

**MC:** Yes, it is a very important part of the type of work that I produce. Keeping it as a public work is very important, that it has proper storage conditions, that it can be installed again and be public, it's a privilege. It's very important.

**P:** Good morning, I wanted to know, do you feel that the work of the disaster is more a work of identification as critical to a system, or rather creates new ecologies to move forward? We are transformation and it goes beyond critical journalism?

**MC:** I think that I am entirely too pessimistic. I think that it would be boring to be telling people how they have to live. I am not the kind of person that would do this, nor that could do this. I do think that by defending the way we want to live and being consistent with our position as political actors we basically change our surroundings. Then, I think that one way to go about this would be if each and every one of us is resilient to capitalism and the favors of capitalism. However, it is not pointing out, or criticizing as such. I think that yes, there are elements in which I make references, there are elements in which I exercise a criticism that passes through my professional filter of other references, but in the end it is simply that. Exercising my profession based on my politics and my ethics.

**P:** Minerva, I wanted to ask you, have you ever questioned your references or your political judgments ever?

**MC:** Absolutely, all the time. It was just because of this that I began to think about moral concepts, concepts of progress, and the concept of development. Just to provide another example, I am producing another piece almost permanently that is a video called *Disidencia* (Dissidence), which is an archive of situations that deal with resistance or opposition, or just alternative lifestyles in Mexico City. The project has become a map of recordings of scenes going from the most obvious political events like demonstrations and marches to the documentation of cultural and political projects and other activities like an alternative currency or *underground* project spaces. But when I was developing the project I was confronted with the dilemma that I would be the one deciding what would be considered dissident or wouldn't be, what would be considered too far left and what wouldn't. I wanted to remove myself from an anthropological vision, I wanted to be inconsequential, a nobody who would observe how these situations happen. In reality, however, the idea of registering these situations emerged because I felt a part of them and I wanted to document them. Yes, the process itself is a filter, from the moment that you decide the frame or what part of the video makes it into the final edition. Again, I think that in the moment that it becomes public the final filter continues to be the viewer. It will have a second reading and the public will make their own opinions depending on the references that they have and their own political filters. I don't know if this is clear.

## Panel 3

JULIETA GONZÁLEZ, JOSÉ ROCA, ITALA SCHMELZ AND FELIPE EHRENBERG  
MODERATOR: EDUARDO ABAROA

### The Aesthetic Imagination Before Chaos: From Self-Destructive Art to the Free-Market Diaspora

JULIETA GONZÁLEZ

Let me clarify that these are a series of notes that could serve as a starting point for a more exhaustive research, or possibly even an exhibition (being a curator and not an academic, when I embark on any critical reflection, I cannot help but think in an exhibition content). As notes, and given the brevity of my talk, I will limit myself to the revision of very precise aspects in the works of the artists I have chosen to discuss here.

This reflection has been partially motivated by the emergence of concepts such as chaos, crisis, diaspora, and the problem of the border, amongst others, as instruments of critical evaluation and platforms for curatorial models that have been formulated based on those notions in the past fifteen years to try to give a more specific referential frame to the periphery's production. In a way, these strategies have stemmed as a reaction to what Hal Foster called "the cultural politics of otherness" that modulated a large part of curatorial and artistic practices during the 80's and 90's. At that time, deconstructive thought activated the concept of otherness to legitimate the aesthetic codes of the periphery and thus to facilitate their insertion within a global cultural production. If this phenomenon greatly enabled the integration of Latin American, Asian and African artists into the mainstream of biennials and other international events, it also gave rise to a series of exhibitions that not only constructed an iconography of otherness, but also misrepresented many of the periphery's artistic practices. Nonetheless, I believe that these models, articulated

at a time of crisis, have worn out and have lost specificity, becoming umbrella terms as homogenizing and clichéd as the multiculturalism of the 80's and early 90's. In any case, I am interested in the way that some of these curatorial proposals have revised and reinscribed the work of artists like Gego, for example, within a contemporary context and outside of the traditions where they existed in a somewhat marginal and dissonant way. I use Gego as an example because she was a figure who existed on the margins of the Venezuelan geometric abstraction tradition, and whose work is re-read in exhibitions such as "The Structure of Survival" in the 2003 Venice Biennale organized by Carlos Basualdo as belonging to the imagination of the crisis, of the informal city. Basualdo's curatorial strategy effects Gego's post-mortem transubstantiation from modern artist into contemporary artist (without getting into a debate on the flexible notion of contemporary in this context). Similar revisions have taken place with other artists who occupied what could be called an "uncomfortable" place within late modernity's aesthetic traditions. As part of my research job for the Tate, which in this particular case is inscribed exclusively to the Latin American context, I have also been interested in revising and recontextualizing the works of some artists whose oeuvre in many cases even anticipates these curatorial and critical discourses today. But I didn't come here to speak of curatorial models, but rather, to speak of the work of some artists that I consider exceptionally pertinent in light of this discussion.

In this symposium we have spoken of the figure of the global artist, based in several cities around the world, and nomadism has certainly become a professional requisite of contemporary artists. If this nomadic condition could serve as a common denominator for the four artists that I wish to present today, in their case it does not respond to a simple everyday need in a contemporary artists' professional life. For these artists, dislocation, and why not call it that, exile as a particular form of chaos, are central and formative experiences, subsidiary to a larger catastrophic event—World War II—that I wish to utilize today as a sort of index to analyze the different aesthetic approximations to chaos in the works of Gustav Metzger, Gertrud Goldschmidt (Gego), Mira Schendel and, as a conclusion, I'd like to dedicate a few words to Luis Camnitzer's theoretical and critical work. During the thirties, each of them at a different point in their life, all of them Jews from Germany and Italy (in Schendel's case) were somehow marked by persecution and exile. But as I said before, in this discussion, the experience of exile is contingent to that of war.

Beyond the catastrophe it implies, World War II, marked the end of modernity, so to speak. If one fundamental text sums up this perception in a resounding way, it's *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, written by Theodor Adorno and Max

Horkheimer during their World War II Californian exile. For Adorno and Horkheimer "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity." For Horkheimer and Adorno, science and progress' promise of emancipation was suddenly diluted in a world where that advancement of knowledge had contributed to the creation of a society "willing to accept the fascist ideology, practice genocide in a deliberate way, and develop lethal weapons of massive destruction." For them, reason had become irrational.

This seems to be the feeling shared by these artists in whose works we can read the sequels of the war experience, even if they don't allude to it directly. Loss, dislocation, disenchantment and apocalyptic visions of technological progress manifest in their works through operations of destruction, deterritorialization, dissolution of structures, de-hierarchization and indeterminacy that we will now analyze.

### **Gustav Metzger: the Art of Destruction**

Perhaps Gustav Metzger's work is most emblematic in terms of the theme that concerns us today, "aesthetic imagination before chaos." In it, the conviction that civilization is on the verge of extinction and that technological progress will lead us to self-annihilation is constantly manifested. Metzger's work is too vast and complex to be analysed thoroughly in the space of this discussion so I will only stop on some particular aspects. Metzger was born in Nuremberg in 1928, the son of Polish Orthodox Jews. After his parents, grandparents and one brother were deported to Poland, in 1939, Metzger and his elder brother managed to escape to England with the help of the Refugee Children's Movement. His parents, brother and other members of his family remained in the extermination camps. In 1948 Metzger officially assumed the condition of statelessness, which he has maintained ever since. From early adolescence on, Metzger was actively militant in diverse political movements, but in 1944 he decided to dedicate himself to art and not "revolution." In 1959, Metzger does an exhibition in which he presents the parts of a cardboard box that correspond to TV packing as abstract works. For Metzger, these disposable boxes possessed aesthetic qualities similar to modern painting's loftiest, and in addition it was an art "made by machines." On the occasion of this exhibition, Metzger composed the first version of his Manifesto for Self-destructive Art, which proposes "mainly a form of public art for industrial societies." Art that can make use of technology and be made in collaboration with scientists and engineers, that can be mechanically produced and assembled in factories, and whose duration and permanence

can vary between a few instants and about 20 years, since the disintegration process is part of its own structure. It also prefigures the interest in entropy and dematerialization that significantly marked the conceptual practices of the end of the 60's and 70's. The collaboration amongst artists, scientists and engineers that Metzger formulated, as well as the precision that frames self-destructive art in an unavoidable collusion with technology, would inscribe Metzger in the context of cybernetic art, from his “spatio-dynamique”, “chrono-dynamique” and “lumino-dynamique” sculptures, to the posterior initiatives by E.A.T (Experiments in Art and Technology), and including the participatory experiences through technological mediation that were central to the GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel) as much as to other kinetic and cybernetic art groups of the time to which Metzger was close (for example Signals, Guy Brett and Paul Keeler's gallery, in whose homonymous magazine, edited by David Medalla, Metzger first published his 5<sup>th</sup> manifesto, *On Random Activity in Material/Transforming Works of Art*). In open opposition to the relatively optimistic and positivistic vision of the techno-utopias of his time, Metzger's self-destructive proposals, as public art and therefore possessing a certain monumental character, emphasize the destructive aspect of the society for which they were conceived. Metzger would later take his concept of self-destruction to other social structures such as the art market (“the artist must destroy art galleries. Capitalist institutions. Boxes of Deceit,” he declares in *Manifesto World*, fourth manifesto, 1962) and the very notion of the artists' production in his later manifestos and actions, such as his 1977-1980 Strike, through which he aspired to put in place the fall of the commercial art system, imagining galleries collapsing, museum bankruptcies, closing of magazines: “Damage one part—and the effect is felt world-wide.” In this sense, Metzger's call to action, typified in the “Act of Perish” pamphlet, finds a more propitious context in the radical actions of artists like the Argentinian destructivists, Ralph Ortiz (Rafael Montañez Ortiz), Charlotte Moorman, Jean Toche, and Jon Hendricks of the later Guerilla Art Action Group, Herman Nitsch, Al Hansen, and Yoko Ono, all of whom participated in one and/or another of the London and New York editions of Destruction in Art Symposium in 1966 and 1968. Later on in the 90's, this preoccupation for destruction gets Metzger closely involved with the environmentalist cause and in 1992 he writes his manifesto titled, “Nature Demised Resurrects as Environment.”

### **Gego: Unraveling the Reticle**

Gertrud Goldschmidt was born in Hamburg in 1912 at the heart of a wealthy family of bankers and intellectuals. In 1938, her family abandons her native city for exile in England and she, recently graduated in architecture, leaves slightly later. In 1939,

a twist of fate (a problem with her British visa) takes her to Venezuela, a country that welcomed the Jews fleeing from Nazi persecution with open arms. Gego would establish herself there definitely until her death in 1994.

Gego's work emerges as a dissonant voice in the context of the tradition of geometric abstraction in Venezuela—a voice that drills into the very foundation of the univocal agenda of the modernist project in the country and proposes a site of resistance from which the validity of said project can be in fact put into question. Gego seems to *weave* an alternate plot to the modernist project in Venezuela, resisting the imperatives of “order and progress” that seemed to underpin it and that, with time, have demonstrated its purely cosmetic mood since they never accompanied a true social, political or economic project in the country.

Gego comes out of the failure of European modernist utopia, out of incertitude and the feeling of general failure that World War II occasioned. So she could hardly share the naive enthusiasm of the Venezuelan modernist avant-garde, who were concentrated on leaving the nineteenth century behind and plunging fully into a twenty century anointed by the oil bonanza, in a tropic where the horrors of the European war seemed a distant nightmare. Gego is disenchanted by the logic of modernity and she expresses this through a distancing from the rationality of pure form and Euclidean geometry. This is manifested in her first sculptural works, which experiment with non-Euclidean geometry, topological surfaces, and games of folds where indeterminacy would seem, if paradoxically, to be an organizing principle.

Again, I only want to focus on a single aspect of Gego's work that I have dealt with before and that has to do with this distancing from pure forms and from the structural rationality of the reticle to decidedly enter into a universe of open, contingent and apparently structurally precarious forms that prefigure and later reflect the urban development of her most immediate context: Caracas, a city that grew in a shapeless, chaotic and un-hierarchized way from an initial reticular grid imposed by the conquistadors on the uneven topography of the valley of Caracas. Gego's *Reticuláreas* (*Reticleareas*) implode the reticle and produce this precisely by their own weight, even though they're made of flexible and light materials such as wire. As a spatial experience, the *Reticleareas* operate on the basis of the contingent and the incidental and unfold the spatial possibilities of a reticle in crisis. Gego's *Reticleareas* can be read as the critique of the local ornamental modernity of monumental vocation on the one hand, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a discreet affinity with the chaos of her adopted city and its informal agglomerations. Caracas, a city without a center but with many centralities, and where the definition of public space obeys the constant flows of the freeway or the avenue and not the static and permanent

spaces of the plaza or park. Her *Dibujos sin papel* (Drawings without Paper) do nothing but confirm that vocation for contingency, precariousness and chaos. They are wire sculptures that defy the spatial autonomy of the sculpture, subordinating it to the wall, and in which marginality is expressed through the precariousness and poverty of the materials she uses, materials which sometimes remind us of the antennae that proliferate on the roofs of the slums in Caracas and that are connected by a knot of stolen electric wires, which also echo Gego's knots and tangles. Guided by chance and opportunity, by the beauty of equilibrium found in that which is evidently unstable, and by the new spaces that can stem from improvised solutions, the humble selection of materials (debris, rusted and bent wires, screws, buttons) and the formal resolution of the *Drawings without Paper* seem to speak of the precariousness of the city's most emblematic architecture. Informal settlement: unprogrammed architecture, agendaless city, resulting from chance and necessity but imbued with strength, resistance and adaptability that defy urban policies and the imperatives of governability. Gego's work, unique amongst its generation in Venezuela, committed to the formal search for geometric abstraction, was capable of capturing the side effects of modernity and the ulterior result of its fleeting utopia of progress.

### **Mira Schendel: Dissolving the Word**

Time shortages limit me to a very brief mention of Mira Schendel's work, which I would like to further develop in an extended form of this talk, but which I didn't want to leave out. I would like to stop for a moment on one aspect of her otherwise prolific work that I find to be grounded in her experience of the war. Schendel was born in Zurich in 1919 of Jewish parents. As a child she went to live in Italy with her mother and suffered Nazi persecution during the war, until she arrived to Sarajevo where she married a Yugoslavian in the hopes of obtaining a visa to emigrate. She finally arrived to Brazil in 1949. Schendel occupies a place somewhat at the margins of the Neo-concrete Brazilian tradition. Unlike Lygia Clark's and Hélio Oiticica's work, hers is not oriented toward the phenomenological aspect of the pieces. Later on, she begins one of her most extensive bodies of work, *Monotipias*, where she begins her exploration of language, where its dissolution takes place, and where sentences and phrases give way to babblings and typographic games. The experience of war and exile are doubtless transmitted in a hermetic way in these works that seem to articulate an order within the chaos of the disarticulate word—that which speaks of the impossibility of constructing meaning after tragedy. In 1966, Schendel begins an intellectual relationship with philosopher Max Bense, and it's perhaps in light of this relationship that we can start to understand the conditions

under which she undertakes this dissolution of the structure of language. Bense proposed the autonomy of the components of language—an autonomy which we can appreciate in *Objetos Gráficos* (Graphic Objects), the body of work Schendel begins in 1967, and in which word, syllable, and letter take on the dimension of the object, but become more legible in a chaotic structure that can be seen right-side-up and upside-down, making language burst from its very own structure.

### **Luis Camnitzer: Reterritorializing the Postcolonial**

Luis Camnitzer's presence in this discussion serves more as a conclusion, and I will not analyze his work as an artist but rather his extensive and lucid production as writer, historian and critic. Camnitzer lived the experience of war and exile in a retroactive way: he was only one year old when his Jewish parents immigrated to Uruguay in 1838, escaping what would have been certain extermination. Due to professional motives, Camnitzer moved to New York in 1964, which he calls "free-trade diaspora." There, together with Liliana Porter and Guillermo Castillo, he founds The New York Graphic Workshop. And then in the 70's he lives a second exile there during the Uruguayan dictatorship: which, having been outside already only belongs to him by ideological affiliation, for, as he says, his formation in Uruguay always pointed to the consolidation of his identity as a "Uruguayan intellectual," and as such he would have probably been exiled during the military dictatorship. Nevertheless, these two indirect exiles caused a feeling of unease. As he himself analyzes his experience in an essay titled "Exile:" "By leaving Germany at the age of one, by definition I started to grow up as an exile. To leave a country under the threat of a death penalty, even at such an early age, must have some influence on any further development." Duality and bilingualism, belonging nowhere but in two places at once caused his early engravings to be perceived as "very South American" in Germany while in Uruguay they were considered "German expressionist." In New York, he leaves expressionism behind, interesting himself in the links between pedagogy and art, and in that process, he becomes more distant from Uruguay. After the thirteen years of dictatorship, which he did not suffer in the flesh but from a distance, Camnitzer concludes:

I see that I am left floating between two cultures—one that is becoming alien even if I don't want it to, another that is alien because I want it to be, and I don't conceive of it in any other way. It is now thirteen years that I am passing through here, in a provisional state. These are thirteen years that took the rest of the Uruguayan intellectuality to jail or into exile, which, except for the guilt complex or alibis, is the same thing. I am a citizen of my memory, which doesn't have laws, passports or inhabitants. It only has distortions.

Camnitzer expresses a conflict of identity in this and other writings and communicates it in a succinct way in his work *Paisaje*, which leads him to dissect the art history of Latin America in his writing and curatorship, renegotiating the genealogies of conceptualism and reclaiming the discourse of diaspora as his own and not as the exclusive domain of a postcolonial theory formulated on the colonial legacies of the British, French and Belgians in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean—colonial structures that remained in place until the second half of the twenty century. In his historiographical revision, we can read a call to specificity lost in the logic of multiculturalism and its subsequent curatorial strategies, which I mention at the beginning of this talk. Camnitzer, for example, locates the beginning of Latin American conceptual art in the figure of Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar’s mentor. Surely an audacious gesture and one that affirms this search for specificity. In this way, his work proposes at the same time a site for resistance and an antidote against the (quite diffuse and often insubstantial) models built by the curatorial strategies of the (intellectually) void era.

## Ceci N’est Pas Une Biennale

JOSÉ ROCA

**1. Rules and Possibilities.** In *The Pleasure of Architecture* Bernard Tschumi said: “If you want to follow the first rule of architecture, break it.” Something similar could be said about curatorship. There are no parameters that can be applied to all cases, only intentions and desires. It is preferable to be congruent with the development of a project than consistent with a hypothetical “*Should be.*”

**2. An Exhibition is Not an Encyclopedia.** Unlike the encyclopedist, a curator can’t include all the examples that illustrate a concept—only those that s/he finds and that are available. Curatorship creates a fiction from those fragments. When recognizing the impossibility of completeness, the only thing left is to try to suspend the visitor’s disbelief when facing a set of small pieces from a puzzle without a model. As Douglas Crimp said, quoting Eugenio Donato’s in *On The Museum’s Ruins*, museums are based on the acritical fiction that it is possible to represent the universe from its fragments. An exhibition creates a believable fiction, or at least one that we want to believe.

**3. An Exhibition is not a Library.** If I want to read I go to the library, where I can acquire in-depth information...and I don’t even have to do it while standing.

**4. An Exhibition is Not an Archive.** If I want to do a research, I go back to the aforementioned library. Archives in an exhibition context either become pure image (which at times is ok, although not having access to the documents is frustrating), or become pure curatorial rhetoric (which is wrong and also frustrating).

**5. An Exhibition is Not a Movie Theatre.** If I want to go and see a movie, I go to the movie theatre, where I can sit in the dark, and the noise (usually) comes only from what is being projected. Aside from very few exceptions, feature films do not belong in the exhibition space.

**6. A Biennial is Not a Museum.** Based on Art History’s orthodoxy, the Museum aspires to truth. A biennial is not grounded on a mountain of facts—it is sheer speculation.