

*Resist and Die: Contemporary
Mexican Art as Spectacle*

In the following presentation, I would like to offer a few points in response to two questions in particular. The first asks what characteristics should art of today possess in order to ascribe the qualifying adjective "resistant" to it, which obviously implies indicating what one must resist. The second question I would like to try to answer is whether or not there is, today, an art in Mexico with these characteristics.

In order to do this, allow me a brief reflection on historical changes in the social function of art, which will then lead us into the current situation. With this objective, I will begin with an extended definition of both the Sociology and Philosophy of art which conceives of art as two-fold: as simultaneously symbol and merchandise. From here I will outline how, in the second half of the twentieth century, these two aspects have been reworked, which has produced a drastic redefinition of the critical objective of resistant art. A large part of my reflection will be dedicated to this aspect for an important reason: Mexico has inserted itself as a player in the international art game. Therefore, once I have outlined the modification that the artistic scene at a global level has produced, I will show how certain contemporary Mexican art has located itself in this new situation.

I. Art as Symbol and Merchandise

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted that from the Middle Ages up to today, artistic practice has been characterized by a "process of autonomization". In other words, throughout History the artist has been liberating him or herself from ecclesiastical and aristocratic guardianship in favor of a better thematic, formal and even political independence. Bourdieu indicates that this liberation is made possible due to the fact that a division of work has resulted, which has led to the formation of artists as a professional group (what's more, he illustrates this point by paralleling it with the appearance of law as a discipline, and the concurrent emergence of a segment of professional

lawyers, as F. Engels indicates). However, such an autonomy of art does not offer economic independence among its benefits. In the context of the bourgeois and industrial revolutions and, later, within the framework of the "cultural industry" arising in the twentieth century, this lack of economic independence implies that artistic creations appear two-fold: as symbolic objects, and also as merchandise. That is to say, artists' creations are not only areas of representation and aesthetic indagation, but also objects in the consumer goods market. As such, Bourdieu sustains that the process of artistic independence really implies a new submissiveness to the market and its laws. From this perspective, it remains to ask ourselves exactly what art has subjected to the laws of the market. In principle, it appears that its product (either as object, or project, or artistic proposal) is subject to the laws of supply and demand. However, it is not only this, for the artist's task is also redefined as both professional and productive in the market of symbolic goods. Throughout the twentieth century, various values have been given to this symbolic and mercantile equation which, according to Bourdieu, forms part of all artwork. As a last resort —and this is the aspect I would like to call your attention to— we have witnessed a deep shift in the symbolic weight of art by the emphasis put on its condition as a consumer good.

Allow me to note a few aspects of this transformation.

It is already common in the History of art to sustain that, throughout a great part of the twentieth century, in the period usually referred to as "modernity", the symbolic role of art was that of transgression (transgressing ways of representing, transgressing its definition, and transgressing its function). If we follow the distinction made by Bourdieu in the above mentioned text, genuinely modern artistic creation up until the middle of the twentieth century emphasized its symbolic function and would only incidentally allude to its characteristic as merchandise. Art was, above all else, a symbolic tool, a vehicle for aggravating the bourgeois, to question the prevailing representation of reality, to favor the advent of a new society, or even to transform the regular modes of life (here we can include positions that range from those Claude Monet to Andre Breton, including John Heartfield and Vladimir Tatlin). Let's say that this "functionalist" vision

of modern art (vs. formalist) conceives of art as fundamentally propositional, its transformative objective being to change the way we see and live.

After the Second World War, and with the emergence of what was later called a post-industrial society, followed by Postmodernity, the role attributed to art changed. Serge Guilbaut has recounted carefully and convincingly how the transition of the artistic vanguard from Paris to New York came about during the forties. In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Guilbaut offers an exemplary case illustrating how, for the first time, the State puts on the clothes of the artistic vanguard to parasitize its supposedly distinctive values. In this case, according to Guilbaut, the American government's use of Abstract Expressionism sought to promote the values of individualism, subjectivism, freedom of expression and apoliticalization in the context of the Cold War—in other words, aspects incarnate in the work of Jackson Pollock and Adolph Gottlieb. This would be the first premeditated, continued and consummated case of the State exploiting the symbolic value of the avant-garde: here the artistic front line leaves off being transgressive and is converted into a propagandistic tool. Its symbolic value appears to be, at least in part, absorbed and transformed by state interests.

As we know, after the Second World War State control and intervention in industrialized society slowly decreased in favor of the free market. And this supposedly should have satisfied the necessities of the citizens: from telephone to gas, including education, transportation and information. But of course, the market must also provide culture. What Daniel Bell and others called post-industrial society—in which, during the second half of the twentieth century, the manufacturing of material goods gave way to new technologies, communication media, and the service sector—is the socio-economic framework in which postmodernity takes root. Postmodernity is thus framed by a new way of producing, more ethereal, speculative and unpredictable than the model that characterized capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is within this socio-economic context that the function of art, having begun germination in the post-war era, is consolidated. At the same time that avant-garde art was in its death throes (which some like to see in minimal art and others in conceptual art between the middle of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies), the channels were being built by which art would be unforgivably distributed from then onwards. Between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the eighties, art galleries and museums would become institutionalized as unavoidable environments of presenting and diffusing fine art. This is not new by any means, even if the number of galleries and museums has indeed exponentially increased; but what is new is that by the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties art has become seen fundamentally as merchandise. Art from the eighties onward is essentially a consumer good: be it as a collectable object, or as part of the industry of leisure. This transformation is crucial as it marks a new behavior in artistic production and, with it, new limits which the art critic must confront. These limits are no longer symbolic, but primarily economic.

The extent of this transformation in the conception of art is something the last theorists of modernity escaped. Theodor Adorno, who suffered the advent of consumer culture and the massive consumption of culture in flesh and blood in the last year of his life in the United States, proposes a contestable resistant conception of art, in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno's unfinished book, which appeared in 1970, is a heated defense of artistic modernity. According to him, art must remain strong against existent reality (it must negate the extended mode of perceiving experience and living it), negative (that is, confrontational), and resist being completely comprehensible. In short, a conception of art as the so-called "grain of sand" in the greased machine of capitalist culture. I reference Adorno because he was, without a doubt, one of the most illustrious minds defending art from being swallowed by consumer society. However, he was incapable of seeing that neither transgression nor the symbolic resistance championed by modern artistic practices—like dodecaphonic music, as Adorno thought— can avoid the assimilating capacity of the market.

Let's return to the distinction made by our friend Bourdieu in which he sustains that art comprehends a dual condition as merchandise and symbol. If we begin with the indisputably omnivorous character of the art market (which, since the sixties, has shown that everything is perfectly sellable: be it replicas of Brillo boxes, spiral jetties, month-long walks along the Wall of China or *hand-jobs* in Soho), the transgression present in the symbolic plane can not resist commercialization, the conversion of art into an anecdotal and abusively onerous consumer good. What's more, it is no coincidence that today we no longer speak of transgression in art (it is not a challenge for the market's bulimia); now we speak of, as you have probably guessed, resistance. As we have heard over these few days in the Symposium, the symbolic function of "resistant" contemporary art is not to be propositional, not to transform the vision of the world or the world itself, but rather interfere in hegemonic representations, recuperate untold histories, reconstitute relegated memories, reveal frictions in the social terrain, etc. As the very term suggests, we are talking about a defensive art that resists the sudden attack of dominant cultures. As a symbol, art does not represent any resistance to the market: the niche of contestable, critical, resistant art does indeed exist. And, as we all know, it sells very well.

II. The Spectacle of Resistance

Now that the transformation in art's social function at the end of the twentieth century has been outlined, allow me to turn to the specific case of Mexico. What is the situation in which recent Mexican art is being carried out? If we could isolate the singularities of political and economic life in the last two decades in Mexico (something at least improbable) no one would be surprised if we said that the socio-economic models from the early eighties (from Miguel de la Madrid's term) to today (that of Vicente Fox) have aligned themselves with international neo-liberal tendencies.

If it was Reagan's and Thatcher's neo-liberal era that received the so-called "boom" in art and the unstoppable resurgence of painting in the eighties, then Mexico followed close behind, and witnessed how Neomexicanism joined in the international pictorial fervor. The

hegemony of painting is not casual: a traditional and tangible support, it is more manageable for the economic interests of the art market than are performance, happenings or mail-art.

As various critics and historians have noted, the so-called pictorial Neomexicanism of the eighties can be seen as an environment of symbolic criticism, of questioning the Mexican symbolic imagination, even homosexual vindications as Osvaldo Sanchez indicated in his article "Body of the Nation". However, more than symbolic questioning, Neomexican painting is, above all else, merchandise, a collectable item. What this reveals is that fine arts, as throughout the century, continue to be the place of symbolic (political, identity or, at least, aesthetic) confrontation; but, since the eighties, along with this symbolic function art has been converted into a paradigmatic consumer good, be it as a collectable object or as part of leisure or the entertainment industry. That is the perception we currently have of art on an international level, and also in Mexico: the art that counts, visible and representative art that circulates in the media, is the one offered on the market (in galleries, museums and art centers). Distinct from the United States, where the art market is activated by private capital, here in Mexico it is almost absolutely dependent upon State patronage (from production grants offered by FONCA, to the most risky proposals coming from museums and art centers, and financing for exhibitions traveling outside Mexico). In this context, what vision of art has the State favored? Principally the spectacularization of art (and of culture in general) through its exclusive reduction to an entertainment product. In Mexico art is seen as a pastime —when it is seen, that is. What's more, perhaps this condition of State dependence has camouflaged the patent conversion of contemporary art into a consumer good: in the eyes of the public, fine art appears only evasively as merchandise due to its being wrapped in nebulous public subventions.

This is not the vision the international art market has of contemporary Mexican art. With the belligerent tradition of post-revolutionary Mexican art as a backdrop —from Muralism to "the groups" through to the militant internationalization of styles in the fifties and sixties— some Mexican artists today have brandished clear or blurred proposals

of social critique. However, despite the fact that work by some of them, such as Teresa Margolles, Gustavo Artigas, Minerva Cuevas, Daniela Rosen and Carlos Amorales, can provoke discomfort in that their proposals reveal precarious aspects of Mexican life (be it work instability, poverty or the insulting squandering by the well-to-do), the fact remains that they are meticulously distributed by commercial art channels. In general, these proposals usually present no more than evasive parallel or parasitic models of artistic conduct, and thus end up feeding the market with symbolic goods. This in no way means that these artists' work lacks revealing formal and conceptual appeal. The work does possess this. However, it is no more than an anecdotal art of resistance since it does not question the fundamental condition of a work of contemporary art: its condition as merchandise. This is nothing new. Criticism, dissidence and subversion sell in the art market. Mexico and the international scene, where the afore-mentioned artists have more presence than in their own country, have kept up with the dictates of the "cultural industry", whose objective it is to distribute goods that are easily identifiable as "artistic" and commercially viable to an audience of masses. This remains proven —and I will not bore you with an interminable list— by the fact that since 2002 alone, innumerable group shows consisting of work by contemporary Mexican artists have been organized: *Zebra Crossing* in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt de Berlin, *Mexico Axis* in the San Diego Museum of Art, *Mexico City- An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* in P.S.1 in New York, *Alibis* in the Witte de With in Rotterdam, *Artificial Sublime* in La Capella in Barcelona, *Mexico, Identity and Rupture* in the Fundacion Telefonica, and *Made in Mexico* in the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston.

How can we interpret all of this? If we consider that since the seventies and throughout the eighties art has been institutionalized as a consumer good characterized, first of all, by recuperating benevolent supports like painting and, later, by assimilating and promoting differences from within the market (think of the multicultural strategies at the end of the eighties beginning of the nineties, including exhibitions such as *Magicians of the Earth in Centre Georges Pompidou*, or *Cooked and Raw* in the Reina Sofia), it comes as no

surprise that this logic of assimilation now presents us with art of resistance or political charge currently being made in Mexico. This is where the question of resistance is really raised, for rather than asking ourselves about an art of resistance, we should be asking about a resistance to art. A resistance to art as it is conceived of today. That is, not resistance at the level of art as symbol, but at the level of art as merchandise. With this I mean that resistance, confrontation, must happen in practice and not only (or rather more than) in representation. Resistance takes place in practices that are not artistic in and of themselves, or that are not found in the space where art is usually presented. We are talking about hybrid techniques non-artistic tactics, with the objective of redefining artistic practices. The most important thing here is to pay attention to the teachings of the past, and the failures of transgressive and refractory art throughout the twentieth century: to resist symbolically does not necessarily imply resisting the mercantile function of art. In short, and in conclusion, the task of resistant art (or the resistance to art, as I mentioned) should be seen in light of an undisputable deed: in the context in which contemporary art is located, there is no transit between the modification of modes of representing (symbolic level) and the transformation of its mercantile condition (merchandise level). In light of this, artistic resistance, if it wishes to respond to the current situation, must directly question the condition of art as merchandise, which is to say its social function —a questioning that exclusively symbolic criticism can not carry out.

¹"The Market of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia University Press, 1993, 113

²Ibid 114

³*De como Nueva York robó la idea de arte moderno*, Mondadori, 1990

⁴*The End of Ideology*, Free Press, 1960

⁵*Teoría estética*, Taurus, 1980

⁶"El cuerpo de la nación" in *Curare*, No. 17, 2000