marked by the word acculturation, to an overcoming of the loss by giving new shape to the life and culture of Latin America after the processes of conquest, colonisation and modernisation.

Just as transculturation was opposed acculturation, the reinvention suggested by Clifford to be contrasted with the 'original invention'. The prefix re in reinvention has two implications one of going back by revising an original invention; and the other going beyond by transcending it. The relevance of Ortiz becomes highly significant, then, because the reinvention of the native land in contemporary Latin America can only take place with the negotiation of a series of translations. Translation however, cannot be understood in this context under its monocultural/monolingual meaning of reducing the Other to the familiar, thus effacing difference, but instead, it has to be read under the light of the transculturation process. Consequently translation becomes a movement from here to there, as well as from one language to the other, in which the translator as well as the translated are displaced and transformed.
The coinage of the term transculturation opened the way to recognise difference and incorporate it as an important component of cultural identity. It showed that identity did not mean local, in fact quite the contrary, identity had to be formed necessarily by a dialogue of the 'here' and the 'there'. This conception brought among many advantages the theoretical platform to bring together artists against the hegemonic cultures that intended to impose uniformity and standardisation.

Traditional values attributed to Latin America had to be subverted in order to escape an invention that took place without the grasp of an 'appropriate language'. The process described by the neologism transculturation has allowed the artist to reinvent the image of Latin America with the appropriate language created from within. It does not burden the artist either with the image of the 'untainted other' or extreme nationalism, nor does it place on him the demand to become a stranger in his own country.

With Angel Rama the concept of transculturation acquired new light. In his book Processes of Transculturation in Latin American Narrative (1974) he introduced the term transculturadores to refer to writers mediating between the different fields of tension created by the diverse cultures, languages and worlds that coexist in different relations of power in their countries. Rama thus carries on the term to the present developments not only in literature but also in art.

Traditionally art from Latin America has been seen under the light of the juxtaposition here/there, self/other. In recent years the increased and accelerated process of cultural mixing around the world have produced new configurations of identity. Trans-national, trans-urban, trans-diasporic, trans-cultural practices are continuously transforming the ways in which we understand culture. With Transit we propose to see the art from Latin America within the imagined third space created with the word Transculturación. Being not here, not there, but in Transit these works reflect a meeting half way between Latin America and Europe/U.S. and their consequent cultural exchange. Thus creating a subversive space that could be described using Cildo Meireles' words for his Cruzeiro do Sul: 'a region that does not exist in official maps ... for a people whose history is legends and fables is a happy people.' (Cildo Meireles, 1999: 106) What Meireles statement aims to convey is not the invisibility or a-historicity of Latin America, rather the idea that there are different senses of history and time than the ones conceived by Europe. Displacement does not produce a-historic communities, instead it produces mixture of histories.

In their diversity the works presented in Transit are united by the perception of something that is not quite in its place. Could it be the bride-attired girl in Yampolsky's Desde que te ausentaste, or the gothic cathedral that serves as a backdrop to Sanchez bus? But what is its place if as we seen there is no single narrative but a series of perspectives, creating a field of negotiation of economical, ideological, cultural and political forces mixing together?

The intermediate space between the here and the there makes way to the encounter between Mickey Mouse, the icon of the American dream, and the ancient San Agustín culture in a totemic figure. In it the mass media symbol is endowed with the sacred aura of the totem and the totem in turn is endowed with the immediacy of the mass media. For Nadin Ospina the pre-Columbian figure is as foreign to Latin
American people as Mickey Mouse, the only image to which they could relate is presented in the way of a new Idol. With Cildo Meireles a similar displacement occur; although Meireles Zero Cruzeiro and Zero Dollar allude to the problem of inflation they still carry a strong connotation of cultural colonialism. The fake currency does not belong to Brazil or to North America but acquires its full meaning in the combination of the two. Meireles currency not only has no value in monetary terms, it is worthless in terms of conveying national values. The usual faces of national heroes have been replaced by images of the 'invisible people' in Brazilian society, the image of an Indian on one side and a mental patient on the other.

In these works history too becomes a challenged territory where nothing is taken as it appears, the accounts of Christopher Columbus are questioned and exaggerated by Curtino. The description of the conquistadores is turn into a comic strip making evident the absurd invention of America as the land of the savages. Along the same lines of opposition to colonialism is Coco Fusco's 'Sudaca Enterprises'. Using figures with irony, Coco Fusco explores the paradox in which Spain opens its doors to Latin American art (ARCO 1997 was devoted to Latin America) and at the same time tightens its immigration policy for people from the same region.

The title of Jose Alejandro Restrepo's work *El cocodrilo de Humboldt no es el cocodrilo de Hegel* opens the space of the gallery for discussion. The debate between Hegel and Humboldt on the American crocodile summarises a long-standing discussion of the conception and representation of Latin America. From a land of savage cannibals made iconic in the engravings by Theodor DeBry in the XVI century, through the land of fantasy created by magical realism to the contemporary popular conception of the melting pots artists have always reflected on these subjects. In *El cocodrilo de Humboldt no es el cocodrilo de Hegel* the artist takes the role of arbiter (transculturador) in the dispute over the 'reality' of the American crocodile. By going into the jungle, filming the object of discussion and placing it in the gallery (two monitors one with the head of the animal, the other with the tale, separated by 25 feet) Restrepo enables the spectators feel the scale of the actual animal and judge by themselves. Thus the artist set the pace and the stage for an encounter that has been explored in different ways throughout this exhibition.

**References**
