

BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

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In the Air: Conceptual Art, North and South By Robert Morgen

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In the 1960s and '70s there was a global conversation happening among conceptual artists in the northern and southern hemispheres. This "in the air" phenomenon is the premise of *Open Work in Latin America, New York & Beyond*, on view at Hunter College's uptown gallery, an exhibition that demonstrates the unique historical contribution of Latin American conceptual artists and their affiliation with artists in New York.

This exchange took place well before the advent of the digital age, at a time when artists were still writing postcards, sending faxes, telegrams, and actually speaking on the phone. Open work also makes clear the variety of ephemeral media being employed by Latin American artists, such as inexpensive chapbooks, Xeroxed papers, black and white video, documentary photographs, and diagrammatic drawings. Conceptual Art was proto-digital in that the ideas (software) for digital transmission were being disseminated before the hardware became available and the electronics became miniaturized. But herein lies an important caveat: that decade's best work was much more complex and ambiguous than our contemporary digital reproductions and sound bites have led us believe. The fact is that many small publications and critical surveys on the subject, in one form or another, may not exist on-line, including out-of-print publications, carbon-copied essays, important letters, manifestos, symposia transcripts, audiotaped interviews, and videotaped panel discussions, events, and lectures. Just because Conceptual Art is about "ideas" does not mean that all the significant work exists in digital form, just as not.



Victor Grippo, *Analog fa IV (III) [Analogy IV (III)]*, 1972, Wood table, ceramic and acrylic dishes, metal silverware, cotton and velvet tablecloths, natural and acrylic potatoes; installation dimensions 29 3/4 x 37 1/8 x 23 3/16 in. (75.6 x 94.3 x 58.9 cm). Edition 3/5, Coleccion Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

Similar ground to this exhibition was covered in *Global Conceptualism* (1999) at the Queens Museum of Art, and *Arte Conceptual Revisado (Conceptual Art Revisited)*, edited by Juan Vicente Aliaga and Jose Miguel Cortes (Universidad Politecnica de Valencia, 1990), which proved an invaluable resource in Spanish for artists in Europe and the Americas. *Open Work* also establishes an important connection with the Centro de Arte y Comunicacion in Buenos Aires, founded in 1968 by Jorge Glusberg, in which New York conceptualists were often invited to work in Latin America. Each of these events occurred outside the mainstream of activity in northern Europe and the United States, and thus, preceded the more recent interest in researching conceptualism in various regions of Latin America as seen in this exhibition.

The exhibition title's *Open Work* is taken from a term first used by

Umberto Eco in 1962, in which he identifies a revisionist aesthetic based on ambiguity, participation, and information in contrast to Benedetto Croce's insistence on intuition and expression introduced in his book, *Aesthetic* (1908). The curator Harper Montgomery cites Eco as a source for the exhibition given the semiologist's interest in allowing viewers, listeners, and readers to complete the work. Sometimes participation is an explicitly political component of the artwork. A good example would be Victor Grippo's installation *Analogia IV* (1972), a modest table with two settings, separated in black and white, in which the viewer may presumably share a lunch with a peasant worker. The Brazilian artist Antonio Dias's taped grid with open spaces on the floor is more concrete. Titled *Do It Yourself: Freedom Territory* (1968), the grid designates a space without authority or control from the outside, obviously in reference to repressive political regimes in his country's past.

Another Brazilian, Helio Oiticica, presented his relaxation installation, *Nests*, at the *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. We learn, however, in Jeremiah W. McCarthy's essay in the exhibition catalog for *Open Work* that this work was, in fact, a last minute replacement for another film projection installation that he called an "Intentional opened visual-spectator act." According to the essayist, Oiticica's proposal was rejected because "the medium possessed subversive potential," less in relation to the content of the film than in the artist's rejection of using Olivetti's formidable *Information Machine*. In addition to the actions of Cildo Meireles and Rafael Ferrer who questioned the relationship of high modernist art to late capitalism, the graphic works of Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter also embodied a strong opposition to the restrictive entitlements and alienating effects of the New York art scene.

The influence of North American artists, such as Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Mel Bochner, and Donald Burgy, is present in a manner that offers a kind of necessary tension, while contributing an important advance to some of the more indigenous aspects present in the work of their South American counterparts. Here I am thinking of the time pieces and performances of David Lamelas, Eduardo Costa, Juan Downey, and Marta Minujin, all fascinating artists. In the context of this relationship between artists working in the two Americas, *Open*

Work makes virtually everything-no matter what the work's original intention-a series of stains by Ed Ruscha, for example-appear as a political statement. This is most likely how the artists included in this provocative and curiously intimate exhibition understood their work at the time-forty years ago-that, indeed, context is what determines content.

<http://www.artcritical.com/2013/04/18/open-work-hunter-college/>