

## Definitely Lost in Translation: Translating *French Theory*

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### First Dérive

"*Ferdydurke* was published in 1937, a year before *Nausea*, but as Gombrowicz was unknown and Sartre famous, *Nausea*, so to speak, usurped Gombrowicz's rightful place in the history of the novel." This is how Milan Kundera recalled not only what may be considered to be the Polish writer's fundamental work, but also his destiny.

In 1939, shortly after the publication of *Ferdydurke*—a novel which was widely admired in Polish intellectual circles—the author had to flee his country when it was occupied by the Nazis, like many other Europeans were forced to do. In his new home in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he was neither appreciated within the country nor promoted outside of it, as Alicia Borinsky has pointed out. "I am not a national treasure," wrote Gombrowicz, recalling the paradox of Borges, whom Borinsky described as "abstract, exotic, not tied to [South America's] problems," and yet widely admired and exported (Borinsky 1996:198).

Apparently, Gombrowicz did not have a very good relationship with the group involved with the prestigious journal *Sur*. It is important to keep this detail in mind, and to some extent, it explains his fate. In Gombrowicz's case, it is interesting to ponder who he might have become if he had arrived at a different destination across the Atlantic—such as New York, where many other European intellectuals arrived. And furthermore, how would Buenos Aires have been affected if, rather than Gombrowicz—"just another Polack, *che*"—it had been André Breton who had disembarked there, to name only one of the celebrity writers from Paris, the center, the myth? How would history have been affected if a different story had been written?

Gombrowicz was not the only one to flee Nazi Europe. As the German army leveled what had been, prior to the outbreak of the war, the capital cities of the avant-garde—or at least the most interesting centers for the fictions that had grown up around the modernist project—Europe began losing most of its artists and intellectuals. In short, one might say that it was being dispossessed of its myth—the myth that had brought Paris to the forefront as the meeting place for European radicals; and the center that was able to withstand the intensity of Berlin or the constructivism of Amsterdam and Moscow, other points of reference. The eternal cities would only be eternal for a day: dazzled by the desire for absolute power, the German military would end up destroying itself and everything around it in the name of that desire.

But in retrospect, maybe those cities really were eternal, at least while someone was deciding whether or not to believe in their eternity. Like any other myth, the myth of a city is created with a minimum of effort: it is enough that some people go

there, and that others follow, and still others after them. It is enough to be aware of the event: what is named exists. It is enough that there be someone living in the city and talking about it. And occupying it. Like empires—and like almost everything in life—cities are simple rhetorical constructions that exist in the imaginations of those that dream about them.

Take New York as an example: the city that Mondrian visited barely a year after Gombrowicz undertook his own American journey. Fernand Léger arrived in New York that same year, and as he himself has explained, his paintings—like Mondrian’s—became lighter, losing some of their original solemnity. Later on, other members of the European avant-garde began joining the American dream, which in the early 1940s—with Europe overrun by injustice—began to snatch away Paris’s more than half-century of hegemony.

Breton arrived in New York in 1941. Other travelers to the United States were Marc Chagall, Nikolaus Pevsner, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius (who was invited by Harvard in 1937 and inserted himself with extraordinary ease into the American system, despite the Bauhaus ideology). Back in the 1930s, New York was a recently debuted dream, but it began to emerge as an indispensable city following the arrival of some of those notorious representatives of the historic avant-garde movements, and even more so following the creation of the New York School, which was conceived in this city as the movement destined to take the reins from the old Parisian avant-garde movements that had been abandoned with no hope for a resurgence.

And like an omen, the arrival of these members of the avant-garde was a media event. People often remember the return of Marcel Duchamp in those war years, fleeing the conflict. As soon as he disembarked, he was accosted by local journalists for his opinion on the city, whose then diminutive skyscrapers (as compared to the buildings that would raise the city into the sky, challenging heaven) were still a novelty to the European eye, Haskell recalls. Without a doubt, New York was more beautiful. The most beautiful.

It was important to be modern, whatever the cost. What wasn’t clear, then or now, was what it truly meant to be *modern*. The impossibility of bringing this project to fruition in the contaminated atmosphere of Europe made it necessary to find a new setting in which to represent modernity: this setting turned out to be New York. But in the same way that Baudelaire described the modern city that Paris would be—though at the time he was writing, it had not yet become that city—people also imagined what they wanted New York, the most modern of ancient cities, to be in the future.

This perhaps explains why, when the Englishwoman Mina Loy arrived in New York in 1916, she was somewhat disappointed. As her ship sailed into the harbor, she could barely make out the city and its then very modest attempts at skyscrapers through the fog. When the air cleared a few hours later, she could see the massive construction on Wall Street, which looked to the eyes of the foreign poet like the “monstrous offspring of the cliffs of Dover.”

Little by little, as she wandered through the Village with its one-story homes, she began to understand the paradox that existed around the concept of *modern life* as seen from the Old World. There are at least two New Yorks: the one that projects a skyline, and the one that inhabits the street. In the same fashion, there are always two realities (at least): the one imposed by theory, and the one represented by artists. The vertigo between the two New Yorks (the one in the sky and the one on the ground), coupled with the dissociation between the two (backdrop and pavement), formed part of the construction of a city that projected itself as a European desire as well, and that quickened one’s step down the street to keep visitors from noticing that they were living in a dream—a modern one at last.

But the story of New York does not *happen*: it is *written*. History is written by power—that which manages to set itself up as a point of reference. For that reason, the question of whether Gombrowicz would have had the same fate if he had reached another port on his arrival from Europe (New York, for example) seems pertinent here, keeping in mind the invention of cities and how they achieve hegemony and then lose it, or never achieve it the first place—and who is to know which is worse. It is a discourse rooted in problems inherent to notions such as *center* and *periphery*—whatever such restrictive terms may be worth—or in other words, more closely joined to the desires that are projected from certain places onto others.

In fact, it is curious—if nothing else—how around the years that *Sur* was being published, there persisted a certain intense fascination for an urban center that was at that time more symbolic than real: Paris. New York itself had had a glimpse of that city at the Armory Show in 1913, where Odilon Redon’s works were displayed alongside those of Marcel Duchamp in an almost ideological confrontation (in two moments) that revealed the American public’s desire to bring itself up to date, which became most evident in the 1920s. Who would have guessed in the time of Clement Greenberg, those years when the fate of international art—so they say—was being defined in New York; Greenberg, who in his impeccably constructed formalism, obsessed with German idealism a little after the fact (it must be said), thought that the Europe of the past would provide the best way to translate the United States of the future.

Therein lies the seductive aporia of Greenberg: he became fixated on establishing a timeline for avant-garde movements, even after the avant-gardes themselves tried to rupture the historical line, which was the reigning historical logic of the time. Furthermore, he did so to justify American art of the 1940s and 1950s, to provide a pedigree for an art which in essence—as Serge Guilbaut pointed out in his classic work—came from nothing. In this sense, the intention of the classically oriented MoMA seems clear—practically a government operation. One might say that *everything* is there, with the hierarchies demanded by the hegemonic narrative, as Foster points out in reference to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, one of the focal points of the museum.

Without a doubt, this extraordinary and exceptional museum contains *everything*, though one might also formulate a perverse possibility: What if *everything* had become the privileged *everything* to be found precisely there, housed by that museum with a history that in a sense also gives the works an added aura that is both powerful and indeterminate? How was that mythic History of the twentieth century written, starting with Picasso and, with a little effort, ending with Picasso? In what way has that story/History influenced subsequent artistic—and theoretic—production?

But let us return to Paris for a moment. It appeared larger than life when seen from Buenos Aires in the late 1930s, and despite the almost total—or impending—loss of Parisian hegemony, this city embodied a myth that was bigger than myth itself. One might even say that for Borges, Paris (London) was the imaginary city he inhabited in Buenos Aires. Even the architecture of the Argentinean city features a curious European-like pastiche, with street corners cross-dressing as Madrid, London or Paris, or perhaps even Palermo.

This constructive bricolage confers its intense originality on a beautiful and prodigious capital city which, in its own fashion and from its own place on the map—or rather, from the place that it believed itself to occupy on the map, given that the location varies depending on one's vantage point, as demonstrated by Torres García with his inverted cone—played an important role in the 1930s, as did São Paulo in the era of Tarsila do Amaral and Blaise Cendrars; or Bowles' Tangiers; or Max Ernst's Saigon; or even the Barcelona of the Surrealists: though when all is said and done, these *peripheries* that are sought out at times, preserved by their wonderful inhabitants, were never seen as symbols or even symptoms of power.

And now some say that if Buenos Aires had not looked to Paris for direction as often as it did, it would have been able to see Gombrowicz more clearly, in its marginal, off-center, distant way. And by seeing Gombrowicz, surely it would have been able to achieve status as a center, which here means only autonomy of thought. In essence, didn't the same thing happen with New York? Wasn't it transformed into myth because it began to turn to itself as a point of reference on the ground and in the sky?

Clearly, there is a catch to this discourse, of which we are all aware. One could argue that the exiles who reached New York brought their popularity with them, thus moving the center of intellectual power from one city to another, given that they represented this power. However, while it may be true that cities often become known for their association with innovation or liberty—and in this sense, New York is a paradigmatic case—it is no less true that our appreciation of the outer edges makes *us* the central idea, given that like everything else in this life, what is central and what is peripheral depends on your point of view: once again, Torres García's image of an inverted cone.

Nevertheless, there is a recurring obsession in the places and cities that see themselves as peripheral: they must always look toward or see themselves at the center, so that no one ever notices that they are on the fringes. So despite the strong

and wonderful local references in *Sur*, and the beauty of Buenos Aires itself—whose singularity lay in how it juggled its many borrowed elements—the group associated with the journal constantly looked toward Paris.

And it kept looking toward Paris, the focal point of all the action in Cortázar's *Rayuela* (published in English as *Hopscotch*), when Paris was more of a dream of past grandeur than anything else, a dream that would be revived in a short-lived and unexpected manner years later, with the events of 1968. And then, for a brief, fiery time, Paris unexpectedly rose from its marginal situation, with no intention of even passing into history. From clandestinity, Guy Debord's Situationist International (SI) was confronted by the success of Sartre and his novel. According to Kundera, this success should have belonged to someone else. No one ever knew about this confrontation, because the SI wished to return to the avant-garde's fundamental nature, which is like saying that the revolution was a bit like a secret sect.

To write history everyday and then to hurriedly erase it afterward. A dream of clandestinity, of a broken line, and if it was able to recover the thread of History, it would be the most radical thread: Bretonian Surrealism, which was more of a safe conduct than an inspiration for the New York School, faced off against Belgian Surrealism, which denied the notion of the unconscious as a privileged part of the story. The SI's preferred formula—*le détournement*, deviation, drift, removal from context, shift in meaning—became a prodigious license to free oneself from boredom and live in a constant state of surprise.

Paris was constantly being mentioned in tangos, as Alicia Borinsky so rightly pointed out. And without a doubt, that led to triumph. A nostalgia for cities, the notion of their fragility, constantly being on the verge of losing them, of losing oneself, helps to construct the myth. Perhaps if Paris had not been the subject of so many tangos, it would be a different place now. If no one had ever spoken about certain cities, they would not be on the maps that are burned into historic fiction. Because many of the cities that were essential to the shaping of modernity are always on the verge of eluding us. Buenos Aires, for example, whose singular force revamped Paris's shabby image through *Hopscotch*. Perhaps a bit of what Kundera said about *Nausea* and *Ferdynand* is also happening to cities. It's all a question of symbolic location.

## Second Dérive

Things have been happening in Brazil since the mid-1960s, though the dominant discourse doesn't take those changes into account, simply because they're happening in a place it doesn't even pay attention to. It's a common occurrence: the Art History we consider to be *authentic and true* is configured based on what goes on in the center. Other events—those that happen in other places—go unnoticed, and aren't included in books. Or they are recovered as part of a wish, a dream that adapts itself to the needs of this discourse of authority: the case of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's beatification is exemplary in the period after Breton.

Or we should at least say that the discourse in use has not taken them into account until recently, as works representing Brazil's artistic and intellectual explosion of the 1950s and 1960s known as *Modernidade* began filtering into collections and exhibitions, perhaps more so than books, thanks to the success of contemporary Latin American artists in the New York—i.e., international—art market since the late 1980s. From this point on, the market began offering exotic delicacies to mouths that had grown weary of other flavors (first Italian, followed by German and Russian).

And despite everything, despite the fact that textbooks written from the center—even if that center is more symbolic than geographic—ignored the importance of what was happening in Brazil, it was the site of one of the few experiences of Western culture to demonstrate how antithetical and irreconcilable concepts are exactly that because of an absurd consensus of thought: our own, which thinks in binary terms and governs the history that is imposed on us. The Brazilian case is not limited to breaking the frame and seeking new places for art. Its merit lies in pointing out the contradictions of the Western discourse in another equally fundamental aspect: in Brazilian concretism, the abstract forms which are cold in the hegemonic tale become warm, as anticipated by Tarsila do Amaral's *Black Woman*, featuring an "African" figure and a Mondrianesque background.

Vivid, anamorphic geometries, Lygia Clark's *Bugs*. Concretist art to touch and to be handled, different textures that can still be sensed in the room named for the artist at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, which is a space designed to be felt rather than seen. Clark did not want the museum to reconstruct the embalmed and odorless relationship usually established between the work and the viewer, the artist and the spectator—an invisible iron barrier.

Western art has accustomed us too much to just looking, feeling as little as possible outside of the eye itself. Art, as it is understood in the West, is a quintessentially hygienic act: that of looking. This is why the most radical aspect of the work of Joseph Beuys, who was so unradical in his ridiculous role of shaman—or rather the artist as a star, even more so than Warhol, who, as intuitively as ever, surrounded Beuys in diamond dust—was the odor with which the passage of time infuses the materials. On visiting one of his installations at a museum, we were pervaded by a rancid flavor: we did not count on such a subversion of our eyes.

Then, whoever passes through that icy *Documenta* could see Clark hanging defenseless, exposed, contradictory, absurd, museumed. Cold. Or at least as cold as possible. Deactivated, turned frigid. The operation has a little too much zany maneuvering in its construction for certain Art History discourses of power: turning everything cold, or into *form*, which amounts to the same thing. In other words: into minimalism, as if being minimalist were a guarantee of seriousness and above all, of modernity. But of course, it wasn't an innocent maneuver. By (re)presenting Clark as a "minimalist," the distinct history of Brazil was erased in a single stroke, canceling out the

importance of *concretism* as the inconvenient concept that made one fact crystal clear: there were other options for a revision of figuration, abstraction and even unconsciousness, even if they weren't invented in New York.

Indeed, is this not Greenberg once again—despite everything—and the American invention of the infamous pedigree for an art which, despite being connected to the past by ties that are in fact more than dubious, breaks with the past by means of abstract expressionism, and achieves independence from Europe through the inventions of minimalism? Is minimalist passion not a part of the hegemonic discourse (Greenbergian, nonetheless) which reinforces the notion of a pedigree of purifications—spatial (form), nonetheless—through its very literalness? And isn't returning to that discourse, if only to reverse it, a way of adapting to the discourse of authority invented in the United States? And above all, isn't it a way of affirming history's asepticism, its homogenization, as proven by so many exhibitions curated over the last ten years?

And because of this, concretism diminishes before minimalism in the dominant discourse, though no one questions the concept of authorship like Clark does. In principle, this concept could be joined to the literalness of minimalist objects. In some of her "literal" works such as *Stone and Air*, for instance, the spectator is the author, tabling issues such as the notions of unity and originality which are essential to this set discourse.

They are attempts to revise history and transform it into stories, fictions. They represent a rejection of Western logic which constructs history based on certainties, on fixed positions. These positions are closely related to the patricidal loss of memory that Haroldo de Campos spoke about—an exercise in *unlearning*. Author, authorship, authority. Author, actor, acting: the second formula is preferable.

But our art theory never takes notice of vulnerable and antiauthoritarian discourses, which are nonetheless the best ones for understanding things. Clark's letter to Mondrian, for instance, written in May 1959 to a dead Mondrian who couldn't respond to or even receive her correspondence: "Today I feel more alone than yesterday. I felt a great need to see your work: a lonely old man, yourself." Clark confessed all her troubles and fears, her "fear of fear," to a Mondrian who "believed in man" and "hated nature." She ended her missive, "Mondrian: I love you so much today." No other document has so eloquently explained Mondrian, or even the discourse and its fissures, but, as has happened so often before, the document escaped notice. Who would possibly care about a love letter written by a Brazilian woman?

### Third Story

Jackson Pollock dribbles paint on the ground—Picasso never did that—and Hans Namuth freezes him as he paints. It is here, in these snapshots from 1950, that we find one of the solidest elements for the construction of Pollock's story. He was

undeniably a standard-bearer in the foundational myth of the Americanism of the 1940s and 1950s—and hence, of the new Modernity as it would be from then on. Pollock, the premier American painter, the necessary painter who Greenberg singled out in his article “American Type-Painting,” published in *Partisan Review* in 1955.

Pollock was the necessary element in the new foundational myth, which was written in (the United States of) America this time. Not only did he represent abstract art as it was then needed for the *mise en scène* of that “Americanism”—which grew from the unconscious—but he was also, in essence, one of the few American painters of the period to have been born in the country rather than immigrating like most of the others. Furthermore, his childhood years in Arizona—the West—also made him the ideal candidate to become the official representative of those roots which those who hoped to find or at least look for America were attempting to reconstruct. What difference did it make that America was everywhere and nowhere? What difference did it make that, in Pollock’s case, these yearned-for roots came more from visits to exhibitions and museums in New York—like the MoMA’s 1941 show, *Art of the United States*—than from his childhood memories? Perhaps a prisoner of his own myth, Pollock himself claimed the opposite in a 1944 interview, as Kirk Varnedoe recalls.

The most important point here is that Pollock declared himself to be an American, notwithstanding the origins of his compositions. Pollock wanted to be tribal, to recover certain roots that in the imprecise collective memory, must have seemed like the best means of separating himself from Europe without making any concessions. This was the origin of the search for the American identity which seems to end with Pollock, that search which was the basis for the very concept of the New York School, as the collective need for an “American art,” which led to the formation of some part of the myth itself.

In his own way, Jackson Pollock clearly was seeking the myth of America, in order to embody it, to fill it. His legendary and supposedly interior landscapes, those he painted on the ground, standing over Picasso, were his personal return to his origins, a flat landscape, with an impossible space like the war stories of the American Indians, spaces where the figurative elements are camouflaged amid a world without shadows. One might even say that his *Number One* (1948) bears many similarities to Frederick Sommer’s photograph from three years earlier, entitled *Arizona Landscape*—deserts where boundaries are blurred and spatial conceptions are camouflaged.

In any case, the complex operation is driven home by Namuth’s photographs. Perhaps because of his formation in the world of the theater, he is able to capture the force of direct action—and that is the source of the deception and misunderstanding. The mythical figure that we know now is forged in these photographs, and one would say that too often, any analysis of Pollock’s work begins with these photographs and their rhetorical impact; photographs that construct the gaze of the photographer as a privileged place, and that of the spectator who is given the opportunity to observe the shaman in a trance state. Too often, the final product has stood in the way, the final

product being Pollock’s *dribbled* paintings, but paintings nonetheless, as if there were no point in trying to reach a decisive interpretation of something mysterious and unfathomable: a shaman’s work—or, as Rosenberg said (cited by Pepe Karmel), “What was to go on a canvas was not a picture but an event.”

But is what Pollock did really so radical? Or does its radicalness lie in the action prior to the work, trampling Picasso underfoot, and with him, all of European history? Was what Lucio Fontana did in the early 1950s—slashing the canvas, the skin of the canvas—not fundamentally more radical? All the time, feeling how the fabric tore under the pressure of his blade, listening to the rasping sound produced by the tear?

The blade enters and gradually sinks into the tense surface to discover the painting’s interior, to recover the old desire to experience the pictorial space in real time, which elapses and is not borrowed time, a constructed temporality. The canvas begins to heat up with the friction of the blade, and the artist’s hand turns red from the pressure: hand and canvas seem to be consumed as they burn in the pleasure of their transgression.

Of course, Fontana’s violent act also implies familiar concepts in the jargon of the abstract expressionists—*tortured, effort, struggle, pain*...—terms that, as Robert Rauschenberg confessed years later, were excessive or at the very least, useless to the artists of the following generation. And Lucio Fontana—like Pollock in his trance—seemed to feel quite comfortable amid so much inflammation, so many cuts, the hand squeezing the knife, ripping a large canvas, as seen in Ugo Mulas’ 1965 series of photographs, which stands as testimony to the whole process.

It may be that all photographs of artists at work tend to look alike, but the group of images showing the phases of Fontana’s torn canvas—a man standing erect before his work, literally stabbing it as if it were a body—brings to mind Namuth’s photographs of Pollock in the busy setting of his work in progress. The photographs are similar, though the two artists are carrying out inverse operations: while Pollock has placed on the ground something that is normally held by an easel—the canvas, though it is atypical in this case—Fontana tears the canvas/body with the skill and control of a practiced killer.

In these series of photographs, they are both seen in uncomfortable positions: their artists’ bodies are too bent or stretched to be painting. It may be true that neither of them is painting in the traditional sense of the word, but what they are creating—whatever one might call it—will wind up hanging on a wall somewhere. Once again, the distortion of the central idea: painting on the ground, disemboweling against the wall. And this is not the only distortion.

#### Fourth Dérive

“You words, march, follow me! / and even if we’ve gone further, / gone too far, there’s still a long way to go, / even further, there is no end to it. // It’s not getting any lighter. //

This word/ will only/ bring other words in its wake,/ sentence for sentence./ That's how the world/ would have its way,/ be said and done,/ once and for all./ She won't say./ Words, follow me,/ that once and for all never comes/—not to this lust for words/ and diction to contradiction!" wrote Ingeborg Bachmann about her meeting with Nelly Sachs.<sup>3</sup>

Bachmann hadn't written poetry for a long time before this, because she couldn't find the right words: words that were not too worn to be able to speak the unspeakable. But she never strayed far from poetry. On the contrary: she withdrew, she stepped aside, waiting for those necessary words to return, to *make themselves manifest*, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said at the end of his *Tractatus*.

"Who knows when they put borders around the country,/ and barbed wire around the pine trees? [...] A word? We'd be best to keep it in our mouths;/ it is better pronounced in both languages/ and though we be mute it will germinate."

Tracing histories with words. Words fallen and erased. Words can be lost, in the case of Willem Boshoff and the writing that fell off the wall in 1997. And on the ground, words such as *pure* and *purity* in the seven languages of Colonial Africa (Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Italian, German and Portuguese).

What remains of the map, of power, when the streets are erased and the words are lost? The world would have to be renamed and the borders redrawn, the maps turned around with a wink, as those who speak from the periphery are always forced to do. The proposals of the Belgian Marcel Mariën which then pass into the SI psychogeography, an ongoing struggle against boredom and alienation. Both are defeated through situations, a way to *détourner*, to redirect, society itself: against the situations created for us and by us. Seeking out the psychic spaces of cities, Debord says, "The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; [...] the appealing or repelling character of certain places—these phenomena all seem to be neglected."<sup>4</sup>

However, we are not speaking about maps in the true sense of the word. It is not about being born in a certain place and speaking a certain language, although of course it is about journeys, paths. It isn't even about opting for stories rather than History, nor about knowing what is essential, because what is essential is the result of a consensus, just like everything else is, and stories narrated—or at least, disseminated—from the centers of power wind up having a strong aftertaste of history, manufactured stories like the *French Theory* of which Francois Cusset speaks in ironic tones and which is only an American passion for the ideas of French thinkers translated, summarized, ingested and returned to Europe—even to France—as the reformulation of an unheard-of intellectual "neocolonialism." Translating English translations back

<sup>3</sup> Translation from the German by Lilian M. Freedberg in *Last Living Words: The Ingeborg Bachmann Reader* (Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 2006). N.T.

<sup>4</sup> Translation from the French by Ken Knabb in *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995). N.T.

into French. Clearly, something is lost in translation. But, that which is lost in translation leads to unprecedented definitions such as the one below, and has also resulted in a very useful text on "visual culture" edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff in 1998—a bestseller that has been reprinted many times.

While it may be true that the very *genre* of Mirzoeff's book—known in English as a *reader*, or a collection of articles and book excerpts on a specific topic, widely used in the U.S. academic system and more recently in the United Kingdom—makes it clear that it is mainly circulated in university libraries and among students. In any case, and leaving aside any doubts that the *reader* genre may provoke in terms of convenience (there is less to digest of books that should really be read in entirety), it would be worth our while to reflect on another subject: to what point may the circulation of the aforementioned book be owed to the wide number of disciplines invoked and convoked by this thing called visual culture?

Perhaps because of this concrete fact, it brought together classic names in canon revision and interpretations—also visual—of the discourses of power, such as Barthes, Foucault, Althusser, Debord, Lacan, Fanon, McLuhan and even Descartes and Marx. And here we find an example of what is often lost in cultural translations. In the short biographies of the authors at the end of the book, Marx is listed as a "legendary writer and activist."

### Fifth Dérive

In the early 1970s, Jacques Lacan seemed to be talking about love: "*Parlez-moi d'amour* is only a song. I have spoken about love letters, declarations of love, which are not the same as the word *love*," he explains in a session of the *Encore* seminar devoted to non-sense. Words are clearly not able to name the relevant thing; they are unable to "speak of love" in any deeper sense than a song title.

Thus, Lacan is not speaking about love, but once again about desire—the key to facing up to life, to understanding the relationships between the Self and the Other: the former becomes aware of who he is when the latter says "no." And of course, the latter says "no" on a regular basis, or at least says, "maybe," given that he is only another Self that sees the first Self as the Other. In our role as Other, we also regularly say "no" or "maybe" or "to some extent" to the Self we have before us; we also deny the "yes" without reservation, and we are not equal to what is demanded of us, floundering as we are in our own non-sense.

And yet, the Self and the Other observe one another from their respective windows, and invert those mobile, infinitely interchangeable roles: we are aware of our subjectivity through the vision of the Other. The reflex, every reflex, contains something of a promise, of reality and fiction, something that is there and not there, and which eludes us just when we think we've captured it. Because Lacan is the antithesis of the literality of the minimal and, one might say, synthetic thought that corresponds

to the English language: difficult to translate. If reading Lacan in French is impossible, reading him in his English translations is pointless.

It is for this reason that criticism in general—even from the United States—has been so fascinated by Lacan's notion of a conscious Self that is also the Other, the two positions infinitely interchangeable, as the psychoanalyst made clear in his line of reasoning. Lacan's writings offer something that anyone who tries to revise imposed paradigms will need: a solid theoretical position on which to base a critique of a slippery concept, one which tends to escape you, and yet a touchstone for the invisibilities that governed thought during the 1980s and early 1990s. Desire, of which everyone spoke back then, was much more than a new strategy for confronting the world after the failure of political values and the end of pleasure—visual pleasure, as well—which at that time was being revealed as yet another imposition of the authoritative gaze. Desire represented a territory between the Self and the Other: a kind of space for endless interchange which was necessarily ever more mobile and unsatisfactory, the eternal need for negotiating meaning.

Consequently, desire began to be described in detail in numerous Lacan readers and in the abundance of texts available in the U.S. market that facilitated the comprehension of his writing through simple explanations—and may a book that is in other senses an excellent representative of its genre serve as an example. Lacan began to inundate the pages of the most influential articles and books published by New York critics, gaining popularity among a group of theoreticians associated with *October* magazine; and from there infiltrating other texts that used this magazine as a point of reference. Making its way to other countries, even returning to Europe by way of America, it was widely proclaimed—French theory translated into English, then translated from English back into French: what a paradox.

The pages of the magazine were inundated by desire to such a degree—both through different psychoanalytical interpretations and the aforementioned fascination for subjects related to Surrealism—that from 1991 to 1998, *October* was almost entirely governed by this obsession that was so characteristic of its time, even by middle grounds, halfway between Lacanian desire (exemplified by texts by Slavoj Žižek, whose books were beginning to be translated) and Julia Kristeva's abjection, which epitomized the exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art. Selections from the Permanent Collection* which opened at the Whitney Museum in New York in the summer of 1993.

This show, which resembled a term project, was organized by four participants in the museum's Independent Studies program, devoted to giving future curators theoretical and practical experience, and in which many members of *October's* editorial board were deeply involved in some capacity. *Abject Art* offered a privileged viewpoint on many of the issues raised by U.S. criticism and art a couple of decades earlier. In fact, these young curators purported to demonstrate—in a very intelligent manner, in my

view, though those who viewed the show as paradigmatic at the time tend to disparage it now—how the rupture of limits and the ultimate impossibility of naming things were not a mark of the time, but something that was the very essence of Modernism—understood here as the phenomenon that was consolidated in the United States beginning in the early 1950s. And what is more, they did so from a historicist perspective, tracking many of the themes that are often considered to be characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s in selected Modernist works from the Whitney's collections.

Following a *modus operandi* that was quite typical to American art historians of the time, the show combined a proposal closely related to classic formalism with concepts in tune with Lacan's theories. *The Optical Unconscious*, Rosalind Krauss's brilliant work published the same year, established the bold efficiency of the combination. Beginning with an approach that was in essence linked to the old Greenbergian formalism, Krauss explored ambiguous terrain that made it clear once again how roles are never assigned permanently; how modernity as a story is increasingly open and ready to be re-narrated. It was also a wonderful translation, despite having been written in English.

Just three years later, in 1996, another member of *October*, Hal Foster, wrote *The Return of the Real*, translated into Spanish some time later, as usually happens. The book—very nearly a threat after years of invisibilities and unnamabilities—only diverged from Lacan superficially. Despite establishing a need for a return to physical bodies and tangible places after so many simulacra in the 1980s, Foster returned to Lacan through the gaze and his questioning of the old privileges of the subject and its self-awareness: "I see myself seeing myself." In any case, Lacan had already predicted the importance of the real which does not wait for the subject.

And then things began happening very quickly. And the pages of books and journals were filled with testimonies about concentration camps: *October* itself had predicted this in its Winter 1998 issue. And the call went out for visibilizations and witness-esses and testimonies: the document. And desire was a bit stifled by all that reality, although it may all be, in one way or another, part of the same symptom, or as Homi Bhabha wrote in his 1989 essay *The Commitment to Theory*, "Between what is represented as the 'larceny' and distortion of European 'metatheorizing' and the radical, engaged, activist experience of Third World creativity, one can see the mirror image (albeit reversed in content and intention) of that ahistorical nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other."

However, I have just remembered that one can no longer quote Bhabha because his approaches have been called into question for dealing essentially with a new neocolonial imposition of the metropolis on the rest. In this case, how can Homi Bhabha return to Latin America as a radical discourse, if his own discourse has ignored certain issues raised in Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, etc. long before he ever dealt with them?

Now we have to quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak if we want to be modern, if we want to be “politically modern.” And not colonial. “To give voice,” is what English speakers call it, though the voice is always taken, never given. We must quote the last thing that the discourse of power has quoted in order to make it clear that we are knowledgeable, that we are a part of it. But quoting the source imposed by the center of power is more and more a colonial act.... Well then, I know about it but I don’t quote it. I decide to not incorporate it into my discourse. We don’t incorporate it. To counter Spivak, Clark. To counter this pseudo French theory, the *vulnerabilizado* or injured Portuguese discourse—though the problem is not Spivak but rather the army of people quoting her who think that Marx is a legendary activist and writer.

The fundamental question is, who manufactures narrative and from where? How do we truly write these particular stories in such a way that they bring us back to the same place every time? Why did Pollock as frozen by Namuth pass into history, while Fontana de Mulas did not, when, all things considered, the Argentine artist’s gesture of cutting the canvas was infinitely more radical? Could history be any different if Fontana had been presented as one of the key figures in the foundational narrative of modernity because cutting a canvas, even fifteen years later, is more radical than walking on one?

Thus, we could conclude with two short stories by Borges that act as metaphors of the hegemonic gaze—which observes the world from a fixed point and draws the world from that perspective, and which is now behind all the canon revisions, including the canons of art. The first is *Museo* (*Museum*, 1960) which talks about a vast and useless map, “de rigueur in science,” and an empire where, “The art of Geography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied an entire City.” The second pertains to his book *Atlas* (1984), in which Borges, now blind, travels the world—the atlas—without being able to see it or seeing it with different eyes from those of retinal vision.

While the first story speaks of the insane desire to control the world, to maintain the position of power that the West has in the world, and the failure to do so, in *Atlas* Borges talks about how enriching it is to find vulnerability in fragmentation, about the map that forces one to see in a new way, to break into pieces. “My physical body can be in Lucerne, Colorado or Cairo, but when I wake up each morning, as I once again take up the habit of being Borges, I invariably emerge from a dream that takes place in Buenos Aires.” Nevertheless, the question remains whether the Buenos Aires where one awakens in Lucerne, Colorado or Iceland is still the same Buenos Aires.

## Conversation

### Liliana Porter and José Luis Blondet

**José Luis Blondet** It seems right that this conversation take place on the stage of a theatre, since we’re talking to Liliana Porter, who’s persistently explored notions related to representation’s reach and limitations. Liliana once noted that seeing her work was like going to the cinema and watching a movie with the lights on. That is, everything around the film is as important as the film itself. Or that it’s like putting a little mystery—irrelevant yet colossal—in the center of a stage. The special effects and all the mechanisms surrounding it, that make the performance possible, are as important as the drama itself. We see both rehearsals and the final performance in the same act.

Talking to Liliana in a theatre—in a theatre in Mexico City—makes even more sense. Liliana began her career right here in Mexico City; she studied here several years, and she had her first show here, in 1957. This first exhibition of her prints and paintings (which to date was her only show in Mexico) was briefly reviewed by Juan José Arreola in an article entitled “Liliana Porter Gives Form to Fable” (*Liliana Porter da forma a la fábula*). Liliana swears that exhibition’s works have very little in common with her recent work, whose literary character is much more evident, featuring actors, stages, dramatic situations, dialogue and even lucid morals to the stories. But it seems as if the story-telling and fable-like qualities that operate in Liliana’s current work were present from the very beginning of her career, though perhaps only for those with a seasoned eye for fable and confabulations, as was the case with the renowned Arreola.

I promised Liliana that we wouldn’t talk about Jorge Luis Borges in this interview, nor about that world of similarities that unites them, and that once prompted her to say she wanted to paint like Borges wrote. And I’ll keep my promise after having mentioned the connection in her work with literary traditions of the fantastic, with the worlds of Arreola and Borges and several others. Liliana gives form to fable, and now it seems the case that’s she’s been doing it for some time.

One of the stories—the fables—that she managed to pull apart only to refashion it from its component parts—was the one that says printmaking is a medium limited to traditional technique. A printer and engraver by profession, Liliana tested printmaking’s limits from early on, and never let herself be trapped by the dictates of technique, but rather, questioned—modestly—the very ways in which a print creates meaning. These explorations coincided with those of Venezuelan artist José Guillermo Castillo and Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer, who, together with Liliana, founded the New York Graphic Workshop in 1965. They composed manifestos, they provoked outcries, participated in important shows and dramatically expanded the notion of