Bearing Witness

A recent show at El Museo del Barrio explored four decades of performance art in the Americas.

BY DANIEL R. QUILES

A video of Papa Coba’s Supermena 51 (1987) was installed above the entrance to “Arte + Vida: Actions by Artists from the Americas, 1960-2000,” a survey of Latin American activist and performance-based art curated by Deborah Cullen for El Museo del Barrio in New York, where it appeared Jan. 30-June 1. The video documented an action in which the Puerto Rican artist ran down a stretch of the West Side Highway in New York City with a pipe of butane in tow, that behind him with ropes, he continued running.

Potential limitation Cullen turned into a positive factor, since the very sparseness of those surviving testimonies made it possible to pack a great deal of work, by more than 160 artists, into the museum’s modest gallery space. “Arte + Vida” was divided into various sections that overlapped spatially and thematically, allowing viewers to draw parallels and construct their own art-historical narrative from the abundance of archival material. Many works and artists occupied multiple categories, befitting the ongoing international exchange of ideas throughout the region. While thematic display facilitated groupings of artists of different nationalities, Cullen focused on particular locales that crystallized ideas at certain junctions, pointing out the centrality of collaboration for so much of this art. (These matters are further explored in the catalogue, which published in mid-May, was unavailable when this article was written.)

The exhibition began in a narrow entrance hall with three artworks grouped under the heading “Preconzer.” Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky was represented by materials detailing a little-known happening staged prior to his filmaking career. For Concentrin (Song to the Ocean), 1963, the artist planned to be lowered into a stadium by a helicopter while reading a Laudeinio poem; however, the event was canceled owing to weather. A series of playful actions punctuated the vulgar titled Hommeage a L’equilibre (Homage to Balance), 1961, by the Caracas-based Neo Dada collective El Teatro de la Balanza (The Roof of the World), which was documented in photos, an artists’ book, and an original three-page manifesto. A printed schedule listed the events that took place for A Day in the Street (1965) by the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV), formed in Paris by Argentine Julio Le Parc. These occurred simultaneously with the rooms that followed, where a variety of contemporaneous practices from the 1960s and ’70s were present. Indeed, the conceptualization developed during this decade by Latin Americans, both at home and abroad, was affirmed in the rest of the exhibition.

The subsequent section, “Signaling,” noted the affinities between the early to mid-’80s street actions of three artists from Argentina. Alberto Greco drew circles in the streets around people and objects for his actions called Vigo Dites (1982-85), a combination of Spanish and Italian that roughly translated as “Living Fingers” (picted in “Argentina Prensor,” this issue). Holgino Vigo used traffic lights and other elements of the civil infrastructure to a Storistian International, and David Lamelas used geometric sculptures to mark off public objects, such as fireboats and street signs, for Sandra Mansiko’s New Objects (Signaling Tures Objects), 1986-87. The next section, “Destitution,” explored the liberating potential of actions such as that of Argentine Marta Minujín (one of the key figures in “Arte + Vida,” appearing in four sections), who destroyed a set of her own sculptures in 1983 when living in Paris. Argentinean artist and El Museo’s founding director Rafael Montañez Ortiz was represented by large-scale photographs, a mattress that he tore apart, promotional materials for the artists’ mutual exhibition of his destruction of pianos. Such variety was frequently employed by Cullen to provide a sense of the missing live performances.

Next was “Neocockey” and the tactile, participatory works of Brazilian Lygia Clark, Helio Oiticica and Lygia Pape, among the best-known of the artists on view. Carlos Canabio’s (Walking), 1963, which guides the viewer in creating a Vithis strip out of paper, was re-created for the exhibition, rightsholding the set of participation and nut the original object. Cullen completed the picture of this frequently exhibited group by including the more explicitly political artists associated with Tropedilla in the later 1960s—Arbor Barrio, Osito Noëto and Antonio Manuel among others. The crucial event in 1965, a wide-running Brazilian movement that included popular musicians and poets, was the original piece of its assimilability and all influences, both local and foreign—at that moment a political stance in itself. Barrio’s “Tromos Ensaingesados: STUTIACIO (Bloody Burdles: SITUATION), 1968-70, were large labels of sheets that the artist wrapped in cloth and left in public spaces overnight. By amuse, they were often mistaken for victims of the military dictatorship, which had taken power in 1964.


Between the years 1966 and '68, Argentine conceptual art became increasingly politicized. The Marshall McLuhan-inspired happenings of Minujín, such as "Simultaneidad en simultaneidad" (Simultaneity in simultaneity), 1966, progressed quite intimately to the "media art" of Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Reinal Eskenazi and many others. For this last trio's 1968 Happening por un saludo atentado (Happening for a Death! Bored [published in "Argentina Provioces," this issue]), photos and information describing a fictional action (in the form of a wild artists' gathering) were submitted to newspapers, which then reported on the alleged event. Thus the group bypassed the usual performance in favor of its documentation in the mass media. During the Onganía dictatorship in the late 1960s, societal critique turned overtly political. Agitprop activities included Tucumán Arde (Tucuman's Burning), 1968, a plot staged by a group of activists in a union headquarters, where El Museo del Barrio presented with photographs and a video.

In 1983, Marta Minujín constructed a replica of the Parthenon at full scale from books that had been banned under the just-concluded dictatorship in Argentina.

Moving into the 1980s, "junta No" focused on chiliene artists who, in the early part of the decade, addressed topics like the bloody dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, among them Lotty Rosenfeld, Dantelé Elia, Carlos Lepe, Dworkin, NCA's (Artists Collective) and Alfredo Arno. For his launching work Oprias 1983, Jaar selected an image from Susan Meiselas's photo series of Sandinista soldiers in Nicaragua, which shows two fully armed men near a soldier inexplicably playing a clarinet. In an accompanying video, Jaar created furious, disorienting noise on a clarinet of his own.

The next room sorted a wide range of 1980s performances and collective actions into two themes, "Humor" and "dreamscape." The nationalities of the artists in this portion were as varied as anywhere in the exhibition, ranging from Brazilian Tsanga—represented by Pente (Cundu, 1984), a tin that enabled a pair of twin girls to walk around with their hair braided together (a performance restaged at the opening)—to Cuban-born, San Francisco-based Tony Lobo, whose Fight (1981) documented his transformation into a professional boxer for one year. Avedes prominent placements were photographs of Minujín's spectacular sculpture-events of the early 1980s. Among these was Partiendo de los libres, homenaje a la democracia (Parthenon of Books/Homage to Democracy), 1981, a full-scale replica of the Parthenon, which she constructed of books that had been banned under the just-concluded dictatorship (the artist encouraged people to dismantle the piece by taking the texts).

Particular attention was given to the "Cuban Renaissance," an upsurge of collective creation during the mid-1960s that offered some genuine critique of Castro's state, as well as of authority in general. Todos Estrellas (All Stars) involved a group of artists who split into two baseball teams as a way of

Miguel Posse: Three Leaf Fish, Los Cucos Gallery, New York, Dec. 1966, gelatin silver print, 9 by 10 inches.

possession Communist fit initiatives. Arte Calle directly parodied revolutionary rhetoric in No queremos inicios (No, we do not want to be introduced), 1988, and Grupo Provisional, in their action Very Good Rauschenberg (1983), kidnapped Robert Rauschenberg during a press conference for his "ROIT-Cube" exhibition at Havana's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. They interrupted the event to give Rauschenberg a painting of an Indian saying "Very Good, Rauschenberg," and asked instantly for his autograph. At the same time, artist Vahidín Morales sat on the floor dressed as a Cuban nationalist, continuously smiling and holding the work of these artists will surely garner closer examination from scholars in the coming years.

Lublin addressed the 1980s with a single theme, "Discovery Channels"—a reference to the continuance of identity politics and an interest in criticizing the history of colonialism—preoccupations that informed much art in that decade, including that of Camilo José Vioque (b. Cuba), Adda (b. Puerto Rico), Eugenio Iturrismo (b. Chile), Silvarta Eara (b. Dominican Republic), Vio Quejada (Chile), and Felix Gonzalez-Torres (b. Puerto Rico), whose very Welcome Back Heroes (1982), a pile of Bonsuka chewing gum, was a reference to the first Gulf War. A standout here was the video The Couple in the Cave: A Greatful Odyssey (1983), showing performances of Coco Pimentel (b. Cuba) and Quico Gomez-Pena (b. Mexico). The artists,clothed in a mix of MTV fashions and "native" dress, performed in a cave, dancing and "exhibiting" themselves, while a barrier identified them as the last survivors of a fictional still-uninhabited island. Inspired by the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, the work gained power as viewers whose emotions ranged from outrage to laughter—anarchist, colonialist ideas still enunciated in contemporary consciousness. The majority of the projects in "Discovery Channels" emerged from the Caribbean and Latino communities in the U.S. The show concluded with The Enduring Body, which offered some examples of recent actions by, among others, Mexico-City-based Teresa Margolies, who used human fat to fill peacocks in buildings in Cuba, and Guatemalan Regina Cisneros, whose performances have considered human relationships in her country. Lublin's goal was not to map contemporary practice, but to provide a look at some of the roots from which it has sprung. In its value for the unwritten present, both in terms of contemporary art practice and pusher Latin American art history, Arte Calle constituted a major statement.

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