

The crisis of crisis

I D E O L O G Y A N D M A R G I N A L I T Y

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Discussion of the theme of marginality in the postmodern era brought to bear a contemporary point of view on the old problem of the ideological condition of art.

The syndrome of doubt seems to be undermining the very heart of centralism in the West. Debates as to cultural identity, that are gaining importance in the vanguard intellectuality of metropolitan centres, spell out new formulas destined to the struggle for the conservation of symbolic power and control of socio-cultural areas.

Such a situation seems related to a confluence process of certain ideological manifestations associated with universal problems: migratory trends at global scale and their contaminating effect; the crises of identity as an effect of sociological, cultural, and ideological contemporary factors: racism; feminism; thirdworldism; gay movements and AIDS victims' rights movements. This progressive confluence is but the expression of marginal solidarity. Even though territoriality is maintained in the circles of influence and interests of the groups, movements and dependent sectors, it is evident that those

marginalized by illness, race, sex, nationality or economic power share a basic condition and the same "hemisphere".

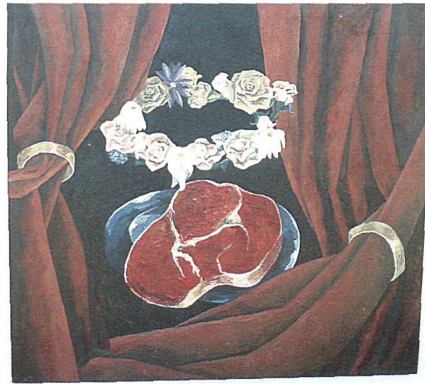
Given such a phenomenon the theories on "the end of ideologies" are incapable of providing an explanation for the deep ideologization of art in postmodernity. More than a crisis of ideologies we should talk about a crisis of hegemonies. The rediscovery of the fact that no neutral zones exist in artistic space has been followed by the recognition that no absolutely hegemonic zones exist, that in turn



Annabel Daou (The Lebanon). Oil on canvas. 5 paintings each 36 x 30". Photos Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

modifies our notions of marginality. In opposition to an economic codification of differences that pretends to locate power in the wealthiest sectors, one can appreciate an ideological and sociocultural configuration that renders any exact localization suspect. The terms of "minorities" and "majorities" become questionable, if we try to identify the discourse of "minorities" with majorities lacking in representation, or rather, whose representativity lacks recognition. Furthermore, constant flux between minorities and majorities, (between élites and the masses) always appears as an exchange, a negotiation that prospers in the areas of power.

Thus we derive the apparent omnipresence of power, reasoned in foucaultian terms, that destabilizes the centre to periphery relation and even the individual's position in respect to that relation. To interpret such ambiguity literally can lead, as Néstor García Canclini has pointed out, to a disperse idea, and to a certain conciliatory vision



Mónica Castillo (Mexico), *Coronación mística*.

of power. Yet this dissemination wouldn't imply, unless we particularly insisted, the concealment of hierarchies and the levels of repression implemented in society. The fact that family oppression isn't the same as police oppression, or that Rockefeller's power isn't the power of a humble school teacher doesn't mean that each of these subsystems can be separated.

Analyses on the subject have tried to prove the frequent interrelation between the different variables of power and subordination; the fragmentation of such spaces and their exchangeability. We would therefore understand the decentralization of power, not as a concealment of pressures that some groups really exert on others, but as the possibility for exchange, for alliance, for mimesis and for simulation, (something that Canclini himself proposes). How can political correctness be interpreted, if not in terms of simulacrum, of flirtation with the other and of mutual assimilation? Thus, both power and subordination are definitely relations of

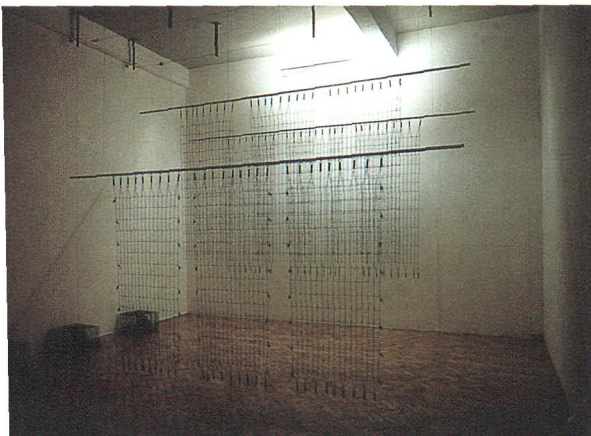
mutual acceptance and rejection. For marginal sectors it is usually easier to determine what is the object of rejection than what are the factors of the homogeneity of marginality. The marginal presents himself as a negating entity, that displaces the "other".

We have to bear in mind that the ethical premises defended by marginality become the basis that through negation structures the ideology of marginal sectors. As Abdul R. Jan



Fernando Arias (Colombia).

Mohamed states, to negate the negation of oneself becomes an affirmative mode for subordinate groups. In this manner an ideological order arises that will be the foundation for a certain kind of art, a certain system of representation, in which, according to Althusser material shape is given to a group of imaginary relationships.



Mona Hatoum (Palestine), *Short Space*, 1992.

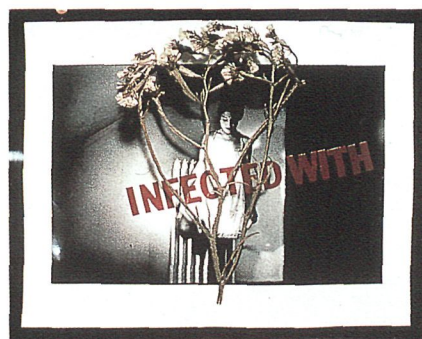
Photo: Elba Capri.



Ricardo Rodríguez Brey. Installation. Vth Habana Biennial (1994).

This negation always entails some appropriation and some mimesis. If we understand the periphery to be the “disorganization” generated by the centre, we will observe, that in its self-organizing effort, the periphery usually resorts to the organizational model proposed by power, yet it combines that search for legitimation in external order with an attack directed to the bases of such models. In this sense Lotman’s appreciation is acceptable: “... the valuation of internal and external space isn’t significant. What is significant is the fact per se of the presence of a frontier”. The position of an ideal

spectator would eventually determine where the boundary between the external and the internal lies, between the organized and the disorganized, between centre and periphery. Yet that spectator doesn’t exist.



Linda Troeller (USA), *TB-AIDS Diary*.

The artistic discourse of marginalized sectors tend to emphasize this fact. Perhaps this explains the tendency to make an art with a profound documentary perspective. The artist that addresses the subject of marginality almost always is actively engaged in its world, (though this doesn’t make him de facto marginal), and he seeks to involve the spectator aggressively. Thus, for example, we have the pronounced testimonial character of Linda Troeller’s work, or that of Fernando Arias Gaviria; the presence of documents in the work of Sue Williamson; the archaeological and historical fundament

in the artistic investigation of Karen Atkinson and Mónica Castillo; the autobiographical in the work of Penny Siopsis; traumatic, exhaustive realist detail, almost reporter style, in Jane Alexander and Wilma Cruise; the individual references of Samta Ben Yahia and Annabel Daou; and on the other hand the direct and strong character of visual communication in the works of Pat Ward Williams, Symrath Patti, Mona Hatoum or Keith Piper.

As an outcome we have an art that rejects any magic aura and confronts reality with intransigent bluntness. It is

the “factographic approach” that Benjamin Buchloh explains, as demythification of reality and of the art work, that tends to create a public beyond the boundaries of artistic institutions. We are referring to an art that operates within (or from) the expressive territories of politics and ethology, of psychology and linguistics, of sociology and aesthetics. If postmodernity has indeed a certain kind of self-referential work concentrated on its own internal logic, it has also fostered a transgressive and expansive movement, through which artistic concepts transcend their own frontiers. Western culture has gradually self-

defined itself, self-determining and self-building, that is to say, laying down its limits, expanding, opening and closing its frontiers, mythologizing the internal and filtering the external following the fragmented dimensions of an ideologically conceived space. That ideological space would be the “universal” identified with a whole where the western would be the focal point. An “ideal” centre within a tortuous configuration rather than genuinely centralized. The labyrinth has a centrifugal tendency, a search for the other pole; that other pole not only marks a somewhat abstract spatial situation, but a definite temporal one.



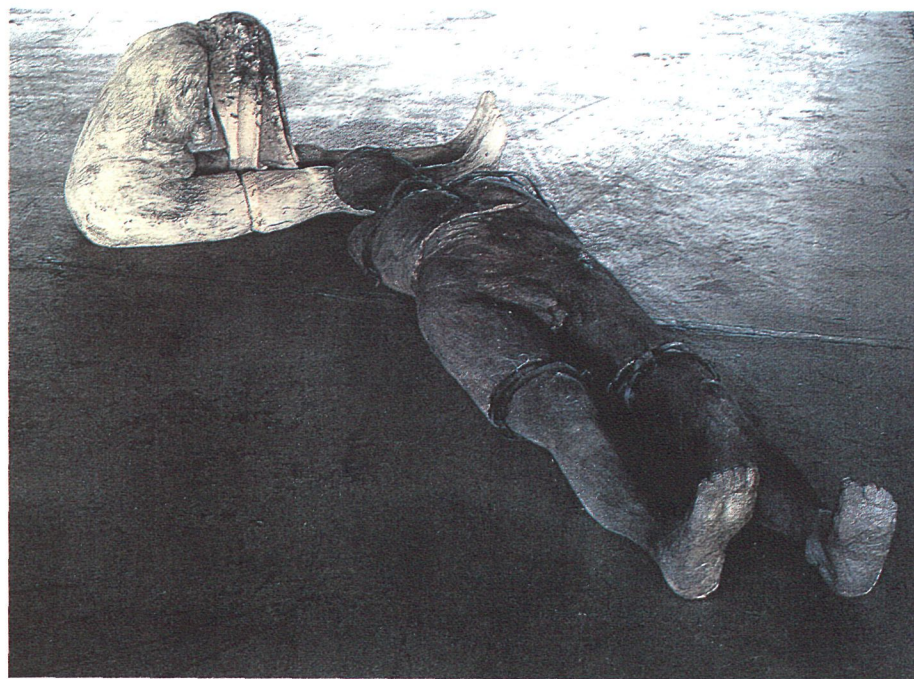
Tania Bruguera. Installation. Vth Habana Biennial, 1994.

Photo: Elba Capri.

The centre-periphery dialectic is also the before and after dialectic, brought to crisis point by the juxtaposition of different historical times.

Art produced in the Third World seems to be condemned to a perennial yesterday in relation to the art of industrial powers. The boom of present african art, for example, isn't so much a highroad to universality, (the triumph over its labyrinthine identity) as a confirmation of otherness, of the permanence of the african in the origins: the first entry to the labyrinth, dark, archaic and vague.

Recognition of the cultural structures of the periphery implies their modernization. But that modernization should be limited to a simple archaeological recovery, paternalistic in the best of cases, and oriented towards neutralizing modern contents, ideologically prizing them apart. The ideal thing would be a recognition of that alternative order, together with an acceptance of that interior "disorder" that is characteristic. This would lead to a reformulation of the traditional notion of the Third World, identified as a geoeconomic periphery as a whole. Some voices have already demanded a "retopography" of the Third World. This isn't sufficient. Above all if we take into account that Great Powers contain their own "internal" Third Worlds, that introduce crisis into any discourse on



Wilma Cruise (South Africa), *Durban Pietá*, 1991-93. Installation M.T.

polarities and reinforce the thesis of the presence of a syncretic multipolarity and of the relativity of the limits between centres and peripheries. We need a "de-territorialization"; if we are

going to continue using the term Third World it will be for referring to a socio-cultural and ideological relation, more than as a precise boundary marker.



Antonio Martorell, *La Torre de Babel*, Installation, Vth Habana Biennial, 1994.