

## Discussion: The Genealogy of the South

**Cuahtémoc Medina:** I would like to propose a sort of question-objection: What should we do with the coincidence you seem to around the notion of “fetishization”? It looks to me that the fetish concept carries an enlightenment project, which hopes that, fonce the market economy collapses, we could enter in a transparent set of material and cognitive relationships with objects, which I understand as a problematic legacy of Marxism. Listening to you, a George Bataille’s phrase comes to mind: “I challenge the art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.” I consider that there is a sort of desire where the artwork has a kind of pale status. By opposing to the fetishism circulating within radical history of art, doesn’t it seem that the activation of desire, part of the breakdowns and ambiguities of the artwork, could be lost? Isn’t it that tactics played by many of us imply, not an enlightenment process but a trick where probably –in practical terms– the destiny of Latin-American archives depend on the fact that the threat coming from the possibility that the Getty Institute buys them is needed so that anybody in our countries would worry about their existence? Don’t you find that the confusion, desire or rise produced by the fetish is a necessary moment in the construction of an operative and tactic plan for its transmission?

**Ana Longoni:** I believe this is a good question, we already discussed once about it. I think that our insistence over the risk of fetishization has

to do with what it produces in the first instance: it extracts, from a much more complex and living practice, a material residue to change it into a mere commodity for the art circuit. Very often, what results from this process of fetishization has to do with an extrapolation, with the extraction from its historical circumstance, from the complexity of a practice, etcetera; it remains just as a set of materials that end up enrolled in the canon and valued in the art market, and completely devoid of the possibility to reactivate the memory of experience in its complexity.

**Suely Rolnik:** This seems to be a recurrent question in my conversations with you, Cuauhtémoc. I would divide your approach into two different parts: the first is the definition of fetish that has to do with the object of desire status. Very well, I can accept this definition and I agree with the critique you make to a certain way of working the notion of fetish that hides any given truth that would be conquered in the revolutionary paradise. But the second part is the idea you raise with this concept. If I understand correctly, what you mean to say is that the tension produced by the transformation of an art proposal into fetishism is necessary to move the critique desire by shifting its need in the art system, translating its importance into the public conscience at its country of origin. I see this situation in a different way: it doesn't seem significant to diminish the mobile of desire in order to critically connect and activate such practices as a reaction towards fetishization by the art system. I return to Ana's argument. As we know, the effects of dictatorships or authoritarian regimes in the micro political unconscious stage are more ruthless and far more serious than the ones perceived in the macro political, visible and intentional—violence, torture, prison, censorship, death, etcetera—. The effects of these regimes in the exercise of thought is very serious, it remains associated with danger and terror, and the experience of humiliation weakens the possibility of thought, i.e., of creating, and this poisoning remains way after the end of the regime. It is in opposition to those conditions that many specific poetics raised in such contexts, not only in Latin America. Both in counterculture and in many artistic practices in the continent a new articulation between micro and macro politics has become possible again, which has allowed overcoming the schism between poetics and politics. I am not talking about art at the service of politics or art as a vehicle of ideological denunciation or awareness, but as the political question part of the poetic itself. That has been the specificity of some artistic practices in the

continent, resulting from the fact that we were all under the same condition of oppression so it was a way of poetically addressing them, making them meaningful. But because of the trauma left by the dictatorships, the classical models of the activist and the artist return, separating again micro-politics and macro-politics.

Thirty years later, what is normally the necessary time to surpass the trauma and therefore activate what was inhibited by violence, Latin America started to link with its past. The elaboration, reconnection and activation of the radicalism of such experiences just began in the second half of the 1990s. It occurs right at the moment when the relation between economic and globalized capitalism and thought becomes clear and the discomfort it causes can be recognized. Thinking, i.e., creating became a fundamental production power within the centre of production itself, in so many ways we cannot discuss here. Also, currently many movements such as the ones presented by Marcelo, developed: the desire to join poetics and politics came back as well as overcoming the schism between micro and macro politics, either from the activist side or the cultural and artistic practices. This third generation needs and wants to connect with that kind of experiences, not only from the cultural point of view but from the perspective of the everyday life, of relationships, of production, etcetera.

For that collective desire, connecting with that past did not involve continuing or imitating the inventions of the past, since those had to do with a particular context, but rather to assume such critical energy and overcome the gap between poetics and politics creating new mechanisms and strategies. However, it is by no means by chance that right now such practices become the privileged object of the international resources and their archives become the matter of dispute of the great museums and collectors: They have turned into the new fetish in the art system and market. Right when the life of thought is once again activated in Latin America and an even more dense connection is required to develop such activity, there appears a new neutralizing process in terms of the presentation of the documentation of the continent in ways that dispeil their critical power. That is also a politic of desire defined by the intolerance towards reason and by the need of neutralizing its critical power and instrumentalizing its energy. If you'd rather continue with the idea of fetish as the energy invested in something that becomes an object of desire, then we have to clear up the following; the politics of desire differ from

what moves them and the effect they produce. We face a confrontation between two politics of desire, utterly different, which correspond to other reality production politics; and I don't think they are the consequence of the other or that it is mere coincidence that they appear in the same historic moment.

**Marcelo Expósito:** There is an exceptionally sharp nuance in Cuauhtémoc's question and I am not sure we are getting it. Maybe, we shouldn't think as opposite the fetishization process of the artistic practice and its recovery for autonomous use; but maybe we could think about fetishization as something immanent to the process of recovery and reactivation of the historical practices. Perhaps if we didn't think of the pair fetishization/recovery as opposite, we could open the possibility of reactivating these experiences, since they are valorized within the global northern circuits.

I am sure this will take us to consider the specific tactics and strategies needed in order to display such ambivalence and encourage this way an autonomous self-valorization of such experiences, by paradoxically promoting their value within the international circuits. We would then have—as I understand Cuauhtémoc's proposal—to think that the field within which (historical or contemporary) artistic experiences are valorized, is in itself a field of conflict and not just a field where these experiences are reified or canceled. This means that it is possible to effectively generate battles, that hegemonies can be disputed within this system, about the question of how to reactivate the experiences that were first forgotten and then turned into fetishes. Because these battles could generate effects that have to do, as you both mention, with reactivating the original nature of such experiences; but also their circulation out of their original context could produce not only fetishization and alienation, but also unexpected fruitful effects.

I will set an example. When I realise how close Carlos Ginzburg's work in Argentina is to that of Isidoro Varcárcel Medina in Madrid, or the way some of Cataluña's political conceptualism collectives applied similar strategies to those used in Argentina or in other places of Latin America—which, appropriated the Anglo-American linguistic and tautological conceptualism methodologies in order to alter them and generate not an artistic self reference but a political activity—I realize that the Spanish local experience, comes from being at the same time north and south,

centre and periphery. I believe that one important part of the historiography reconsideration in a museum such as MACBA in recent years has to do with our geopolitical and cultural situation of being north and south, and hence the tight and ambivalent bond this museum has had with Latin American art in recent years. Hereby a positive effect of the experiences circulation in the international system and far from their place of origin. But at the same time, in that process of approach and recovery/reactivation of experiences, a fetishization is also generated as well as a reincorporation of some elements into a much more complex and vast circuit of economic and symbolic valorization. Maybe what we need to do is to think of strategies and tactics that allow generating combined resonances of such different and ambivalent processes.

**Cuahtémoc Medina:** The concept of “fetish” has such potential. Because, finally, this feticho, these “spell” that is a colonial category (following William Pietz’s reading) belongs to a territory of economic relations where two different cultures don’t understand their economic scale of values. The One sees the other like performing absurd and irrational exchanges and the other sees an incomprehensible logic of representation. This fact opens the possibility that even the *Nikisi* in Congo could be interpreted as catholic saints. There is a territory of misunderstandings that increases the notion of over-value and under-value, moving constantly between two speakers that negotiate under oppression and violence within a disturbed economy. I feel that in the Latin-American art process we frequently find this situation, where a permanent situation of north and south exists, and where the “north” suddenly says: “But, how is it possible that you pay attention to Beatriz González?”

My question was in this sense: I am not sure that the search of transparency, the search of historical certainty, of testimonial values, could be necessarily the objective. There is an issue i find merely defensive (and I do not claim my hesitation is not problematical): the idea that the State could propose some sort of legislation that could introduce an ethical regulation in cultural exchanges. I gave up on that a long time ago. Aren’t we invoking here a concept of “cultural heritage”, something like the “conceptual cultural heritage”?

**Suely Rolnik:** I agree with you that it is not about the rescue of the so-called true or essence of Latin America’s art. That’s a hallucination;

we are constantly stuck in a field of forces, for the definition of present cartographies, in the outlining of which art has become one of the more important mechanisms at stake. The initiative of the *Red de Conceptualismos del Sur* with the Government of Brazil to establish a politic of archives is part of such dynamic, which is not defined by a defensive attitude of an illusory rescue of “cultural heritage” understood more as a sort of mummy, but to create the institutional conditions to encourage investigation and the critical promotion of past artistic practices so to streamline current thinking through a dialogue with such experimentations. Research itself is part of this dynamic process and logic production. Instead of rescuing, it is more about activating. But, I don’t agree with your view on the State. In Latin America it is common for us to cancel any negotiation with the State or its authorities, and there are good historical reasons for that, but that leads us to generalize which sometimes proves wrong. The State as well is a field of forces in confrontation and therefore part of a broaden field of forces also across it. Currently in Brazil, the time is ripe for the activation of certain cultural and institutional politics (Cultural Ministry has signed some important initiatives during the first years of Lula’s government) and it stands like a possible place for productive action for the Network (*Red de Conceptualismos del Sur*). We must seize the moment, because times like this are not very stable. Also, if it accomplishes some positive effect, it could work as a precedent for other initiatives in more favourable circumstances in other countries not only in Latin America. It’s just that.

**Ana Longoni:** I completely agree with Suely. I just wanted to add something to your question about “heritage”. This almost kamikaze demarche we want to start with the Cultural Ministry of Brasilia’s authorities, is not part of a naïve characterization assuming that the State could save the heritage. Rather I think it has to do more with generating some sort of symbolic disorder or attention to a *status quo* that seemed to be unchallengeable and fixed. We stand in front of it from the (subjective) power of having created this collective platform instead of what could just remain as despair or plain sadness at the news that Haroldo de Campos’ archives were going to be exported to Europe. We felt there was an absolute need and urgency to say and do something collectively. I don’t know if we contribute to change the *status quo* but at least we set a precedent, we generate

a disturbance, a public action, a coherent stance that alters a cartography that seemed to have an already mapped logic.

**Suely Rolnik:** We know there is no *gran finale*, a happy or sad one (paradise or apocalypse). The paradise is a religious hallucination our generation still articulated (the communist paradise or counterculture). Currently such logic has finally been abandoned; we know life is a permanent struggle and that there are collective synergy moments where some unacceptable barriers can be crossed so a new mapping can be defined. The Brasilia initiative is just that at the moment —that could last a split of a second—, it is possible to make a fissure there and, maybe, produce a small displacement.

**Cuauhtémoc Medina:** While Marcelo explained his diagram, I was thinking that unlike the map, a diagram has a classificatory first moment, which allows the possibility of later making connexions and flows. What would imply to stop operating under the basis of the history of our countries? If these kind of diagrams are a way of relating the south-south, is maybe because they allow the creation of non lineal arguments. I am not sure if the tension between history's specificity and a diagram's possibility could be explored in a way that, when someone recalls American or European art history, its great cultural impact in occasions is the result of its de-contextualization. What sells is the artistic device and never the concrete reasons or causes that make it work. Is it the diagram an incitation to abandon the project of historical representation for the construction of relations, classifications and contacts between different mechanisms? What is the relationship between that and the subject of contextual rescue-reconstruction?

**Marcelo Expósito:** When we produced the diagram for *Desacuerdos*, it had a provocative purpose. As a matter of fact, diagrams are thought from a way of cataloguing, classifying and linking elements in accordance to a series of approaches and strategies, to a political view, that are explicitly made evident within the diagrammatic organization. Yes, a diagram should be based in strict investigation, analysis and thinking protocols; but at the same time, it is completely out the usual art history's positivist discourse. If someone says: "there are things missing here", there is no other answer than: yes, there are things missing, that's it; because it is

all about designing a diagram that connect ideas we find interesting and that didn't have any relationship before, deciding to rule out others. It is through conceptually establishing a series of links and putting them together in a visual diagram, when an interpretation that seems to be political is produced.

This reminds me what Ana always argues when any European or North American Institution asks: “find out what archives are there in Latin America so we can work with them or acquire them”. The answer must be: “in Latin America and particularly what you are looking for, there are no archives”. An archive is a construction: what exists are bits and pieces and one has to decide what to evaluate in accordance with certain choices, so to make those things visible, retrieve and reactivate them and, at the same time, ensure they acquire value.

A clear example: when we were doing the research for *Desacuerdos*, we used a feminist essay about conceptualist practices during the 1960s and 1970s in Spain (through investigations by Fefa Vila, Carmen Navarrete and María Ruido), undoubtedly assuming there was not a feminist conceptual art movement in Spain during that time, but we wanted to apply an extremely politicized point of view —evaluating in retrospective with criteria that was not of historiographic positivism, because it wasn't about the restitution of the authenticity of certain practice— of the work of some women artists that precisely couldn't exercise feminism as it wasn't possible in such context.

In that sense, I think the idea of diagram has an important point: breaking with certain scientific historiography. And, the diagram shows as well the will to dispute hegemonies with clarity.

**Question by the audience:** A very simple question, where does the archive end and the work of art begins? And if in a first moment, just as now, there is going to be a negotiation and a conflict with the institution or museum, is there a way to prevent in the future another conflict with the market, the great art market and not the small museum market?

**Ana Longoni:** What seems to me, taking account of the practices we usually rescue or elaborate is that very often, “works” superimpose to the archive and moreover they exceed it. That is something the Network (*Red de Conceptualismos del Sur*) insists on: recovering the archives is not enough as what is left there are barely material or visible remains that

seem to replace representation possibilities of a certain kind of experiences that are actually much more complex. We believe that reactivating them today would turn out as different tactics that exceed the exhibition of documents coming out as “work” and that have to do with the capacity of making them empower their critical potential and awaken the memory of an experience that has been left dormant, blocked, cut, mutilated.

**Suely Rolnik:** That’s exactly the idea that led to the project of an archive around Lygia Clark’s work I did between 2003 and 2006. From 1963 until her death in 1988, Lygia created a large series of practices where the piece was about creating certain subjectivity starting from those who participated in them. Given the market’s fetishization of that group of work by the end of the 1990s, a question was unavoidable: how to access a work created from the disruptive experience it promotes? For this kind of work, it is not enough to show the objects used in the experience, or even the documentation of the actions it implied, and less remake them like a spectacle for the public. I decided to film 65 people in France, Brazil and the United States that took part in such experiences, but also people that lived in the context where they had their origin and their possible conditions: Brazilian counterculture, specially the experience the merging of politics and poetics. My intention was that the interviews themselves worked as a device to activate the collective memory of such experiences, which power was forgotten under the trauma effect of dictatorship. I was looking to create a group of different experiences that could promote other entries for the activation of an experience of Lygia’s poetics today. I had to deal with the same matter when I had to think of a curatorial mechanism for Lygia’s exhibition in France and Brazil, where we used this archive as the experience’s detonator. Here, the notion of archive is not only a group of organized documents, allegedly neutral, it becomes the work’s power device as well as the selection and statement text of the work. It was for this project I joined the Network (*Red de Conceptualismos del Sur*) in 2007.

**Nelly Richard:** I think Marcelo’s last remark is a key factor as it underlines something I think is missing in this discussion, a necessary consideration about research practices. It seems like the Network (*Red de Conceptualismos del Sur*) and its activation of memory wants, in a certain way, the reinstatement of the works into a life context. Fine. But actually the creation of archives derives from an a research practice. Then to

avoid simplifications, the production of local memory, from the south, in the south and for the south, as for example Chile, within that overflow or decentralization between art-politics, shouldn't be on hands of researchers that don't question the limits and conventions of their own disciplines, as for example in art history. has validity unless it questions its own limits, if then fetishize or idolize the practice's knowledge that others in the north are working with in the intersection of cultural studies, visual studies, postcolonial theory and feminism. Then for me the question about models, about the research diagram is fundamental. The relationship that restores such practices of the multi dimensionality between the *Red* and its creation of memory couldn't occur if the researcher doesn't assume this problem.

**Suely Rolnik:** I agree with you and think that the experience with other investigation politics –those within academic tradition and who practice the production of ideas as the construction of the present– is one of the shared questions of the *Red de Conceptualismos del Sur*. These kinds of initiatives –heterogeneous as they are– were already taking place. An example: the postgraduate programme I put together with a small group of colleges, almost thirty years ago, at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Sao Paulo, where our selection criteria was that the subject had to speak from his or her own concerns with his or her own sensible reality, even stuttering; it was from there they will elaborate their thesis. It doesn't matter that they arrive with a previously defined issue or a specific speciality. The work they will do during the program will be exactly that of formulating their own question and the theoretical contributions will develop within this process.

**Ana Longoni:** Our Network doesn't have a share line or platform yet but we are working on it. About Nelly's approach, a priority within our line of work is precisely research, not merely confined to the academic or university field and its rules, but as an overflow of such spaces in order to articulate them with others through the political effect and the construction of a series of problems and critiques of such poetic-politic episodes, that have been plunged or minimized in the accounts of art history.

**Ricardo Basbaum:** I would like to ask Marcelo about the art space and the artist's role. I think that in your presentation both are situated in a

battlefront, a combat zone. And I believe it is a very interesting condition of contemporary art, that always takes us to consider the limits in the art scene and the artist's role itself, which is never though a priori, but always appears as the result of such battle: what would be interesting to create in this art scene, not a priori, but more as an experimentation space?

**Marcelo Expósito:** Actually, what I wanted to say is that there is a need of establishing the link between different times. In the first place, is it or could it be political to review the history recounts? Or, could a certain kind of experimental contribution in the art field be political? Is the creative experience within social movements political even when it goes out on the street? And then, in the second place: the fundamental contemporary problem, doesn't it lie precisely on how all these different levels of politization articulate? The link between them has to be controversial for sure, but that is not the problem, the problem would be in the fact that such articulation doesn't take place and if we keep these standards apart, the possibilities of creating complex changes are limited.

One point of friendly disagreement with Suely about how she approached the issue of the articulation between the micro and macro politics is clear in what I think about the reading that she has offered on Cildo Miereles's work, extremely suggestive, as it doesn't explain completely how the articulation proposed by Suely is effective in that particular work. I mean, is there a politization of the body of such artistic experience? If one has to go to Brazil, to some powerful person's ranch, and also have the capacity of dwelling with the access protocols of that work, in order to go through the subjectivity experience, then I question the standard of transformation that piece could generate. What do we have to do to effectively accomplish a political reactivation through that piece, in values that exceed its current status of elite fetish? How can we take to the interior of the movements this experience in a subjective way –putting apart the artistic object– and this way complete the ideological dimension of the political work out in the streets? And, how can we articulate both historiographic narrative and experimental transformation on the historical moment of that artistic practice? If these links don't take place (and it never happens naturally) it is very difficult to incite real transformations within the dominant system, which is quite complex as it works in many different levels.

**Suely Rolnik:** It truly is an eternal controversy between us that I like as it provokes us and makes us move forward. From my point of view, it is essential that macro and micro politics articulate but we cannot use the same criteria to evaluate the effects of interventions in each one of its scales. The micro scale –present in art, in social movements or any other kind of action– has to do with the experience of a status quo in the body itself, its invisible face, unconscious, and the actions that intervene in that stage could, eventually, have an effect in the subjectivity process where it is confined and loses its potential. But nothing warrants such effects; in any case, they are unpredictable and cannot be measured as they spread almost imperceptibly in space and time until finally, they produce displacements. On the other hand, the micro has another logic than the macro as this last one has to do with the conscience of a status of things, with the visible face, with representation and, maybe the effects are more measurable. To think about the effect of actions in its micro political standard as legitimizing criteria is like injecting a dose of guilt that inhibits the essential dimension of the sensible relationship with otherness. That affirms the subjectivity dominant politic defined precisely for inhibiting such aspect.