

# contemporary colonial art

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I was about eighteen years old when I read the three volumes of “The Culture of the Cities” by Lewis Mumford. Of the whole work only one idea remained stuck in my mind, an idea or description with which I had identified immediately: “The bathroom is the only place of privacy we have left.” It took me about five years to realize that this statement was somebody else’s truth. It is true in what Mumford himself calls a “megalopolis,” an overgrown monster city, but it definitely was not true in my city, Montevideo, with less than a million people—and widely spaced, at least in that time and in my background. A symptom of metropolitan culture had managed to evoke in me, an inhabitant of the colonies—through apparently intellectual means—an experience I never had had.

One day I left my country. At the time of my leaving, people used to whistle when they wanted to show public disapproval. Five years later I returned and discovered that whistling was being used for approval, the same as in the United States of America.

A gentleman in a developed country invents the “potato chip.” In his own living context, he managed to enrich qualitatively the cocktail hour and quantitatively, himself. However, in the colonial context, he introduced a new habit, a notion of status, a point of identification through which the colony can relate to the metropolis and believe to feel and act the same. We can say that what happened was a cultural rape through a potato.

The examples only show fragments of a process of transculturation, a part of a vicious circle that holds: economic dependence, mono-production, the creation of artificial needs and the substitution of cultural values. It is a process that managed the ideal situation of nearly everybody actually wanting to participate in it. It creates the need of listening to the latest record, of reading the latest book, of chewing the latest chewing gum, of fitting all the metropolitan molds.

There is no need for this process to be accomplished in all social segments. From the Empire’s point of view the need decreases in proportion to the amount of power held by each social segment, provided the total mechanism is well oiled.

Most of the social classes fit between the Cadillac and the Coke, some even remaining under the latter. United Press provides total, instantaneous and universal information. But in the same act, it also leaves total, instantaneous and universal ignorance.

The artist is an integral part of these informed and isolated social segments. In the colonial areas, in a role which is not very defined—somewhere between a buffoon and a spokesman—he is one of the leaks through which the informative pressure of the Empire keeps filtering through. It is strange that the phrase “Colonial Art” is filled with only positive connotations and that it only refers to the past. In reality it happens in the present, and with benevolence it is called “international style.” With less courtesy, it tends to be epigonous, derivative, and sometimes even opportunistic.

There is a rhetoric and a mental process of the Empire which are very particular and which are not new. As president of the U.S.A., Quincy Adams, said in 1842: “The moral obligation to proceed to commercial exchanges between nations is solely based on the Christian premise that obliges us to love our neighbor.” At the time, the conclusion of this concept was that since China was not Christian, it was bellicose and anti-social, since “The fundamental principle of the Chinese Empire is anti-commercial.” This way, the moral justification was set down for what was called the “opium war,” a war mainly between Britain and China, but with strong profits for the western and Christian civilization.

Commodore Perry went with four battleships to isolationist Japan to offer a commercial treaty. Seven months later, in February of 1854, he returned with an increased squadron to look for the answer.

As with Commerce, Art is above stingy political games: “it helps the communication and understanding of the people,” “it is a common denominator for understanding.” “The world is smaller everyday,” and under the rug of this phrase one sweeps the moment-by-moment growing difference between the cultural needs of economically developed countries and those underdeveloped or developing.

The achievements of the Metropolis have international validity automatically. To speak in the U.S.A. of a Jasper Johns or of a Rauschenberg as a good local artist, with all the implications of provincialism, sounds offensive and insulting. Both are universal luminaries and “art does not have frontiers.” The size of the transculturation problem may be indicated by the fact that “art does not have frontiers” is no longer a figure of speech, a saying, but rather, a commonplace.

The distortion is even deeper. The United States of America, with 6% of the world population, consumes 50% of the world consumer goods. In addition to the necessary military consequences to maintain that situation, this rather monstrous proportion allows the United States of America to also fix the conditions of the market for those goods. The art-consumer goods do not escape the rule.

An empire has a culture to disseminate, even when this culture is only a collection of habits. In the metropolis, art consumer goods are created which originate from an “existing culture.” The creation of these goods, which we can call “cultural products,” and their consumption, determine a series of rules both rigid and functional. Their results remain accumulated in what we call “history of art.” This “history” is metropolitan in nature, and when local histories appear in other places, they are compiled with the same measuring sticks. Who determines what is universal, also is who determines how it is done.

The question for the colonial artist is this—by participating in the metropolitan art game, is he really only postponing the liberation of the colony to which he belongs? There is an absurdity in creating cultural products when there is no culture to justify them. Latin America has five centuries of being a colony, without a breathing space to assume itself. The task is still there—to build its own culture, to find a cultural identity. The artist, instead of

working on this problem, holds the same attitude which Chinese restaurants have in western countries: a Chinese restaurant submits willingly to the image the metropolitan culture has of it. It announces its name with Chinesely-styled letters, advertises “exotic food,” and has, just in case, a page of metropolitan food listed in the menu.

Without too much scientific care, I will borrow some terms of Information Theory: originality, redundancy, and banality.

Traditionally, in art there is a careful balance of the three elements. The originality is the contribution of the artwork. The redundancy, technically a waste of repetitive information, insures the intelligent reception of the message by the public. The banality is the frame of reference, or the collection of known elements which the originality needs as a vehicle in order not to die in hermetism and incommunicability.

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One of the decisions that places the artist, politically as well as among other things, is the banality system or the system he will use as a reference. The colonial artist believes that he makes this choice in total freedom. Generally speaking, however, he only chooses out of three possibilities, and the three of them are based on manufacturing cultural products. That is how the paradox comes about that politically aware artists keep working for the metropolitan culture. The three options are : the “international style,” the regional and picturesque “folklorism,” and the subordination to political-literary content.

The contribution or originality of a cultural product only functions as a refinement of the culture from which it comes (for the culture itself and also for its expansion or proselytizing). It achieves a sophistication of the consuming process. The creation of cultural products in the colonial area then becomes a tool for the enrichment and sophistication of the metropolitan culture. With the growing strength of the “international style,” the result becomes obvious in the productive outlook of Latin America. The aesthetic trends used are permanently lagging behind those promulgated in the imperial centers, without the corresponding evolutions which take place in those centers. It happens that in this way we have individual developments of artists with artificial breaks, which can only be explained by the date the “art magazine” arrived, or the date the “exhibition” was held with the updating information. The increase of the information stream only increases the speed of the changes. Alan Solomon, who was in charge of the American exhibit in the Biennial of Venice (where Rauschenberg won the Big Prize—exhibit flown over with military aircraft), commended a group of artists of Rosario, Argentina, because “they worked according to New York standards only with some weeks of delay.” The New York painter, Frank Stella, said : “If we are the best, it is only fair that they imitate us.” At the same time, colonial artists complained about the expenses of chroming and plastics in general—a fact which, according to them, put them out of the international Market. And E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) is opening branches in different underdeveloped countries, usually after the artists’ own request.

The result is obviously to be a perfecting of the metropolitan imagery.

One of the reactions to the “international style,” as well as willful ignoring in regard to this style, leads to folklorism. This option, instead of basing itself on the activities of the imperial cultural centers, is based on local traditions, and especially on the formal symptoms of the local traditions. There are two problems with this option. The first is that these traditions are usually not sensitive to the immediate and present reality, opening a way to escapism. Second, with few exceptions these traditions are dead. There have been too many colonizations to allow a continuity between the traditions and the artist. Usually the artist comes from the middle class, thus consuming those traditions rather than living them. The folklorist option, then, becomes as derivative as the option that follows the “international style.”

The third option is the subordination to the political-literary content. This option comes from a political commitment prior to a creative decision. This in itself would be a normal process. The limitations appear when the creative process only is dedicated to the production of illustrations, didactically worried, and simultaneously follows the rules of the game indicated by the history of art. The didactic function requires a high percentage of redundancy, leaving little room for originality.

The options described were in their purest form. In the international market, the winners coming from the colonies appear always to refer to more than one option at the time. In this way they probably achieve at the same time a higher degree of contribution and of communicability. But all the artists who follow these rules of the game, whatever the reference system they use, are bound by a broader system regardless of their aesthetics or their politics. It is the system of the object. A painting is a painting recognizable as such, whatever its form or its content. The same happens with any art object, even if it doesn't follow the traditional formal lines. There is a publicity machinery strong enough to transmit the norms of recognition which in every moment is called “avant-garde.” The label “avant-garde” is one of these norms.

The relation between the object and the consuming of that object (which generalized gives the relation between art and society) serves as a thermometer for the functionality of art. In the capitalist, economically developed society, the art object is subject to the laws of supply and demand. The artist is placed in the production of objects with his creation, with the production of creators with his teaching. He is paid for both with very little or no philanthropy, since the power structure accepts him as important, or at least, as usable.

The situation is also reflected in the economic investment of the artist, or his patron, in the actual work production. In 1968, in the Whitney Sculpture Annual, the average investment in materials alone, per sculpture, must have reached about \$200. This amount is more than the annual income of the majority of the inhabitants in underdeveloped countries.

Meanwhile, the concessions the artist has to make in the colonies are more obvious and more painful. In normal circumstances, the artist cannot live by his skills. He has one or more jobs unrelated to his art. He sells to a small national elite or to tourists. He depends on the government's philanthropy through its politically corrupt exhibitions. He always has that permanent option between his principles and the corruption and alms.

I believe the possibilities for change are two:

The first one, moderate, is to continue to use the system of reference pertaining to certain forms capable of being related to art, but not to produce cultural products, but rather to inform about data toward a culture. This means to inform about situations not necessarily aesthetic, able to affect the mechanisms that eventually will produce or define a culture. To isolate, stress, and bring to awareness of transculturating elements, and to give a notion of essences which will allow the creation of new platforms is what I feel is needed. It is what we can call a perceptual alphabetization. It implies to assume economical underdevelopment as cultural stimulus, without relative value judgments. What may be negative in economical terms is only factual in cultural terms. In this moment, a huge percentage of inhabitants of the underdeveloped areas are starving to death. But artists continue to produce full-belly art.

The second possibility is to affect cultural structures through social and political ones, applying the same creativity usually used for art. If we analyze the activities of certain guerrilla groups, especially the Tupamaros and some other urban groups, we can see that something like this is already happening. The system of reference is decidedly alien to the traditional art reference systems. However, they are functioning for expressions which, at the same time they contribute to a total structure change, also have a high density of aesthetic content. For the first time the aesthetic message is understandable as such, without the help of the “art context” given by the museum, the gallery, etc.

The urban guerrilla functions in conditions very similar to those with which the traditional artist is confronted when he is about to produce a work. There is a common goal: to communicate a message and at the same time to change with the process the conditions in which the public finds itself. There is a similar search to find the exact amount of originality which, using the known as a background, allows him to stress the message until notoriety for its effectiveness, sometimes signaling towards the unknown. But by going from the object to the situation, from the elitist legality to subversion, there appear new elements. The public, a passive consumer, suddenly in passing from object to situation has to participate actively to be part of the situation. Passing from legality to subversion, the need of finding a minimum stimulus with a maximum effect appears—an effect that through its impact justifies the risk taken and pays for it. During certain historical periods, at the level of the object, this meant dealing with and creating mysteries. At the level of situations, and in this case, it means the change of the social structure.

These coincidences are not enough to make an artist out of the urban guerilla fighter, the same way as the activity of painting is not enough to make an artist out of a painter. But there are definite cases where the urban guerilla achieves aesthetic levels, widely transcending the movement's pure political function. It is when the movement reaches this stage that it really is on the way toward creating a new culture instead of simply providing old perceptions with a new political form.

The options of traditional art fulfill socially the same function of other institutions used by the power structure to insure stability. That is why they lead to an aesthetic of balance. In a Machiavellian way, within these coordinates, a revolutionary message can be reduced to a

stabilizing function. Art then becomes a safety valve for the expression of individual and collective neuroses originating in the inability of coping with the environment. Its products serve as a retarded correction of a perception braked by the system of conventions and stereotypes that stabilize society. They create a slightly updated system which, eventually assimilated by history, will require a new system, and so on without end. Art objects serve as points of identification alienated from the consumer, requiring more sympathy than empathy. The consumer, for instance, is able to identify with the moral message of a film. He applauds it, feeling that in this way he pays his quota of personal commitment without having to change the course of his life in a significant way. It is the same cathartic action offered by religion.

Instead, the aesthetics of imbalance, the one that affects structures, that demands full participation or full rejection, does not allow for the comfort of alienation.

It leads to the confrontation which will bring about change.

It leads to the integration of aesthetic creativity with all the systems of reference used in everyday life.

It leads the individual to be a permanent creator, to be in a state of constant perception. It leads him to determine his environment according to his needs and to fight in order to achieve the changes.

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