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**The Collective El Sindicato, 1976-1979
Intervening in Conceptualism in Latin America**

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Intervening in Conceptualism in Latin America

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Abstract

The Collective El Sindicato, 1976-1979 Intervening in Conceptualism in Latin America

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Conceptual practices developed in Colombia towards the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s. Even a cursory look at surveys of Colombian conceptual art shows that the collective El Sindicato, active between 1976 and 1979, secured its space in these accounts with its 1978 work *Alacena con zapatos*, which won the top prize at the XXVII Salón Nacional. However, *Alacena con zapatos* was neither the only, nor the most significant, contribution of El Sindicato to the development of conceptual practices. The collective's rich oeuvre, while concise, was nonetheless remarkable in its interventions on public spaces as a means for social change. A number of factors have led to the critical misunderstanding and, ultimately, the historiographical neglect of these interventions. This thesis problematizes these factors in order to reframe and expand El Sindicato's role within the narrative of Colombian art. To elucidate El Sindicato's contributions, and

taking into account that much of Colombian conceptual art remains unknown in the United States, this thesis also registers Colombia's artistic field as it stood in the 1970s. In all, my project situates El Sindicato's practices within the broader narrative of Conceptualism as a means to both enrich our understanding of contemporary art in Colombia and help expand the familiar boundaries of the map of conceptual art.

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Introduction

On November 20, 1978, the jury of the XXVII Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales, held at Bogotá's Museo Nacional, pronounced the two winners of the Salon's grand prize: the painting *Atmósfera* by Ana Mercedes Hoyos, and the assemblage *Alacena con zapatos* by the group El Sindicato (Figures 1 and 2). Painting and drawing in Colombia had long held the dominant position within the arts, enjoying a strong tradition of patronage from collectors and the steady endorsement of both public institutions and private galleries. Hoyos' winning work stood along this hegemonic line of creative investigation, as it manifested a reflection on Color Field painting—a large square canvas, its internal composition consisting of gradations of white and blue hues. Hoyos, from Bogotá, was an already established artist in the national scene, and her work at the Salón received predictable acclaim.¹

El Sindicato's *Alacena con zapatos* however, with its tattered shoes collected from the streets of Barranquilla and nailed to an old cupboard, unleashed a fierce debate in public forums over the official sanctioning of Idea, or Conceptual, art in Colombia. Indeed, *Alacena con zapatos* was an affront on multiple levels: it attacked the fetishization of the art object through its use of discarded materials; the shoes—mostly work boots, tennis shoes, and inexpensive canvas or plastic sandals—signified bodies of the working class, and thus these bodies trespassed the sanctity of the elite museum space; the work was by artists from Barranquilla, a periphery of the national artistic discourse in 1970s Colombia; and finally, these artists worked collectively, a novel approach during this time, condemning the art world's cultivation of individualism and

¹ “La obra expuesta por Ana Mercedes Hoyos se denomina ‘Atmósfera’ y constituye un positivo aporte al tratamiento del color en óleo.” “Ganadores del Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales.” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), November 21, 1978

its worship of the so-called artist-genius. However, *Alacena* was neither the only, nor the most significant, contribution of El Sindicato to the development of conceptual practices in Colombia. For El Sindicato's rich oeuvre, while concise, was nonetheless remarkable in its interventions on public spaces as a means for social change.

The collective El Sindicato emerged in Barranquilla in 1976 with members Antonio Arrieta, Alberto del Castillo, Ramiro Gómez, Carlos Restrepo, and Luis Stand. Eventually, when Arrieta and Stand left the country, artists Efraín Arrieta and Aníbal Tobón would take their place. The group's focus was to experiment with art in order to more actively engage with and change social, economic, and political realities. Conceptual strategies, which had taken root in Colombia since the late 1960s, became their tool through which to carry out their experimentations. Fueled by their youthful energy and the zeitgeist of revolution, in just two years the collective created a multiplicity of works that spanned installations, environments, performances, and art actions.

While these seemingly followed a number of directions, one distinct thread weaves throughout their oeuvre: that of intervention. An intervention marks a deliberate interference on a site and its corresponding social relations to alter the course of such relations. My definition of intervention builds on that of Rosalyn Deutsche, who was among the first to theorize the term extensively. In her analyses of art created for and within public spaces, Deutsche distinguished between assimilative and interruptive models of practices—the former seeking to harmoniously integrate itself with its surrounding environment, while the latter seeks to critically intervene the existing order of a given site.² My framing of the term, however, encompasses not only altering

² These distinctions are also elaborated by Miwon Kwon in "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 86. See also Rosalyn Deutsche, "*Tilted Arc* and Uses of Public

physical space but also interposing on theoretical and ideological realms. El Sindicato intervened on the cityscape as well as on institutional spaces, whether it was turning a gallery into a forest of dead leaves, staging a massacre of simulated bodies at a busy city intersection, orchestrating a gathering of disparate social groups, or barricading a commercial gallery. In myriad ways these works transgressed traditional norms of art, trespassed on public space, interfered with hegemonic political and historical discourses, and brazenly enlisted their audience's participation. The analytical term of intervention serves to speak to all these different operations. It also introduces El Sindicato's own role within artistic production in Colombia, for the collective intervened in the narrative of Conceptualism as it had been developing towards the mid-1970s.

Even a cursory look at surveys of Colombian conceptual art shows that El Sindicato secured its space in these historiographical accounts with *Alacena con zapatos*. The rest of the group's work, however, has been relegated to footnotes and mentions in passing. A number of factors have led to the critical misunderstanding and, ultimately, the historiographical neglect of the rest of El Sindicato's work. In the volatile context of 1970s Colombia, El Sindicato strove to create socially constructive art while evading particular political ideologies. As such, not only did its work do away with all references to traditional media, but it also set aside the didactic or propagandistic political content expected from so-called "committed" art. Additionally, El Sindicato's work does not fit neatly into the narrative of conceptual art as it developed towards the mid-1970s in Colombia, which consisted mostly of graphic and linguistic investigations. The artists constituting this vein—including Bernardo Salcedo, Antonio Caro, and Jorge Posada—created confrontational works that varied greatly in conceptualization and execution, but

Space," *Design Book Review*, no.23 (Winter 1992): 22-27, and "Uneven development: Public Art in New York City," *October* 47 (Winter 1988): 3-52

were fundamentally text-based and embedded in the gallery space. These works increasingly enjoyed institutional support, finding high-profile platforms in prominent exhibitions like the *Exposición Panamericana* and the *Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas*, in Cali, or the *Bienal Coltejer* in Medellín. With its discarded materials, plurality of modes, and ephemeral quality, El Sindicato's work greatly differed from the prevalent conceptual techniques.

Furthermore, as with much ephemeral art little, if any, visual documentation remains of El Sindicato's interventions. The dearth of iconic images to represent them further made it so that El Sindicato's contributions other than *Alacena* would go routinely omitted in the narrative of Colombian conceptual art. Whereas contemporaneous art criticism and initial overviews of these practices—like Álvaro Barrios article “El arte como idea en Barranquilla,” published in 1978 in the journal *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* and Eduardo Márceles Daconte's “El arte conceptual se toma el Salón Nacional,” also published in 1978 in the newspaper *El Espectador*—analyzed El Sindicato's interventions extensively, the first thorough survey of 1970s art in Colombia, Eduardo Serrano's “Los años setentas: y el arte en Colombia,” published in *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* in 1981, solely focuses on *Alacena*, setting the tone for the collective's treatment in surveys to follow: for instance, *Cien años de arte colombiano, 1886-1986*, from 1985—also by Serrano—and the exhibition and text *Colombia, Años 70, Revista al arte colombiano*, organized by John Castles and Carmen María Jaramillo in 2002, both only emphasize *Alacena* and leave the rest of the collective's work behind. Other works like Álvaro Barrios' *Orígenes del arte conceptual en Colombia*, a collection of interviews with Colombian conceptual artists and, perhaps ironically, Beatriz González's “Espectador de un funeral, 1970-1980,” an overview of the *Salón Nacional* during said decade, delve more into El Sindicato's oeuvre, yet their analyses remain at a

superficial level. Only Gina McDaniel Tarver's "Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions: Early Colombian Conceptual Art and Its Antecedents, 1961–1975" and Ivonne Pini's "Arte y política en Colombia (de mediados de la década de 1970 a la de los ochenta)," devote more than a paragraph to the collective's interventions.³

By recollecting El Sindicato's interventions in this thesis I not only seek to enrich our understanding of contemporary art in Colombia, but I also join a larger initiative in the historiography of art in Latin America: the re-evaluation of the map of conceptual art. For decades the art historical canon solely recognized as Conceptual Art that self-identified movement which emerged in the United States and Europe after Minimalism. This movement's emphasis on the artist's intention and on linguistic propositions—represented by the tautological works of artists like Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner—certainly had vast reverberations in contemporary art. Artists throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s also experimented with reformulating artistic practice with an emphasis on the conceptual rather than on the aesthetic. However, as opposed to the Americans and Europeans, Latin American artists like El Sindicato focused on the behavior of art, on the artwork's active relations with the larger social milieu. In other words, these artists attempted to redefine the possibilities for art to engage with and change social, economic, and political realities. A multitude of terms gained currency in Colombia in the 1970s to refer to these works: "idea art," "systems art," "art of concept," "conceptual art," and "non-object art," to name a few. Many of these artists did not align

³ See Eduardo Serrano, *Cien años de arte colombiano, 1886-1986* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1985), Carmen María Jaramillo, *Colombia, Años 70, Revista al arte colombiano* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá/Academia Superior de Artes, 2003), Álvaro Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual en Colombia* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2000), Beatriz González, "Espectador de un funeral, 1970-1980," in *Marca Registrada: Salón Nacional de Artistas; tradición y vanguardia en el arte colombiano* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta Colombia, 2006), 121-138, Gina McDaniel Tarver, "Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions: Early Colombian Conceptual Art and Its Antecedents, 1961–1975" (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2008), and Ivonne Pini, "Arte y política en Colombia (de mediados de la década de 1970 a la de los ochenta)," *Ensayos. Historia y teoría del arte* 10 (2005): 193-227.

themselves with their American or European contemporaries, or even know about them. Indeed, use of conceptual strategies here was often an instinctive recourse borne out of local circumstances, rather than the tautological theorization of art.

Some scholars have opted to use “Conceptualism” as a term to retrospectively analyze these practices and transcend the geographic and stylistic limitations posed by the term Conceptual Art. This term was first developed by artist Luis Camnitzer and expounded upon in the seminal exhibition he organized with Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Point of Origin 1950s-1980s* from 1999:

It is important to delineate a clear distinction between *conceptual art* as a term used to denote an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism, and *conceptualism*, which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception. Conceptualism [...] reimagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities within which it was being made.⁴

My analysis of El Sindicato adheres to this view of Conceptualism as an analytical category; like curator Mari Carmen Ramírez also states, of Conceptualism as “a strategy of antidiscourses whose evasive tactics call into question both the fetishization of art and its systems of production and distribution in late capitalist society.”⁵ As a strategy, Conceptualism then serves to encompass the multitude of practices emerging in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and to productively analyze El Sindicato’s oeuvre.⁶ Given that most research involving Conceptualism in Latin America so far has focused on Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Rio de Janeiro, my own re-mapping efforts also aim to

⁴ Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, “Foreword,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), vii

⁵ Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Tactics for thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980,” in *Global Conceptualism: Point of Origin 1950s–1980s*, 53

⁶ As I am retrospectively looking at El Sindicato through the lens of Conceptualism, I must clarify here two terms: my use of “Conceptual” directly refers to the movement that developed in the United States and Europe. In contrast, I use the adjective “conceptual” for those practices and strategies employed by Latin American artists between the 1960s and 1980s, including Colombians like El Sindicato.

bring attention to conceptual practices in Colombia, where they also thrived. Colombian Conceptualism remains, on the most part, uncharted territory, with only a handful of studies developed and published mostly within Colombia itself.⁷ Using this analytical category of Conceptualism, I hope to situate El Sindicato within the broader scope of art in Latin America, while elucidating the collective's antidiscursive operations within its particular local context.

To analyze El Sindicato's conceptual innovations, one must necessarily register Colombia's artistic field in the 1970s. Therefore, this thesis rests on the framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. To fully demonstrate those innovations I first begin with a contextualization of the emergence of conceptual practices in Colombia between 1969-1975. Central figures of this period critically examined politics, the economy, and social problems through conceptual maneuvers in their work. However, as I have briefly mentioned, this experimentation of the first half of the decade remained rooted in object-based, graphic and linguistic investigations. El Sindicato continued this course of social and institutional critique, yet it chose to undertake interventions that would directly engage the surrounding urban fabric.

Chapter two traces the second phase of Colombian Conceptualism, which spans the years 1976 through 1981.⁸ This phase saw the emergence of El Sindicato, as well as the consolidation of institutional support of conceptual practices. In this chapter I delve into El Sindicato's initial projects in order to underline its working process. I must add here that my analysis of Conceptualism adheres to the demarcation of 1981 as an

⁷ See note 3

⁸ My analysis follows Tarver's periodization of Conceptualism in "Intrepid Iconoclasts," 37-38

endpoint.⁹ This year marks the culmination of Conceptualism in Colombia with the simultaneous occurrence of the *IV Bienal de Arte Coltejer* and the *I Coloquio de Arte No Objetual y de Arte Urbano* in Medellín. These events point to a shift in Colombia's artistic field in regards to the creation, reception, and criticism of art. While conceptual practices trickled through to art made after 1981, artists and critics alike progressively diminished their emphasis on the term "conceptual" or its related forms in Colombian discourse ("idea art," "art of systems," et al). Colombian society at large also underwent significant changes after 1981, with the end of the presidency of Julio César Turbay Ayala and the rise of the era of drug trafficking. Upon my overview of the Colombian artistic field in the 1970s, what I hope to demonstrate in this first section is that Colombian artistic production consisted in a plurality of forms and modes, and while Conceptualism gained traction, hegemonic traditions like painting and the graphic arts also remained strong.

The second section of my thesis focuses on four of El Sindicato's interventions: *Aguinaldos*, *Violencia*, *Barricada*, and *Alacena con zapatos*. My analysis weaves in Colombian history during this time, for context is not only relevant but constitutive of these works. Upon the radicalization of Colombia's public sphere in the late 1970s, El Sindicato sought to reformulate the strategies of Conceptualism to adequately respond to repression and marginalization in the city. With these four interventions, El Sindicato enacted a conceptual practice with a sociological perspective that addressed the multiplicity of audiences of a complex urban environment like Barranquilla's.

Although the group never photographed its own works, Carlos Restrepo, Efraín Arrieta, and Aníbal Tobón kept archives of documents related to these works and their

⁹ See Tarver, 37-38, Jaramillo, *Colombia, Años 70, Revista al arte colombiano*, 3-4, and Carlos Arturo Fernández Uribe, *Arte en Colombia 1981-2006* (Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2007), 1-14

reception. Newspaper photographs and articles, as well as the artists' writings and additional secondary sources serve to reconstruct the works.¹⁰ El Sindicato's archives include praising as well as scathing reviews, making for a richer understanding of its contemporaneous social as well as artistic values and preconceptions. The 1970s in Colombia were certainly a period of extreme change in all spheres of society, and these archives act as a microcosm or cross section of the issues at stake for Colombians during this time. Indeed, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, El Sindicato serves as a "synchronic slice" of Colombia in the 1970s¹¹; an analysis of its work therefore reveals intertwined narratives of social unrest, of the rise of Colombia's peripheries vis-à-vis Bogotá, and of experimental art and its legitimization.

It is impossible to fully replicate, in any historiographical endeavor, the events of the past. In truth, as scholar Miguel A. López states,

We do not recover the past in order to make it exist as a bundle of skeletons, but to disturb the orders and assurances of the present. The task of reintegrating the subversive component of whatever we happen to be historicizing [...] is a question of making the event spill over and break down established modes of thinking about the past and the future.¹²

There only a handful of Conceptual artists in Colombia, yet their works had deep reverberations then as well as in contemporary practices. As a contemporary scholar

¹⁰ My main primary sources come from Arrieta and Tobón archives, as they are the most comprehensive. I have been able to access complete copies of all three through Gina McDaniel Tarver, to whom the artists provided access to the originals and who has also supplemented them through her own research.

¹¹ In his evaluation of the autonomous artistic field, Pierre Bourdieu states, "The history which I have tried to reconstruct in its most decisive phases by using a series of synchronic slices leads to the establishment of this world apart—the artistic field or the literary field we know today." Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market for Symbolic Goods," in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 141

¹² Miguel A. López, "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?," *Afterall*, no.23 (Spring 2010), accessed March 20, 2011, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.23/how.do.we.know.what.latin.american.Conceptualism.looks.likemiguela.lopez>

analyzing these works retrospectively I seek to reactivate these dormant histories, projecting them to the present in an attempt to further destabilize the art historical canon.

THE SCAFFOLDING FOR EL SINDICATO

Chapter 1: *Early Conceptualism in Colombia, 1968-1975*

It is crucial to first map the origins of Conceptualism in Colombia—those artists, critics, and institutions that were its protagonists—so as to then properly trace El Sindicato’s contributions to the shift that takes place after 1975. My analysis here is, of course, a high-level overview of this period. My main objective in this chapter is three-fold: to illustrate that Conceptualism in Colombia was an internal development and not a foreign import; to map those institutions and relations that made possible the emergence and growth of Conceptualism; and to demonstrate how the early phase of Conceptualism (1968-1975) remained mostly rooted in object-based and mostly graphic or linguistic investigations.¹³

Conceptual art in Colombia developed later than in other regions, reaching its maturity in the 1970s. Many scholars and critics of contemporary art in Colombia now place the origins of Conceptualism there in 1968, with the December opening of the exhibition *Espacios ambientales* at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO) (Figure 3).¹⁴ Curated by the Argentine critic and MAMBO director Marta Traba, *Espacios ambientales* introduced an art that focused on the relationship between the work and its surrounding space. Most notably, these works distinctively relied on the spectator’s participation as an integral part of their realization. As Marta Traba expressed in the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador* days after it opened, the exhibition was meant as

¹³ I owe much of my analysis in this chapter to the work of Gina McDaniel Tarver, whose doctoral dissertation singularly traces early Conceptualism in Colombia and demonstrates how Colombian artists Feliza Bursztyn, Beatriz González, and Bernardo Salcedo are the predecessors of this movement in the country. See Gina McDaniel Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions: Early Colombian Conceptual Art and Its Antecedents, 1961–1975.”

¹⁴ See Álvaro Barrios, *Orígenes*, Jaramillo, *Colombia, años 70, revista al arte colombiano*, 7, and Ivonne Pini, “Arte y política en Colombia (de mediados de la década de 1970 a la de los ochenta),” 183.

“an attack on the passivity of the public[...]it also is the maximum attempt to lure it. We can no longer say that a radical change has affected art and the spectator-artwork relationship. This must be demonstrated.”¹⁵

Traba commissioned artists like Álvaro Barrios, Feliza Bursztyn, Bernardo Salcedo, Santiago Cárdenas, and Ana Mercedes Hoyos to each create immersive environments throughout the museum. While little visual documentation of the exhibition survives, Álvaro Barrios’ descriptions included in his survey on Colombian Conceptualism serve to partially reconstruct the works.¹⁶ On the first floor, Cárdenas’ *Espacios Negativos* consisted of an empty gray room with a *trompe l’oeil* electrical cable painted on the wall that connected to the real cable of an iron placed on the floor. On the second floor, Feliza Bursztyn’s *Siempre acostada* consisted of a dark room with eleven motorized metal sculptures. Dramatically lit, the sculptures also created an aural environment by emitting sounds as they moved and jerked. Ana Mercedes Hoyos’s work *Sobre blanco, sobre blanco, sobre blanco* was also on the second floor, and consisted of a wooden labyrinth of narrow passageways with an unexpected window opening that displayed a “tableaux to do with mail and a slide projection of landscapes.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, on the third floor was Álvaro Barrios’s *Pasatiempo con luz intermitente*, comprising an entirely red space with red walls, floors and ceiling. This environment resembled an auditorium, with chairs facing a stage on which a pair of white floating hands, a folding

¹⁵ “La exposición es un ataque a la pasividad del público pero también es el máximo esfuerzo por atraerlo. No se puede seguir diciendo que se ha operado en el arte y en la relación espectador-obra de arte un cambio radical. Hay que demostrarlo.” Marta Traba, “Recordando con ira,” *Magazín de El Espectador* (Bogotá), December 15, 1968, as quoted in Ivone Pini, “Arte y política en Colombia (de mediados de la década de 1970 a la de los ochenta),” *Ensayos. Historia y teoría del arte* 10 (2005). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Spanish are my own.

¹⁶ See Álvaro Barrios, “El ‘Homenaje a Dante’ y la exposición de ‘Espacios Ambientales’,” in *Orígenes*, 17-19

¹⁷ Tarver, 56. Barrios rather obliquely describes “an unexpected illuminated window opening that allowed large mail envelopes to enter.” I have chosen to quote Tarver’s clearer description.

chair, and a colossal ball of rolled-up comic strips formed a static, surreal scene. The back of each chair also had red bulbs that flashed continuously. In contrast, Salcedo did not construct an environment; rather, he turned a pristine, white bathroom of the museum into his work through the gesture of placing a wall label next to the bathroom door, and a doll in the bathroom's sink.

This was the first time that this type of art was seen in Colombia, and it predictably drew much attention.¹⁸ Unforeseen by Traba and the artists, however, was the ensuing attack and partial destruction of the exhibition during the early morning hours following its opening. A group of students of the Universidad Nacional who had protested the opening later trespassed and vandalized the exhibition, proclaiming that art should be for the people and not for the bourgeoisie.¹⁹ The MAMBO at the time was situated on the campus of the Universidad Nacional, a locus of protests in the late 1960s. Thus the student protesters felt the immediate need to attack an art they perceived to be deliberately turning its back on the troubled Colombian context. Traba responded to these acts in *El Espectador* in her characteristically vehement prose:

I worry that these experiences of knowledge, meant to enrich the capacity of vision and comprehension of the educated man, may be considered by a certain section of students as a sign of indifference to the problems of the Colombian people. It is difficult for one to admit that they do not realize that the way out of underdevelopment, regardless of the political situation that the country may be in—capitalism or socialism, authoritarianism or popular revolution—can only be achieved through multiple routes, that at the same time that literacy is fostered, it is necessary to stimulate a creative culture, that at the same time that sewers are built museums must be habilitated, and that any other conduct favors the economic, cultural and political status quo reigning in Colombia since colonial times.²⁰

¹⁸ Tarver quotes some of the reactions in the Bogotá news: “Madness..., very unusual..., incredible..., magnificent..., extraordinary..., a good experiment..., absurd... This is contemporary art!” Tarver, 56

¹⁹ Barrios, *Orígenes*, 18

²⁰ “Me preocupa que tales experiencias de conocimiento, destinadas a enriquecer la capacidad de visión y de comprensión del hombre culto, puedan ser consideradas por cierto sector de estudiantes como una

Traba's statement is certainly loaded, yet it points to a larger debate that loomed in Colombia for the next several years over the ways in which art could be socially committed or could be able to engage in political critique; if, say, in contrast to neofiguration, an art with a conceptual foundation like the environments of *Espacios ambientales* could be capable of reflecting upon the Colombian context and of having any critical reach within its audience. Indeed, long accustomed to the traditional approaches to painting, drawing and printmaking, the Colombian artistic field was rather slow in opening itself to new artistic formulations. However, the work of three particular artists came to open grounds for new strategies of expression, thus paving the way for the Conceptualism that took root in the country in the 1970s. Traba had propelled the early career of these three artists, and included their work in *Espacios ambientales*: Feliza Bursztyn, Beatriz González, and Bernardo Salcedo.

I must emphasize, however, that Traba herself did not support or push towards the development of conceptual art. Ever the high modernist, she was unrelenting against the emergence of conceptual practices in Latin America, in large part because of their rejection of formalism and aesthetic autonomy. For Traba, the true artist was to be “eminently apolitical, asocial, disinterested in the contingent, a being that is in the midst of history as a disquieting island and for whom words like progress, civilization, justice, have no meaning whatsoever.”²¹ Having arrived in Colombia in 1954, Traba was an institution in the Colombian artistic field into the late 1960s, a towering figure with vast

muestra de indiferencia hacia los problemas del pueblo colombiano. Es difícil admitir que no comprendan que la salida del subdesarrollo, en cualquier situación política que viva el país, capitalismo o socialismo, autoritarismo o revolución popular, no puede hacerse sino por vías múltiples, que al mismo tiempo que se alfabetiza hay que estimular una cultura en el orden creativo, que al mismo tiempo que se hacen alcantarillados hay que habilitar museos y que cualquier otra conducta favorece el statu quo económico, cultural y político reinante en Colombia desde la Colonia.” Traba, “Reflexión después de la batalla,” *El Espectador* (Bogotá), December 22, 1968, as quoted in Pini, 184

²¹ Traba, “El genio anti-servil,” *Intermedio [El Tiempo]* (Bogotá), June 26, 1956

cultural capital. She served as a university professor of art history, published regular columns of art criticism in the Colombian news, and founded the art journal *Prisma* in 1957, the only art journal in Colombia other than abstract painter Judith Márquez's *Plástica*.²² She also hosted her own television shows on Colombia's Televisora Nacional ("Una visita a los museos" and "El ABC del Arte" from 1955 to 1957, then "El ciclo de conferencias" and "Curso de Historia del Arte" in 1958), teaching the Colombian public about modern art.²³ She helped found Colombia's first permanent, non-commercial venue for modern art, the MAMBO, of which she was named director in 1962. She also briefly owned her own gallery in Bogotá, from 1968 to 1969. The MAMBO, however, was Traba's main platform until her departure from the country in 1969, and it was there that she formulated the modernist rubric by which Colombian art was to be valued and promoted.

In the 1950s and early 1960s Traba rejected the nationalist modernism inherited from Mexican muralism, as practiced by Colombian artists like Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo (Figure 4). In contrast, her strong inclination towards internationalism at the time led her to champion the careers of abstract painters Guillermo Wiedemann, Alejandro Obregón, and Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, as well as that of sculptor Edgar Negret (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8).²⁴ As scholar Florencia Bazzano-Nelson has illustrated, Traba tended to distrust Pop art, Conceptual art, and Happenings, which she considered as examples of "'aesthetic deterioration' and associated exclusively—and erroneously—with the United States."²⁵ Additionally, Traba contended that these modes of expression were neither

²² Tarver, 153

²³ Emma Araújo de Vallejo, ed., *Marta Traba* (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana/Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1984), 366. For a full timeline of Traba's life and career, see pages 359-375.

²⁴ Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, "Marta Traba: Internationalism or Regional Resistance?" *Art Journal* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2005), 87

²⁵ Bazzano-Nelson, 88

relevant nor suitable for responding to the underdeveloped context of countries like Colombia.²⁶ Traba eventually developed these postulations into a theory of resistance that anchors her widely known 1973 book, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas: 1950–1970*. As such, her prominence in Colombia made it so that conceptual strategies were slow to take off there, crystallizing only years after her departure. Ironically, however, as Gina Tarver explicates in her study of early Colombian Conceptualism, before Traba left she helped pave the way for the development of Conceptualism by legitimizing the early works of Feliza Bursztyn, Beatriz González, and Bernardo Salcedo. As I will discuss below, starting in the early 1960s these artists introduced elements that were to become the cornerstones of early Colombian Conceptualism: the use of “non-art” or discarded materials, the activation of the spectator-artwork relationship, the incorporation of popular culture, the subversion of historical and political narratives, explorations into new modes like installation art, and the experimentation with text.

PREDECESSORS TO CONCEPTUALISM

Feliza Bursztyn

Feliza Bursztyn (1933-1982) was a sculptor born and based in Bogotá whose oeuvre radically challenged notions of beauty. In 1961 she began creating and exhibiting her now-famous *chatarras*, or junk sculptures. The *chatarras* consisted of groupings of assorted metal items like nuts, screws, and small sheets of metal usually welded around a vertical axis (Figure 9). Her pieces gradually became more complex as she submitted the materials to diverse alterations, twisting, cutting and positioning these in increasingly

²⁶ Bazzano-Nelson, 88. See also Tarver, 135.

irregular—even erratic—forms. In *Mirando al norte*, a mass of metal rods seems to be suspended in a state of explosion, jutting out towards the observer (Figure 10). The sculpture dramatically stands at an adult human scale, imposing its chaotic amalgam of textures on the spectator and the exhibition space.

Bursztyn won the top prize for sculpture with *Mirando al norte* in the 1965 *XVII Salón de Artistas Nacionales*, the foremost venue and competition for Colombian artists. The *Salón* served as the indicator of the state of artistic practice and discourse in Colombia, with its top prizes awarding works considered to be exemplary of their contemporaneous practices. Neofigurative artists like Alejandro Obregón, Carlos Granada, and Pedro Alcántara naturally figured among the winners of the *Salón* during the early 1960s. However, the 1965 *Salón* stood out as a rupture in Colombia’s artistic narrative, marking a sharp generational break from the old “masters” by awarding young artists who represented an aesthetic transformation taking place in Colombia: while Bursztyn won the sculpture prize, Normán Mejía won the top prize for painting with his *La horrible mujer castigadora* (Figure 11). The *Salón* also awarded special mentions to emerging artists Carlos Rojas and Beatriz González (Figures 12 and 13). Taken together, these works stylistically do not present a cohesive aesthetic. What these works shared was a dialectical confrontation against the established order, in their conscious mediation on the relationship between the work and the viewer.

Bursztyn’s work with junk materials confronted traditional notions of beauty and opened new possibilities for materials and expression. These pieces challenged the viewer and demanded a rejection of rationalism in favor of a phenomenological approach. In fact, phenomenology was central to her *Históricas* works from 1967 and 1968, some of which formed part of *Espacios ambientales* (Figure 14). At first glance these objects appear to be three-dimensional free-form drawings or doodles, with their

strips of metal arranged in irregular organic forms. Attaching a motor to the metal strips, Bursztyn instead created kinetic sculptures that jerked and clanked continuously, unleashing a cacophony in the exhibition space. Through sound and movement Bursztyn therefore destabilized the sculptural medium and distinctively involved the spectator within the work by introducing the element of time. Kinetic art, discarded materials, anti-aesthetic sculpture, and the requisite involvement of the spectator—these were all unprecedented in Colombian art.

Beatriz González

As previously mentioned, Beatriz González (b.1938—) was one of the new names incorporated by Traba into the vocabulary of Colombian modern art chiefly through the 1965 *Salón*. González made this definitive debut on the national stage with her work *Los suicidios del Sisga*, an oil painting based on a news photograph of a couple who had committed suicide by jumping into Bogotá's Sisga lake (Figure 15). The couple apparently had taken this photograph moments before jumping into the reservoir.²⁷ Both images show the couple joining hands while holding a bouquet of flowers. Yet González appropriated the photograph as it was published in Bogotá's *El Tiempo* newspaper and introduced color to it in monochromatic blocks that lack any tonal gradation. González also painted the couple's features using austere forms and simple brush strokes, rendering a flat and static image. With *Los suicidas del Sisga* González began her immersion into Colombia's popular iconography, the images of which were an inexhaustible source for her work. The painting's bright colors, popular references, and inorganic feel all point to Pop Art. However, in her analyses of González's work Traba is cautious to distinguish

²⁷ Traba, "Beatriz González," *Revista Eco* (Bogotá), 1978, reproduced in Araújo, *Marta Traba*, 67

González from her North American contemporaries, placing her work not as derivative but as a parallel materialization of the same international current:

The irreality of Colombia's iconographic reality, and its profound conservative and grotesque inclination: the hopeless inefficiency of hierarchical values that are sustained artificially, [these] are exposed by her work with the same apparent coolness with which in the United States Lichtenstein expands the 'comic' bubble or Rosenquist enumerates car windshield wipers and tires.²⁸

Traba contended that González's painterly detachment remained free from the technical "control" that dominated American Pop Art; for her art came from, and responded to a local context—a distinct, provincial society. González herself asserted the precedence of the local in her work: "I am a precursor to a Colombian art, indeed, to a provincial art that cannot circulate universally except if as a curiosity."²⁹

González's paintings keenly confronted constructions of taste by inventively appropriating local popular imagery and imparting on these a sense of irony. She integrated elements regarded as "low culture" into a conventional medium of "high culture," a medium she further subverted through the use of garish color and flat, even crude human forms. This conceptualization of the painting medium had far-reaching effects on Colombia's artistic production. Most notably, her work opened entirely new possibilities of visually representing the Colombian context. In fact, as her 1967 works *Apuntes para la historia extensa de Colombia Tomo I* and *Tomo II* manifest, González sought to intervene in Colombia's historical narrative and thus formulate a historiographical critique through her paintings (Figure 16). González based these

²⁸ "La irrealidad de la realidad iconográfica colombiana, y su profundo sentido conservador y grotesco: la ineficacia irremediable de valores jerárquicos sostenidos artificialmente, son expuestos por su obra con la misma aparente frialdad con que en Estados Unidos Lichtenstein amplía la burbuja de un 'cómic' o Rosenquist enumera limpiabrisas y llantas de automóvil." Traba, "Beatriz González." According to González, at the time she was not familiar with Lichtenstein, nor was she all that familiarized with Pop Art. See Tarver, 89-92, 165

²⁹ As quoted in Traba, "Beatriz González"

paintings on newspaper photographs of two portraits of Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander, the first president and vice-president, respectively, of the republic of Colombia. This was a response to Colombians' renewed interest and reverence of their national history and heroes, particularly evident in the 1964 release of the multi-tome *Historia Extensa de Colombia*.³⁰ Rather than employing the traditional materials of oil and canvas, González made her version of the portraits using enamel on metal. Furthermore, she retained the oval surface shape but substituted the originals' solemn palette of dark black, red, and gold with bright greens, yellows, reds, and blues. Like *Los suicidas del Sisga, Tomo I* and *Tomo II*'s figures are flat and have minimal detail. González also omits specific details like the world map that Bolívar holds in the original painting, making it so that both figures now hold nondescript objects or masses with their hands. As such, in González's paintings Bolívar and Santander lose all the traditional attributes included in the pictorial representation of national idols. The paintings desecrated the elitist, canonical construction of historical figures by drawing from visual strategies considered to be in "bad taste": "the deliberate tastelessness of her works points out that the national devotion to the cult of revolutionary heroes is on the same level as other popular national fascinations, like royalty-watching, the worship of beauty queens, and the preoccupation with tragic love and violent death."³¹

Bernardo Salcedo

Bernardo Salcedo (1939-2007) bridges Colombian Conceptualism's antecedents and Conceptualism's early practitioners; for Marta Traba "discovered" Salcedo in 1964 and propelled his early career, the direction of which he then shifted after 1968 towards

³⁰ In Barrios' interview with González, she remarks that around this time she made several sketches revolving around this theme, because she "found it so ridiculous all that beatific furor over the founding fathers" ("me parecía muy ridícula toda esa beatería alrededor de los próceres"). Barrios, *Orígenes*, 43

³¹ Tarver, 120

conceptual approaches. Salcedo was an architect by training, which most likely informed his then-unusual approach to making art. Similar to Bursztyn, Salcedo made assemblages of ordinary, “non-art” materials. His early works employ items like doll parts, spinning tops, funnels, cranks, and rolling pins (Figures 17 and 18). Yet rather than these constituting a chaotic mass, Salcedo carefully placed the items within a white box and arranged them in a formalist manner, clearly paying attention to each object as a form and to the overall balance of the piece. The uniform white hue applied to each object further highlights Salcedo’s concern for aesthetics during this time. These assemblages were neither paintings nor sculptures; hung on the gallery wall, they projected outwards into space. Salcedo himself did not have a term for them, and neither did the critics in Colombia at large, who struggled to define and explain them. In response to this, Salcedo stated in 1966: “They are works. It’s not sculpture. Nor boxes. Nor painting. And even less architecture. It makes me mad that people say it’s architecture: you can see that they don’t have the least idea about this....”³² As opposed to Bursztyn’s sculptures—wherein the constitutive materials shed their original character as she fashioned them into a larger form—Salcedo’s assemblages relied on the tension between the disparate objects he placed together; the whole was simply, not more than, the sum of its parts.

Beginning in 1968 Salcedo experimented with conceptual strategies that followed two general courses: plays on language and installation art. This phase of Salcedo’s career constituted a watershed in the development of Conceptualism in Colombia, thanks both to his clever subversions and to the ample news and attention that his works received. Salcedo experimented with language and installation simultaneously during this time, and below I will discuss some case studies that highlight those conceptual

³² “Son hechos. No es escultura. Ni cajas. Ni pintura. Y menos arquitectura. Me da rabia que la gente diga que es arquitectura: se ve que no tienen ni idea sobre eso....” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), September 18, 1966. As quoted and translated by Tarver, 88, 164

maneuvers that most influenced and trickled through Colombia's artistic practice in the 1970s.

Departing from the neutral white tone of his previous assemblages, Salcedo imbued the assemblages *Autopistas '69* and *Cajas excitantes* with saturated hues of red, green, and yellow (Figures 19 and 20). *Autopistas '69* and *Cajas excitantes* also differed from Salcedo's earlier assemblages in their placement and dynamic within the exhibition space. He installed large wooden arrows that stretched across the floor and jutted out of boxes installed on the wall, calling for the spectator to negotiate his/her space with the work. Traba saw these as an art of "invasion," in the way they transgressed on "conventional spaces where man lives, and burst into them with an intrepid and possessive insolence."³³ That Salcedo's *Autopistas* and *Cajas excitantes* physically encroached on the spectator's personal space would have significant resonances in Colombian Conceptualism, particularly in its later phase (1976-1982).

Two other case studies are of consequence to the development of conceptual installations in Colombia: *Cajas elementales*, from 1969, and *Hectárea de heno*, from 1970. *Cajas elementales* could be seen as a reinvention of his earlier assemblages: using simple white boxes, Salcedo introduced even more banal materials like rocks, straw and dirt, all of which were new to Colombian art.³⁴ Often, each box contained a single element within its glass enclosure, as in *Paseo al río*, from 1969 (Figure 21). Others held a miniature environment of dirt, as in *Minifundio*, from 1969 (Figure 22). While modest in composition, the *Cajas elementales* should not be seen as introspective formal exercises, for these comprised microcosms of Colombian landscapes and engaged with

³³ "el arte de invasión o de agresión a los espacios convencionales donde vive el hombre, e irrumpido en ellos con una insolencia intrépida y posesiva" Traba, "Defensa del sí y defensa del no," *Magazín Dominical* (Bogotá), December 8 1968, excerpted from Tarver, 112

³⁴ Tarver, 126

contemporaneous sociopolitical debates. The tiny land holding contained in *Minifundio*, for example, adroitly comments on the ineffectual agricultural reforms under President Carlos Lleras Restrepo, which left little to Colombia's small-scale farmers.³⁵ The title *Minifundio*, the opposite of *latifundio* or large farming estate, drives Salcedo's argument home. As such, *Cajas elementales* display Salcedo's keen awareness of the position of art within the social system, and its need to actively engage with it.

By early 1970 Salcedo was yet to make his definitive statement on Colombian artistic production. His work then swiftly reached national as well as international audiences through Medellín's *Bienal Coltejer*, where he won the top prize for national artists with *Hectárea de heno* (Figure 23).³⁶ This work consisted of a towering pile of hundreds of large plastic sacks filled with hay, each numbered arbitrarily in a large black font.³⁷ Salcedo intended for the public to sit on and play with the sacks, making participation an integral part of the work.³⁸ As a number of scholars have remarked, this work, along with *Caja agraria* and *Minifundio* point to the Colombian government's ineffectual political solutions, particularly when addressing the issue of land distribution and its consequent economic and social disparities.³⁹ This installation proved to be of great consequence not just because it won a top prize, but because this was the first time that national and international critics labeled a Colombian work "conceptual": "Colombian critics fit *Hectárea* into an internationally established category because, on the one hand, that was a way to defend it, but also because it was a way of attempting to

³⁵ For a detailed examination of Salcedo's *Cajas elementales*, see Tarver, 126-133.

³⁶ This prize was named *Premio Colcultura para artista nacional*. A "grand prize" was awarded to Argentine Luis Tomasello. *II Bienal de Arte Coltejer, Medellín*, exh. cat. (Medellín: Coltejer, 1971)

³⁷ In an interview with Barrios, Salcedo indicates that there was no rigor to the numbering; there were many threes, fours, seventeens, etc. Barrios, *Orígenes*, 28-29.

³⁸ Barrios, *Orígenes*, 29

³⁹ See Pini, 200. See also Maria Iovino, "El universo en caja," in *Catálogo de la exposición de Bernardo Salcedo* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, 2001), 28, and Tarver, 201-202.

understand something that could not be explained otherwise given that Colombian critics had not developed a critical language that went beyond formal or aesthetic analysis.”⁴⁰ Salcedo himself was not interested in labels or in following international trends. For instance, in a later interview with Álvaro Barrios, Salcedo confirms the conceptual foundation of *Hectárea*, yet denies any reference to international conceptual art: *Hectárea* was “purely a game without conceptual conceit.”⁴¹

Salcedo’s work with language also had significant influence on early Colombian conceptual artists. His experimentations in this area cover much ground, from the simple gesture of tacking a wall label to a museum bathroom for *Espacios Ambientales*, to the meticulous mathematical operations in *Multiplicaciones* (Figures 24 and 25). In these two works, both from 1970, Salcedo “solves” complex multiplications of several digits, detailing on the page each step. He subsequently signed and displayed these as objects, calling them graphics or drawings.⁴² Despite their unusual content, *Multiplicaciones* constitute an irreverent reference to drawing.⁴³ Salcedo’s handwritten calculations are not particularly streamlined or sterile; simple, preliminary operations dot the right side or bottom of the page, while other numbers appear crossed out or written over. This was language as art, and their display in a solo exhibition at the Biblioteca Nacional in November of 1970 only further legitimized this conceptual approach. Several of Salcedo’s works from 1970 onwards focused on plays with language, a maneuver that would have great impact on emerging artists like Antonio Caro.

⁴⁰ Tarver, 193

⁴¹ Barrios, 29.

⁴² Barrios, *Orígenes*, 30

⁴³ However, Tarver indicates how, seen in the context of their exhibition, these works deal more with Colombia’s educational system. Tarver, 292

SIGNAL SYSTEMS: BIENALES, SALONES & GALLERIES

Before 1968 the Colombian artistic field was still rather provincial, with only a few institutions—most of these in Bogotá—generating discourse on contemporary art. Beginning in 1968, however, significant developments took place that, in conjunction with *Espacios ambientales*, solidly marked this year as the “beginning” of the seventies decade and therefore as the point of origin of Conceptualism in Colombia. A burgeoning of art institutions that truly took off in the 1970s and came to legitimize conceptual practices began with the inaugurations in 1968 of the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia in Cali and Medellín’s *Bienal Coltejer*. Such developments in Cali and Medellín—and later, in Barranquilla—not only signaled the rise of Colombia’s “peripheral” cities in the arts, but also opened Colombia’s artistic field to a plurality of modes of expression.⁴⁴ Traba’s departure in 1969 had instantly marked the end of an era for the field. Most importantly, it made room for these alternative formations of conceptual artists to fully crystallize.

Cali’s Exposición de Artes Gráficas & Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas

By the 1960s Cali had long been cultivating the graphic arts with its *Festival Nacional de Arte*. This festival gradually opened itself to experimental approaches and international participation; for instance, the 1969 *Festival* included works by Christo, Sol LeWitt, and Walter de Maria.⁴⁵ In 1970, however, Cali propelled its national prominence in the arts when it organized the *Exposición de Artes Gráficas* as part of the *X Festival Nacional de Arte* at La Tertulia. The *Exposición de Artes Gráficas* enthusiastically promoted experimentation in the graphic arts, exhibiting works by international artists

⁴⁴ It is worth noting that while physically and symbolically peripheral to Bogotá, the cities of Cali, Medellín, and Barranquilla in the 1970s were the most populous in the country.

⁴⁵ Tarver, 508

like Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter, and showcasing new conceptual works by Bernardo Salcedo as well as by two emerging conceptual artists, Antonio Caro and Jorge Posada. These three artists exhibited daring appropriations of the graphic medium, each of them utilizing the newly available technology of photocopying to make a biting commentary on originality and artistic value (Figures 26, 27, and 28). I would like to pause on Salcedo and Posada's works, for I believe a brief discussion of these will elucidate some of the trends that were prevalent in early Colombian Conceptualism.

In *Información general*, Salcedo produced a photocopy of a page on which he repeated the handwritten phrase “el tiempo es oro” (literally, “time is gold,” or “time is money”). With this work Salcedo formulates a critique of artistic value on two levels. He first performs the pointless task of writing this stock phrase over and over on the page, without much care for making the sentences look identical. Given that this seemingly pointless—or even punitive—exercise was made with the objective of being displayed, Salcedo here sharply goes against Colombia's strong tradition of modes of art that value technical skill and arduous labor, like painting and drawing. Yet rather than signing this page and exhibiting it, Salcedo then photocopies the original and exhibits this (unsigned) copy. Thus with this piece Salcedo mocks the foundations of the system by which art was assessed and valued, ignoring degree of technical mastery, originality, adherence to aesthetic style, the practice of connoisseurship, etc.

Meanwhile, Jorge Posada's *Escudo Colombiano* consists of a Xerox copy of a schoolbook page that explains the elements of Colombia's national shield. Posada appropriated the page from its original context, then altered the lesson's pristine and hermetic quality by submitting it to a photocopy. This crude copy erases all detail from the illustration of the shield and smudges a portion of the explicatory text. Posada subsequently signed and displayed this as an art object. Through these maneuvers, Posada

at once destroys the illusion of the precious, autonomous art object, while bringing to the fore the operations by which the Colombian state's ideological apparatus of pedagogy institutionalizes nationalism. This is particularly powerful given the context of Colombia in 1970, as its government struggled to assert its legitimacy in the face of rising opposition from popular and radical guerrilla groups.

These two works highlight the turn towards conceptual strategies that drew upon technologies of mass communication while exercising plays on linguistic meaning and representation. Conceptual artists used such strategies to formulate incisive sociopolitical and institutional critique. In fact, this became the crux of Antonio Caro's works, arguably the most recognized examples of Colombian Conceptualism. For instance, Caro's 1974 *Colombia-Marlboro* slyly combines drawing and collage to simulate the ubiquitous brand and powerfully unveil the dominance of foreign corporations over Colombian interests (Figure 29). Such experimental graphic investigations gained increased legitimacy in Colombia particularly through Cali's *Exposición Panamericana* and its successor, the *Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas*, as well as through Medellín's *Bienal Coltejer*. These large, international events facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas, generated discourse as well as controversy, and in turn influenced Colombia's dominant artistic conceptions.⁴⁶

Medellín's *Bienal Coltejer*

From its inception the *Bienal Coltejer* was intended at as an international showcase of contemporary art. As it developed, it grew significantly in size and scope. As such, thanks to this biennial Colombian artists and the public alike were able to participate in an international discourse on modes of artistic production. Although started

⁴⁶ Pini, 184

in 1968, the biennial truly took off in 1970. Between the months of May and June of that year, it exhibited five hundred works by one hundred and seventy artists from Latin America, the United States, Canada, and Spain.⁴⁷ An event of this magnitude was unprecedented in Colombia. The biennial's mission of providing the public an opportunity to get to know the "cultural alternatives [available] to Latin American artists" was coupled with a strong educational component.⁴⁸ The biennial took place at the Universidad de Antioquía, where it also hosted courses, lectures, roundtable discussions, and gallery tours. Photographs taken during these events illustrate the dynamic dialog that took place between students, educators, artists, and the general public (Figures 30 and 31). An international jury of the Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argán, Spanish critic Vicente Aguilera Cerni, and British-American critic Lawrence Alloway oversaw the competition, its composition also exemplifying the event's objective to insert Colombia within the larger network of contemporary art. This is also evident in the biennial's exhibition policy, which called for organizing works by tendency rather than by nationality.⁴⁹

The event was not strictly intended to showcase experimental art, and its inclusion of numerous paintings and other traditional media reflects this. Nonetheless, the biennial included a number of works that experimented with new media. Argentine Julio Le Parc exhibited a large installation featuring black silhouettes of historical and cultural icons like Napoleon, Uncle Sam, Mickey Mouse, Adolf Hitler, and the Beatles (Figure 32). Lea Lublin, also Argentinean, presented an immersive installation titled *Fluvio subtunal* (Figure 33). Meanwhile, Irish artist Les Levine presented a work of video art (Figure 34).

⁴⁷ *II Bienal de Arte Coltejer, Medellín*, exh. cat. (Medellín: Coltejer, 1970)

⁴⁸ Serrano, "Los años setentas y el arte en Colombia," *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 1, no.4 (1980): 27

⁴⁹ Tarver, 208

Peruvian Luis Arias Vera and Guatemalan Luis H. Diaz's works also stand out for consisting of mail correspondence (Figures 35 and 36). This event even saw the debut of Beatriz González's *Muebles* series, with her work *Naturaleza casi muerta* (Figure 37). The *Muebles* series reveals González's appropriation of some conceptual maneuvers. For instance, *Naturaleza casi muerta* consists of a painting made in enamel on metal of a wounded Jesus falling on the road to the Cavalry. However, González placed the painting within a large wooden bed frame, synthesizing both objects to reveal the entanglement of Catholicism and domesticity in Colombian daily life. While González firmly asserts her distance from Conceptualism, this work nonetheless reveals how conceptual strategies trickled even into her work during this time.⁵⁰ That this high-profile biennial exhibited works by Colombian artists alongside international samples of experimental art—and Salcedo winning the top national prize for *Hectárea*—had great influence on Colombians, particularly on up-and-coming artists hungry for new avenues of expression.

The 1972 *Bienal Coltejer* in part reflected this, with its inclusion of more conceptual works by Colombian artists. Antonio Caro exhibited his book *Azul—Color*, an exploration into the concept of color (Figure 38). Caro tacked the pages of his book onto the gallery wall, showing studies of tonal gradation and definitions for “color” and the color blue, for example. Salcedo similarly exhibited a textual work, titled *Naturalezas muertas* (Figure 39). The work consists of text descriptions of imagery common to still-life paintings: a table with fruit and pots, two oranges, a cabbage. In a characteristically witty manner, Salcedo requested for his work to be exhibited in the Figurative Painting

⁵⁰ “A mí lo que me interesa es el gusto. Me interesa el porqué una persona coloca estas cosas y no otras en su casa. Si hubiera sido una artista conceptual, desde el 70 habría puesto una tarjeta diciendo: vayan y vean la casa de zutano. Y otra: vayan y vean la casa de fulano. Pero como soy una artista a la antigua, necesito pintar y pinto.” González speaking about her work, as quoted in Germán Rubiano Caballero, “Beatriz González: Biografía,” *Biblioteca virtual: Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango*, accessed April 15, 2011, <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/biografias/gonzbeat.htm>

section of the *Bienal*.⁵¹ Two other Colombian artists departed from text-based works towards installation. Julia Acuña's *No contaminación* consisted of a booth into which visitors entered and immersed themselves in (Figure 40). Efraín Arrieta's contribution titled *Construya-Destruya* also focused on the viewer's physical participation as an integral part of the work. *Construya-Destruya* consisted of 333 adobe bricks placed in the gallery space, meant to be arranged, stacked, or dispersed as the viewer pleased (Figure 41).⁵² Acuña and Arrieta's works signal an emerging interest on part of Colombian conceptual artists in further engaging the physicality of the viewer with the work. Arrieta's future work revolved around this concern, and would inform the investigations of El Sindicato when he joined the collective in 1976.

The *Salón Nacional*

Another significant change took place in 1970 at the *XXI Salón de Artistas Nacionales*, further revealing the attitudinal shift that defined the 1970s in Colombia. This *Salón* definitely belonged to young artists, with new names gracing the exhibition list, like Miguel Angel Rojas, Edgar Silva, and Ever Astudillo, to name a few.⁵³ Furthermore, as critic Eduardo Serrano points out, it exhibited an unprecedented amount of experimental works "emphasizing concepts, generally to the detriment of academic norms."⁵⁴ Antonio Caro also made his definitive debut on the national stage at this *Salón* with his installation *Homenaje tardío de sus amigos y amigas de Zipaquirá, Manaure y Galerazamba*, otherwise known as *Cabeza de Lleras*. The work consisted of a life-size head made of salt in a glass vitrine (Figure 42). The head also sported a pair of thick

⁵¹ *III Bienal de Arte Coltejer, Medellín, Colombia*, exh. cat., (Medellín: Coltejer, 1973), 57

⁵² *III Bienal de Arte Coltejer, Medellín, Colombia*, 29

⁵³ Omar Rayo, Edgar Silva, and Francisco Rocca won the first, second, and third prizes, respectively. Calderón, 165

⁵⁴ Serrano, "Los años setentas y el arte en Colombia," 27

black eyeglasses in an explicit reference to President Lleras' iconic eyewear (Figure 43). During the exhibition, Caro poured water into the vitrine in an iconoclastic move to erase Lleras' image. The vitrine was apparently not entirely sealed and water spilled across the gallery floor, causing a commotion (Figure 44). While *Cabeza de Lleras* is distinct within Caro's oeuvre—much like in the case of Salcedo and his work *Hectárea*—it nonetheless cemented his reputation as a conceptual artist, and heralded his forthcoming trajectory of aesthetic subversiveness and political critique through art.

The *Salón* certainly was turning over a new leaf in terms of the art it exhibited. Nevertheless, the event struggled to define its identity within the Colombian art field:

The organizers struggled with important issues: whether it would be better to make the salon non-competitive by abolishing the prizes, how to make the salon more representative of the nation, how to make the salon more accessible to a nation-wide audience, and how to make the salon more democratic.⁵⁵

Therefore, beginning in 1971 the *Salón* underwent numerous changes to its policies and structure. In 1972 it eliminated its monetary prizes in an attempt to make the event more egalitarian.⁵⁶ This triggered an uproar within the artist community, and a number of them turning to the news to voice their concerns. “This is a rip-off to the artists,” stated Salcedo, adding, “my only concern is that young artists get recognized, for the *Salón Nacional* is an exhibition of young art...if it isn't possible to award money then grants or other types of stimulus should be created.”⁵⁷ In reaction to the new measure, more than one hundred artists created the *I Salón Independiente Jorge Tadeo Lozano* in protest of

⁵⁵ Tarver, 305

⁵⁶ Article 8 of the *Salón* Rules states, “The XXIII *Salón* will not have cash prizes, nor recognitions or special mentions” (El XXIII *Salón* no tendrá premios en efectivo ni reconocimiento ni menciones especiales”). Calderón, 326

⁵⁷ “Es un robo a los artistas[...]Mi único interés es el que se reconozca a los artistas jóvenes pues el *Salón Nacional* es ante todo una muestra de arte joven...si no es posible dar dinero en efectivo que se creen becas y otras clases de estímulos.” As quoted in Serrano, “Los años setentas y el arte en Colombia,” 30 and excerpted from “Los Artistas Rechazan al *Salón Anual* sin Premios,” *El Espectador* (Bogotá), August 17, 1972.

the *Salón Nacional*. This was held in October of 1972 at the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, and counted with thirty prizes to emphasize the motivations behind this independent venture.⁵⁸

Antonio Caro was the sole artist who exhibited at both *Salones*, with two different, yet complementary works: *AQUINOCABEELARTE* at the *Salón Nacional*, and *Documentación y información sobre Manuel Quintín Lame* at the *Salón Independiente*. Both these works declared Caro's decisive turn towards language as art. *AQUINOCABEELARTE* consisted of sixteen black and white posters, 70x50cm each, hung together to form a banner (Figure 45). Smaller text and dates appear beneath each letter on each poster, indicating the names of assassinated Colombian activists and the dates of their death. At first glance the work seems to solely critique the *Salón Nacional's* restrictive policies; "Aquí no cabe el arte," or "art does not fit here," appears to declare how contemporary art—relevant art—could not fit in a showcase that still showed its conservative preferences. However, the work's political component emerges when the viewer discerns the small text: art as we traditionally know it does not fit in the tumultuous context of contemporary Colombia. *AQUINOCABEELARTE* takes the form of posters used in street protests, illustrating the urban sources from which Colombian conceptual artists increasingly drew. In a similar manner *Documentación y información sobre Manuel Quintín Lame* refers to the Colombian indigenous rebel who led indigenous uprisings in the early twentieth century. This work also consisted of posters, each reproducing a portion of Quintín Lame's elaborate pictographic signature. Most significantly, however, is how this work turns its attention to both the inside and outside of the gallery space. While most of the posters face inwards to the gallery space, one

⁵⁸ Serrano, "Los años setentas y el arte en Colombia," 30

poster faces the outside (Figure 46). Additionally, Caro created and distributed flyers containing biographical information on Quintín Lame as well as a reproduction of his signature, as a means to further disseminate information on this subversive historical figure (Figure 47). Caro's strategies in this work show the increasing interest on part of Colombian conceptual artists in engaging an audience outside of the self-selected exhibition goers.

Commercial galleries

A rise in experimental galleries also helped propel the dissemination of conceptual practices in the 1970s. This rise also attested to the rise of Cali, Medellín, and Barranquilla in the second half of the decade as hotbeds of experimental art. While the Galería Belarca and Galería Santa Fe opened in Bogotá around 1970, 1974 saw the openings of Galería La Oficina in Medellín, Ciudad Solar in Cali, and Galería de arte Álvaro Barrios in Barranquilla. These were important venues for established artists like Salcedo as well as for emerging artists to continue their experimentations.

PRECEDENTS TO EL SINDICATO

My survey above on the Colombian artistic field in the 1970s touches upon the works of key artists that would later inform the work of El Sindicato: Bernardo Salcedo, Jorge Posada, and, most significantly, Antonio Caro. These artists took a distinct critical position on their social context, utilizing plays on language to enact political statements. Caro would have a particularly deep connection with El Sindicato. Not only did he maintain a friendship with the members of El Sindicato, but the collective also invited him as a collaborator to its *Aguinaldos* project in 1976, and hosted an exhibition of his

work at its space in July 1977.⁵⁹ El Sindicato first came to know Caro's work thanks to Álvaro Barrios' gallery, which exhibited the work *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* in 1973. This work was first developed for the MAMBO exhibition *Nombres nuevos en el arte de Colombia*, and consisted of a large, red silk banner on which Caro painted a translation of Mao Tse-Tung's original statement from his *Little Red Book*, "Imperialism and All Reactionaries Are Paper Tigers (for a photograph of the MAMBO installation, see Figure 48)."⁶⁰ Caro was influenced by the Marxist zeitgeist at the time, as he later asserted how Mao Tse-tung's thinking in particular had a great following among youths and students.⁶¹ For his show at Álvaro Barrios' gallery in Barranquilla, Caro altered *El imperialismo* by including a small edition of "prints" to be handed out to guests. Made using Xerox photocopies, each "print" contained Mao's phrase and a drawing of a ferocious tiger.⁶² Once again Caro employed flyers to extend his work beyond the gallery space, as he had done for his work at the *Salón Independiente* in 1972. Taking his work outside of the gallery was a model that El Sindicato would later expand upon.

Another important precedence established by Caro in this vein was his 1972 work *Colombia, 12 pliegos*, which won the first art prize at the *VI Salón de Agosto* at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo "El Minuto de Dios" in Bogotá (Figure 49). This consisted of cardstock posters placed side by side on a wall outside the venue. A set of these, for instance, has the word "Colombia" hand-painted on the header, followed by hand-painted statistics related to the land and agrarian crisis in Colombia: 500,000 laborers without land emigrate periodically in search of work; 1,350,000 families possess

⁵⁹ "Antonio Caro: ésto es una invitación." Unidentified news clipping, July 4, 1977, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

⁶⁰ See Tarver for an extensive analysis of this work, 313

⁶¹ Tarver, 313

⁶² Tarver, 315-316

on average 4.5 cultivatable hectares each. The use of these statistics recalls Salcedo's works like *Minifundio*, not exactly a coincidence given Caro's deep admiration of Salcedo.⁶³

Two other artists from the first phase of Conceptualism would similarly experiment with stepping beyond the gallery space with their work. Jonier Marín (b.1946-), a Colombian expatriate, briefly returned to the country in 1974 and created an intervention titled *Incomunicable*. Marín placed posters throughout the streets of Bogotá that consisted solely of the word *incomunicable* ("incommunicable") written upside down (Figure 50). The posters mimic the advertisements around them, which consist mostly of text. The simplicity of the posters' composition and the upturned text make them somewhat stand out in the jumble, catching only the eye of the attentive pedestrian. In a similar maneuver to Caro's *Colombia-Marlboro* project, the work itself consists not in the posters but in the reactions of passers-by, which Marín photographed and recorded. *Incomunicable* curiously recalls Cortázar's opening lines of his short story, *Graffiti*:

So many things that begin and perhaps end as a game. I suppose you were amused to find a drawing next to yours and you attributed it to coincidence, and only the second time did you realize that it was intentional. It was then that you looked at it slowly, and even came back later to look at it again[...]⁶⁴

Cortázar's story tells of a couple during the years of military dictatorship in Argentina whose romance takes place solely through their anonymous drawings and writings on the streets of the city. It bears witness to how even the most ingenuous acts could be subversive when undertaken in a public context within a repressive milieu. Marín and his

⁶³ See Antonio Caro in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 112-113

⁶⁴ "Tantas cosas que empiezan y acaso acaban como un juego, supongo que te hizo gracia encontrar el dibujo al lado del tuyo, lo atribuíste a una casualidad o a un capricho y sólo la segunda vez te diste cuenta de que era intencionado y entonces lo miraste despacio, incluso volviste más tarde para mirarlo de nuevo..." Julio Cortázar, "Graffiti," in *La autopista del sur y otros cuentos* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 320

Incomunicables are, of course, situated in a much less charged context than Argentina's dictatorship. However, the dynamics involved in *Graffiti* and *Incomunicable* are parallel to each other. Only the cautious observer would take notice of what was amiss in Marín's cryptic "advertisement," and stop or perhaps come back to reflect on what the poster deemed was "incommunicable." Despite the posters' enigmatic text, this work nonetheless speaks to the turmoil simmering Colombia's metropolises. *Incomunicable*, in the words of scholar Néstor García Canclini, serves as a public text that "register[s] the city's dramas, what in the city is [otherwise] lost and transformed."⁶⁵ Marín did not exhibit his documentation of *Incomunicable* in Colombia, and only displayed some of the photographs in two of the CAYC's *Art Systems in Latin America* shows in Europe between 1974 and 1975.⁶⁶

In his career as a conceptual artist, Álvaro Barrios mixed drawing, collage, and assemblage in order to blur the boundaries between representation and reality. His series *Grabados populares*, however, would have the deepest resonances with El Sindicato. Between 1972 and 1984, Barrios created and issued a series of prints through local newspapers, signing and numbering them for anyone who approached him to do so (Figure 51).⁶⁷ These prints contained the surreal, dreamlike imagery characteristic to his oeuvre, playing with associations and proportions that in turn sharply contrasted with the rest of the newspaper's content. Most importantly, these prints subverted the economic value of printmaking, traditionally determined by the number of prints in an edition, as well as by the artist's signature.⁶⁸ Inserting his creations within the network of mass

⁶⁵ "sirven para registrar los dramas de la ciudad, lo que en ella se pierde y se transforma." Néstor García Canclini, *Consumidores y ciudadanos: conflictos multiculturales de la globalización* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1995), 178

⁶⁶ Tarver, 331-332

⁶⁷ Serrano, "La influencia del Pop," in *Cien años de arte colombiano, 1886-1986*, 177

⁶⁸ For detailed descriptions of this series, see Tarver, 245-246

media, Barrios relinquished control over their distribution, making his work accessible to large and diverse audiences. This radical way of reaching out beyond the artistic field would have great impact on the members of El Sindicato. Barrios would also prove to be an influence for El Sindicato in other ways, as he was their teacher at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in Barranquilla, and would later support the collective's endeavors personally as well as through his institutional reach—he included their work in his 1978 exhibitions *Homenaje a Marcel Duchamp* and *El arte como idea en Barranquilla*, and also invited them to participate in the 1979 *I Festival de Arte de Vanguardia*.

Evidently there were few artists in Colombia who dared to forgo established gallery spaces to engage alternate audiences. Nevertheless Caro, Barrios, and Marín's explorations would resonate with El Sindicato's own experimentations in the coming years. Additionally, Caro, Posada, and Salcedo innovatively inserted their works within larger political discourses, albeit without adopting a didactic tone. Presenting only symbols, statistics, and facts, these artists abstained from guiding the viewer towards specific conclusions, solely aiming for the viewer to process this data and be inspired to think critically about his or her social context. El Sindicato would continue this course of critique, yet it diverged from using text in favor of using discarded objects, making these into catalysts within the myriad strategies they developed to more directly engage its surrounding urban fabric.

Chapter 2: *El Sindicato and the Second Conceptual Wave, 1976-1981*

The notion of 'province' has begun to disappear from considerations pertaining to the arts [...] we can assert, therefore, that the heterogeneity of the current art scene in Colombia is due to [...] the diverse lines of thought with which creative investigations take place in different regions of the country.

-Eduardo Serrano, *Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín*

The institutional and critical structures established during the first conceptual wave laid the groundwork for the subsequent wave of conceptual artists in Colombia. As even the more conservative platforms like the *Salón Nacional* opened themselves to conceptual practices, the Colombian public became more receptive to the kind of work that artists like El Sindicato produced after 1975. Central figures of the early 1970s like Caro, Barrios, Posada, and Salcedo critically examined politics, the economy, and social problems through conceptual maneuvers. However, as the work of these representative artists demonstrate, experimentation in the first half of the decade remained rooted in graphic and linguistic investigations.

The second wave of Conceptualism saw the growth of Barranquilla's art scene into a dynamic hub for experimentation. Barrios played a key role in this process particularly through his gallery, as well as through his curatorial efforts and his fostering of El Sindicato and other local conceptual artists. These included Álvaro Herazo, born in Cartagena but based in Barranquilla, whose work towards the mid-1970s concentrated on appropriating and intervening on geographical maps with text and collage as a commentary on notions of territory and nationality; María Rodríguez, who mostly created landscapes using glass and mirrors but also dabbled into utilizing text as art (Figure 52); and Antonio Inginio Caro (no relation to the other Antonio Caro), most known for his

photographic sequences of ephemeral, iconoclastic actions, particularly involving the melting of religious wax figures (Figure 53).⁶⁹ Barranquilla was thus becoming a hotbed of Conceptualism, “a prodigal land” for this art, as Serrano would state decades later.⁷⁰

Serrano, MAMBO’s chief curator from 1974 through 1994, was keen to point out these emergent developments in Colombia’s peripheral cities, then framing these within an institution from Bogotá in the 1974 exhibition *Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín*. In fact, Serrano was a key figure in the consolidation of Colombian Conceptualism in the second half of the 1970s. He propagated conceptual practices that moved beyond textual works like those of Posada, Caro, and Salcedo, with installations primarily taking center stage in his curatorial endeavors. Serrano’s chief platform was the *Salón Atenas*, an alternative salon he inaugurated in 1975 at the MAMBO. Dedicated exclusively to experimental art, the salon invited up to ten participants under the age of thirty-one to exhibit each year.⁷¹

The first *Salón Atenas* included a work by Antonio Caro, and also introduced other emerging artists like Miguel Ángel Rojas and Ramiro Gómez, the latter going on to be a founding member of El Sindicato in 1976. Caro’s work, *Colombia-Marlboro*, consisted of over 100 slides showing Marlboro cartons placed in and around Bogotá’s Parque de la Independencia (Figure 54).⁷² Caro also used Marlboro cartons to spell out the word “Colombia” on a hillside of Bogotá, the image of which was the final slide of the project (Figure 55). This particular iteration of Caro’s play on language and critique

⁶⁹ For more information on these artists, see Serrano, “El Conceptualismo,” in *Cien años de arte colombiano 1886-1986*, 217-219, Barrios, “El arte como idea en Barranquilla,” and Serrano, “Los años setentas: y el arte en Colombia.” Unfortunately, there are no images available of Herazo’s maps.

⁷⁰ “Barranquilla—tierra pródiga del conceptualismo.” Serrano, “El Conceptualismo,” in *Cien años de arte colombiano 1886-1986*, 218

⁷¹ Of note also is that no artist could participate in the *Salón* more than once. Serrano, “I Salón Atenas,” in *Primer Salón Atenas*, exh. cat. (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1975), reproduced in *Arte colombiano contemporáneo*, 40

⁷² See Tarver, 322-325

of corporate dominance over Colombia further shows his interest in engaging with space beyond the gallery, as a means to insert his practice within the broader social fabric. Rojas's work, on the other hand, was certainly the most scandalous. It consisted of an installation of large-scale drawings of the same man installed on the wall, with seventy photographs of floor tile forming a square surface on the floor (Figure 56). Drops of a substance speckled these photographs, denoted, per the wall label, as "organic matter." These drops were of real semen, a fact that some, but not all, viewers were unaware of, yet nonetheless caused a commotion. As such, the work examines male desire and attraction. Through the use of photorealist drawing and photography, Rojas plays with representation and reality to create an installation that confronts the taboo subject of homosexuality. On his part, Gómez exhibited a number of objects such as *Objeto con vidrio*, an assemblage of wood, glass, and nails (Figure 57). Gómez commonly inflicted nails onto his objects, lending a sense of hostility to the work. *Objeto con vidrio* conveys this aggression that engendered it, its elements also recalling barbed wire and fencing. While small, the work nonetheless powerfully expresses feelings of physical restraint and oppression. This resonates with Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss' framing of the conceptual object as a "carrier of meaning, [a] reinvestment of meaning in preexisting objects."⁷³ The communicative aspects of Gómez's objects would later translate onto El Sindicato's oeuvre.

Housed in one of Colombia's eminent art institutions, the *Salón Atenas* therefore became a powerful promotional force for Conceptualism in the country, propelling the careers of these young emerging artists. With institutional support like the *Salón Atenas*, Conceptualism entered its phase of consolidation by 1976. Experimental work during this

⁷³ Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss, "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, viii

time gained increasing visibility within major exhibitions, albeit not without its dose of polemics. New institutions sprang up throughout the country, making Colombia's artistic field and its relations of power more complex. Journals emerged to open new stages for art criticism, like *Arte en Colombia*, founded in Bogotá in 1976, and *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura*, founded in Medellín in 1978. Barranquilla and Medellín also founded their own museums dedicated to modern art, both in 1978. New figures gained footing on the national stage through their work in curating and criticism, such as Alberto Sierra in Medellín, Miguel González in Cali, and Álvaro Barrios in Barranquilla. They in turn greatly favored and fostered experimental and conceptual approaches to art. The Peruvian critic and theorist Juan Acha also contributed to this process after he made his authoritative debut on the Colombian scene as part of the jury of the 1976 *Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales*, along with Serrano and Maritza Uribe de Urdinola, co-founder of Cali's Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia. A staunch proponent of a sociological approach to art, he called for the dismantling of individualism and the myth of the artist-genius, and proposed that artists as well as critics look to the relations between art and its surrounding social, economic, and cultural context. Out of the critics active in Colombia at the time, Acha developed his writings with a much more theoretical approach. Nevertheless, González, Sierra, Serrano, and Barrios echoed these concerns in their support of local conceptual art.

This call for a sociological approach, of course, was part of a much larger discussion taking place throughout Latin America. This was a turbulent time on many fronts; the region was facing stunted economic development and profound social inequalities, with a number of nations also falling under the grip of dictatorships. In this context not only were many Latin American artists re-evaluating their practice in relation to the fabric of society, but also critics at large were re-examining their own cultural and

social role. In the words of Mexican historian Rita Eder, Latin American critics and theoreticians in the seventies sought to “understand art as a social product, and its ability to become a sensitizing element of a given community.”⁷⁴ This intellectual reframing had Marxist underpinnings, and its aspirations are suitably encapsulated by Acha when he stated that “what is important is to change the world, not to express it.”⁷⁵ Such statements had deep resonances in Colombian artistic production, particularly in the work of conceptual artists.

Two additional significant developments took place that further pushed Conceptualism in Colombia forward: the renaming of the *Salón Nacional* and the launching of its *Salones Regionales*. In 1974 the *Salón de Artistas Nacionales* changed its name to *Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales*. What seems like a minor detail truly was the advent of this institution’s embrace of new media, for the *Salón*’s organizers meant for this title change to reflect its inclusion of installations, photography, and video art. These kinds of works were still few and far between in 1974, but this modification nonetheless had ramifications for the later institutional validation of conceptual works like El Sindicato’s. The *Salón*’s new attitude towards Colombia’s plurality of artistic production was also evident in its inauguration of the *Salones Regionales*. As of 1976 the *Salón* thoroughly altered its structure by holding separate *Salones Regionales*, one for each of Colombia’s major geographical regions.⁷⁶ Artists submitted works to their corresponding salon, each of which had its own local jury and a prize structure mirroring that of the

⁷⁴ “entender el arte como un producto social y su capacidad de convertirse en factor sensibilizador de una comunidad.” Rita Eder, as quoted in Frederico Morais, *Las artes plásticas en la América Latina: del trance a lo transitorio* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1990), 11

⁷⁵ “lo importante es cambiar el mundo y no expresarlo.” Acha, “La necesidad latinoamericana de redefinir el arte,” reproduced in *Ensayos y ponencias Latinoamericanistas* (Caracas: Ediciones GAN, 1984), 94

⁷⁶ In 1976 there were regional salons in Barranquilla, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Cali, Ibagué, and Tunja. Calderón, *50 años: Salón Nacional de Artistas*, 197

national salon. Those works that won the top prize at each regional salon would then go on to compete and be exhibited at the *Salón de Artes Visuales* in Bogotá. Indeed, this new structure conveys the lingering desire for Bogotá to remain the highest arbiter of art in the country. However, opening the regional salons had the effect of decentralizing power over artistic value thanks to its necessary reliance on local juries. The regional salons also made it possible for more artists, especially younger and unknown ones, to participate on this high-profile stage. Naturally, the rising figures of Barrios, Sierra and González figured amongst the juries of the regional salons. Conceptual artists had acquired yet another prominent venue for their work, and the growing institutional attention of this kind of practice would be evident as ever when the next *Salón*, held in 1978, precisely awarded the top prize to a group from Barranquilla whose work focused on the social function of art.

EL SINDICATO EMERGES

As artists and institutions in Colombia explored new avenues for expression, a singular development materialized in 1976 with the formation of the collective El Sindicato. In April of that year, the artists Antonio Arrieta, Alberto del Castillo, Ramiro Gómez, Carlos Restrepo, and Luis Stand came together as a group and began planning their first project, which would open that following June. At the time all but Stand were graduates of Barranquilla's public Escuela de Bellas Artes (Stand would graduate later in the year) and had already participated in several national exhibitions. Ramiro Gómez and Carlos Restrepo exhibited in the 1975 and 1976 *Salón Atenas*, respectively, and had been

included in MAMBO's 1974 show *Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín* (Figure 58). In 1976 Del Castillo also had a solo exhibition at Bogotá's Galería Belarca.⁷⁷

Their middle-class backgrounds marked a revolutionary turn in 1970s Colombian cultural production, for it signaled the rise of the educated working class.⁷⁸ Because of the "limitations posed by galleries in terms of size, tastes, and notions of those in charge of directing them," El Sindicato chose to bypass these institutions and instead based its practice in an old theater that had most recently been used as the headquarters of a naval workers union (Figure 59).⁷⁹ The group took its name from this locale, deeming the name befitting to its objectives.⁸⁰ Its mission was straightforward: to collectively create provocative works of a conceptual nature that candidly challenged all traditional notions of art. In the words of Ramiro Gómez, "El Sindicato is a group of subversive aesthetic experimentations...we are concerned with presenting and not with pleasing."⁸¹ For each project the collective would invite a guest artist who would then collaborate at an equal capacity as each member. As scholar Ivonne Pini has noted of the group, "in an exceptional manner within Colombian art, there emerged a collective

⁷⁷ del Castillo went on to exhibit at the 1977 *Salón Atenas* as well.

⁷⁸ Critics at the time remarked on the demographic background of El Sindicato. Álvaro Barrios, for example, states in his 1978 article: El Sindicato "is a group that does not have the bourgeois origin nor those characteristics which that society demands to gather around and support, culturally or socially, artists. ("Un grupo que no tiene el origen ni las características burguesas que esa sociedad exige para rodear y apoyar cultural o socialmente a los artistas." Barrios, Álvaro, "El Arte Como Idea En Barranquilla," "El Arte Como Idea en Barranquilla," *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 1, no.2 (1978), 24.

⁷⁹ "Con los impedimentos que se presentan en las galerías, por tamaños, gustos y conceptos de las personas encargadas de dirigir[...]" Ramiro Gómez, "Montones," unidentified news clipping from 1976, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

⁸⁰ Efraín Arrieta, Alberto del Castillo, Ramiro Gómez, Carlos Restrepo, and Aníbal Tobón. "Testimonio y Manifiesto de El Sindicato," January 7, 1977.

⁸¹ Ramiro Gómez, "El Sindicato le cambia su gusto con mucho gusto," unidentified news clipping, November 18, 1976, personal archive of Efraín Arrieta

practice and the creation of art that deviated from commonly accepted parameters.”⁸² Indeed, El Sindicato’s approach to Conceptualism was unique in Colombia.

Collectivism was a rare and revolutionary practice in the country. One such instance was the radical printmaking group Taller 4 Rojo, started in Bogotá in 1971 by Nirma Zárate, Diego Arango, Carlos Granada, and Umberto Giangrandi, among others. With a deep political commitment, the artists of the Taller 4 Rojo developed prints with a strong didactic and propagandistic bent. For them, printmaking was not only an economically viable medium, but also a means of mass communication for their ideological views.⁸³ The group aligned itself with radical Leftist politics as they had grown throughout Latin America since the Cuban Revolution. Its prints therefore had strong Marxist undertones and made references to American imperialism and scenes of the Vietnam War (Figures 60 and 61). Incorporating photography and popular design, these prints display an experimental approach. However, it is evident that they remained rooted in political activism. The group in fact separated in 1974, having reached an internal impasse over struggling to distinguish its works either as art or political propaganda.⁸⁴

Another group that was active in the 1970s was the Grupo 44, started in 1977 in Barranquilla. However, rather than constituting a collective, the Grupo 44 was truly a workshop of artists, comprising Delfina Bernal, Álvaro Herazo, Anne Bertrand, Fernando Cepeda, Ida Esbra, Eduardo Hernández, Christiane Lensueur, and Víctor Sánchez. It also included three architects. The group met regularly to share ideas, yet it never produced

⁸² “De manera excepcional en el arte colombiano aparecía una experiencia grupal y la realización de un tipo de arte que se alejaba de los parametros habitualmente aceptados.” Pini, 203

⁸³ Pini, 196

⁸⁴ Pini, 196

collective work.⁸⁵ While the members of Grupo 44 individually created conceptual works, their stance was markedly different from El Sindicato's. As critics Óscar Ojeda and Álvaro Tirado observed in their 1981 retrospective evaluation of Colombian Conceptualism, these artists argued that the public for conceptual art needed to be informed on the grammar of contemporary art for them to appreciate the potency of their works.⁸⁶

On June 4, 1976 El Sindicato debuted its first project, titled *Espacios de actitud*. For this exhibition, each artist created distinct spaces within the old theater using solely discarded materials like tires, wood, metal, and other waste. An article published in the Barranquilla newspaper *Diario del Caribe*, for instance, shows a large grouping of tires in the background on what used to be the theater's stage, whereas in the foreground stands a wooden frame with a tire hanging from it and another noose hovers above (Figure 62). *Espacios de actitud*—spaces of attitude—meant to convey the collective's distinctive emphasis on concept rather than form. The mounds of discarded objects were not meant to expand the formal realm of what is to be considered “aesthetic.”⁸⁷ Rather, they were to communicate the attitude that produced them, that of rebellion and nonconformity, of a restless drive to move art as far away from commercialization as possible. In fact, from this point forward El Sindicato used waste materials exclusively

⁸⁵ Barrios, “El arte como idea en Barranquilla,” *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 1, no. 2 (September 1978): 26

⁸⁶ “Los más connotados representantes de este otro equipo [Grupo 44], aseguran que el espectador de una obra conceptual debe ser por lo menos un iniciado en la comprensión del lenguaje artístico moderno y conceptual.” Óscar Ojeda and Álvaro Tirado, “Agonía y muerte del arte conceptual en Barranquilla,” *Intermedio, Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), June 14, 1981

⁸⁷ In an article following their second exhibition, Alberto del Castillo wrote, “the proposals El Sindicato has made in the last two exhibitions are not aesthetic, nor do they strive in the formal sense to make ‘plastic’ propositions...” (“Las proposiciones hechas a través de las dos muestras que ha realizado El Sindicato no son esteticistas, ni siquiera persiguen en el aspecto formal hacer planteamientos ‘plásticos’”). Del Castillo, “Montones: La segunda muestra del Sindicato,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), September 15, 1976

throughout its oeuvre, deliberately using the detritus of a society defined by consumption to further its artistic project.

El Sindicato maintained that *Espacios de actitud* was an investigation into the possibilities as yet unexplored in art, a stance it reaffirmed in subsequent projects.⁸⁸ These experimentations in turn were based on local concerns and not on emulating international trends. In truth, the group was not theoretical and had no intentions of “breaking Art History apart.”⁸⁹ They really were a young group of energetic and irreverent artists who were eager to explore the potential of art to respond, in a relevant manner, to their chaotic context. For El Sindicato, like many artists in Latin America at the time, a conceptual approach was a forceful way in which they could interpret, through art, the surrounding social environment. The use of conceptual strategies in this case was an instinctive recourse borne out of local circumstances, rather than a tautological theorization of art. As future member of El Sindicato Aníbal Tobón stated in retrospect,

In our time[...]we had no goals, but points of reference. We did not elaborate theories nor were we worried about that. We assimilated that new field of art, but more from a vital attitude than from a theoretical one. We wanted to make provocative works that would make people feel, and that would become an existential adventure which perhaps stemmed more from *nadaísmo*—the

⁸⁸ The article published two days before the exhibition opening mentions how El Sindicato’s work is “primordially investigative” (“primordialmente investigativo”) and also refers to the collective’s “investigations with the purpose of positively contributing to the fine arts” (“realizan investigaciones con el fin de contribuir positivamente con las bellas artes”) “‘El Sindicato’ expone: Espacios de actitud,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), June 2, 1976. This language is echoed by del Castillo’s own statement on El Sindicato’s second project, declaring the group’s goal that “through teamwork, the group be able to consolidate the guidelines under which investigation in Art should develop” (“lograr por medio del trabajo en equipo, llegar a consolidar las pautas según cuales se debe desenvolver la investigación en el Arte”). del Castillo, “Montones: La segunda muestra del Sindicato”

⁸⁹ Gómez, “Montones.” At the time, the group positioned its works as part of the “Arte de Sistemas” (systems art), referring to the term popularized by the Argentine Jorge Glusberg, who organized an exhibition in conjunction with the *Bienal Coltejer* (“obras cuyo campo corresponde al Arte de Sistemas.” del Castillo, “Montones: La segunda muestra del Sindicato.” While one might readily see El Sindicato as following the trends and theoretical lines set by the CAyC, the collective’s use of the term instead indicates the lingering dearth of local critical language that could explain this kind of work. The group would go on to also use the term “arte de idea” (idea art) and “arte conceptual”(conceptual art) almost interchangeably.

proponents of which were our friends—than from European or North American movements.⁹⁰

Nadaísmo, or “nothing-ism,” was a literary movement originated in 1958 in Medellín by the poet and professor Gonzalo Arango. Writing in the wake of Colombia’s *La Violencia*, an extremely violent period in which political strife resulted in thousands of deaths throughout the country, Arango drew heavily from surrealism and existentialism in his *Manifiesto Nadaísta* to formulate a radically new literary response to this volatile context. Arango’s magnetic personality and public performances—like delivering a speech written on toilet paper to a crowd gathered at Medellín’s Berrío Park—won him dozens of young followers drawn to his mockery of the absurdity of Colombia’s situation. The movement of *Nadaísmo* centered mainly on poetry, its practitioners responding to new concerns like the deafening clamor of Colombia’s growing metropolises—Cali, Medellín, and Barranquilla. This was poetry “written with eyesight, impregnated with noise, struck by the shouts of street vendors, sweaty and tacky; the sentimentalism that distinguishes it demonstrates[...] a history entirely made up of unrealized goals.”⁹¹ *Nadaísmo* had reverberations in Colombian culture for decades. The 1970 publication of *Nadaísmo 70*, a survey of the movement, proves its continued relevance twelve years after its founding. Also, well-known visual artists like Salcedo and Álvaro Barrios affirmed a *Nadaísta* influence in their work. Barrios even went so far

⁹⁰ “En nuestro tiempo [...] no teníamos metas sino puntos de referencia. No ilustrábamos teorías ni nos preocupábamos por eso. Nos asimilamos a ese nuevo campo de acción del arte, pero más desde una actitud vital que teórica. Queríamos hacer obras provocadoras, que se hicieran sentir, y que se convirtieran en una aventura existencial, quizás más derivada del nadaísmo —de cuyos integrantes fuimos amigos— que de movimientos europeos o norteamericanos” Aníbal Tobón, as quoted in Carmen María Jaramillo, “Arte moderno o contemporáneo?,” *Colombia Años 70* (Bogotá: Asab, 2002), 69

⁹¹ “Poesía hecha con la vista, impregnada de ruidos, golpeada por los gritos de los vendedores callejeros, sudorosa y cursi, el sentimentalismo que la distingue muestra[...] una historia toda hecha de propósitos irrealizados.” J.G. Gobo Borda, “Nadaísmo,” in *Historia portátil de la poesía colombiana* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1995), 213

as to call himself a *Nadaísta* painter.⁹² It is notable, however, that the *Nadaístas* moved away from revolutionary goals, deliberately straying from political ideologies. In fact, as its title demonstrates, the movement proved to be nihilistic above everything else. When connecting *Nadaísmo* to El Sindicato's practice then, we are able to trace parallels in their brazen approach to art making, "disrespecting" the rules of aesthetic traditions and ultimately aiming to jolt the reader/spectator. We can also see striking similarities in their incorporation of urban aspects in their work, as a distinct response to the rapidly changing environment of Colombia's cities. However, as I will elaborate on below, El Sindicato diverges from *Nadaísmo* as it rejects nihilism in favor of a socially constructive practice.

El Sindicato's first, second, and third projects were closely related. Its second project, titled *Montones*, included Efraín Arrieta as guest artist, although he became a permanent member of the collective thereafter. The collective opened *Montones* on August 27, 1976. Similar to *Espacios de actitud*, it consisted of groupings of objects, this time following the dictionary definition of *montones*: "a group of things gathered without any sense of order, [or] a considerable number."⁹³ Thus El Sindicato established as the exhibition theme the very process lying behind the works, each "montón" consisting of distinct heaps of discarded materials (Figure 63). Consequently, while the works' form did not seem methodical, the concept behind them was.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, *Espacios de actitud* and *Montones* still maintained a certain individualist quality to them. After all,

⁹² Interview with Álvaro Barrios, *Cromos* (Bogotá), No. 2564 (Noviembre 21, 1966), 61

⁹³ "conjunto de cosas puestas sin orden unas sobre otras, número considerable." "Montones," exh. brochure, August 1976, personal archive of Gina McDaniel Tarver

⁹⁴ In an editorial column Efraín Arrieta asserted how the seeming randomness of the "montones" was truly a thorough elaboration of the theme on part of each artist, "transforming the materials, or means, into ends" ("los 'medios' se transforman en 'fines'"). Efraín Arrieta, "Apuntes sobre Arte," *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), August 1976

each artist created his own space and “montón.” It was only after its third project that the artists solitified their collective working process.

This third project, titled *Dispersar*, debuted on October 1, 1976 (see invitation, figure 64). Following the dictionary definition of *Dispersar*—“to disperse”—the group scattered the heaps of *Montones* throughout the theater space, undoing the previous forms to create a single, entire surface of disarray without separate components: “*Montones* was the base for *Dispersar*, which consisted in dispersing the heaps we had made earlier, which led to a more collective attitude. Before [...] we had the tendency to individualize ourselves.”⁹⁵ Precariously placing *Montones*’ materials throughout the room also required the viewer to carefully negotiate the exhibition space as he or she moved about to take in the work; that is, the end result of the “dispersal” process. *Dispersar* displays a certain element of aggression, focusing on the viewer’s embodiment by imposing itself throughout the space. This coercion of the viewer into participating with the work would go on to form the crux of El Sindicato’s oeuvre.

The progressive encroachment of El Sindicato’s first three projects into the space of the viewer resulted in, perhaps unsurprisingly, highly critical reactions. Those who attended the openings also seemed to be apprehensive about the absence of individuality conveyed by the works, seen strongest in *Dispersar*. As Alberto del Castillo wrote regarding the latter, the group’s works lacked any indication of formal relationships with the traditional art that tends to satisfy exhibition goers.⁹⁶ Furthermore, these exhibitions produced “a reaction that, while expected, in some cases was accompanied by the curious

⁹⁵ “*Montones* fue la base para *Dispersar*, que consistía en esparcir los montones que habíamos hecho anteriormente, lo que condujo a que la actitud fuera más colectiva. Antes [...] teníamos una tendencia a individualizarnos.” Ramiro Gómez in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 171

⁹⁶ del Castillo, “*Dispersar*: La 3a. Exposición del Sindicato,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), October 1976

concern for the impersonality that individualism suffered thanks to the contributions that made up the exhibition.”⁹⁷ In a fiery statement published in November of 1976, the members of El Sindicato also addressed negative reviews by asserting that vocal disagreements with their work were precisely the group’s objective: “if you are motivated to comment negatively about our exhibitions, remember that you are helping us, [and] that is our merit. TO DISPLEASE!”⁹⁸

From *Dispersar* on, the collective embarked on a period of intense activity and experimentation, with its investigations manifesting themselves through a multiplicity of modes such as installations, environments, and art actions. By 1977 Luis Stand and Antonio Arrieta had left the country, while Efraín Arrieta and Aníbal Tobón joined the collective in their place. Efraín Arrieta’s work previous to joining El Sindicato had a strong participatory aspect, which would in turn shine through the collective’s forthcoming works. Arrieta’s aforementioned *Construya-Destruya* from 1972, for instance, highlights his emphasis on participation, as the work relied on the viewer rearranging 333 bricks within the gallery space. Meanwhile, Aníbal Tobón became the group’s organizational force, distributing tasks among each member: Arrieta would be in charge of collecting all documentation and coverage on the group’s work, Restrepo would be “reviser,” Gómez would be treasurer and in charge of collecting donations, Restrepo would conduct all external relations, and Tobón would be the copyeditor, for

⁹⁷ “produjo una reacción que si bien era esperada, vino en algunos casos acompañada de la curiosa preocupación por la despersonificación que de la individualidad sufrieran los aportes que conformaron la muestra.” del Castillo, “Dispersar: La 3a. Exposición del Sindicato”

⁹⁸ “Si se motiva a opinar desfavorablemente sobre nuestras exposiciones, piense que nos está ayudando, ese es nuestro mérito. DESAGRADAR!” El Sindicato, “El Sindicato le cambia su gusto con mucho gusto”

the group considered him the most eloquent.⁹⁹ As Gómez later expressed, the group was now a true artists' union.

Artist Guillermo Aragón also regularly participated in El Sindicato's projects, although his name does not figure amongst the signatures on the group's manifesto, written and signed on January 1, 1977. The manifesto also marked the collective's interest in extending its reach beyond its own exhibition space.¹⁰⁰ Most compelling is its new regard for participating in "other exhibitions." Was El Sindicato contradicting one of its original tenets? Mirroring the sentiments expressed by artist Luis Camnitzer, El Sindicato recognized that sometimes to subvert institutions it is most effective to use them.¹⁰¹ While its initial projects were indeed garnering much attention, El Sindicato must have realized that operating completely from the outside would limit its potential to generate the structural change it advocated for. In fact, the artists would state later that year in a published interview,

"Through the mobilization of El Sindicato we will prove to the more affluent sectors that the same system of galleries can be compatible with other proposals [...] [we are] responding to the needs that are the outcome of our research process and not of social climbing."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ "Aníbal, que era una persona muy organizada, decidió asignar un trabajo a cada miembro de 'El Sindicato'; así, por ejemplo, a Efraín Arrieta se le encargó la documentación; tenía que guardar todas las cosas que llegaban acerca del grupo—recortes de prensa, cassettes, críticas--;Alberto del Castillo era el revisor, Carlos Restrepo hacía las relaciones, Aníbal Tobón era el redactor porque en verdad él sí sabía escribir y yo era el tesorero porque trabajaba para que la gente nos hiciera donaciones en especies o en dinero. Entonces ya éramos un verdadero Sindicato." Gómez in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 173-174

¹⁰⁰ "el sindicato (sic) buscará estrechar vínculos con el público, otros grupos y creadores, para que su actividad se desencadene y entre en estrecho contacto con todo aquello[...]este contacto, se propiciará por medio de las exposiciones en la sede del grupo, por aceptación de invitaciones a participar en otras muestras, por medio de charlas, actividades culturales en general[...]" Efraín Arrieta, Alberto del Castillo, Ramiro Gómez, Carlos Restrepo, and Aníbal Tobón. "Testimonio y Manifiesto de El Sindicato," January 7, 1977, personal archive of Efraín Arrieta

¹⁰¹ See Gina Tarver, "The Trepadori Project," in *The New York Graphic Workshop, 1964-1970* (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, 2010), 77

¹⁰² "Y vamos a demostrar a través de la movilización de El Sindicato a los sectores de más afluencia que ese mismo sistema de galerías se puede llevar con otros planteamientos [...] [estamos] respondiendo a las

The collective nonetheless maintained its fundamental principles of using discarded materials and of creating works whose commercialization was, at least at the time, inconceivable in Colombia. In other words, these experiments were not acquirable by institutions given the art field's established parameters. To wit: in 1977 El Sindicato was invited to participate in Barranquilla's second *Salón Regional de Artes Visuales*. On opening night, June 11, 1977, bewildered visitors came across the group's *El Salón dentro del Salón*. Staged in a miniature French-style salon in a 2x3 meter space—complete with over 15 replicas of paintings by the “Old Masters”—the work consisted of a performance wherein the members of El Sindicato and painter Álvaro Barrios acted out hyperbolized versions of the usual interactions that take place in this type of event, ruthlessly mocking the antiquated and bourgeois format of the salon (Figure 65). The group did not intend for this work to be a mere jest, however. In an article published after the opening, El Sindicato closed its public statement by declaring, “theater presents the facts as absurd as they are, it is up to you to think of the solution.”¹⁰³ This is the closing line from Chilean playwright Isidora Aguirre's 1963 play *Los papeleros*, a work defined by its focus on social critique. As such, with this work El Sindicato aimed to place a mirror to the *Salón*, so as to invite critical thinking on part of its organizers and audience. It called for opening Colombia's insular institutions to wider concerns and new modes of

necesidades que se nos presentan como consecuencia del proceso investigativo y no por arrivismo.” El Sindicato in conversation with Lola Salcedo Castañeda, “Alfabeto plástico (XIX): La vanguardia del arte,” unidentified news clipping from September 7, 1977, personal archive of Efraín Arrieta

¹⁰³ “El teatro presenta los hechos tan absurdos como son, a vosotros corresponde pensar en la solución.” Grupo El Sindicato, “Así es eso del arte,” unidentified news clipping, June 11, 1977, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

expression. The group repeated its performance two more times during the run of the *Salón* and, perhaps as anticipated, it did not win an award that year.¹⁰⁴

Other intriguing examples of El Sindicato's interventions in institutional spaces include *Hojarasca*, also from June 1977, and *Colgandejos*, from October 1977. In both projects the group utilized the dictionary meaning of the title as its creative catalyst. Exhibited in Galería la Escuela of the Universidad del Atlántico, *Hojarasca* consisted of a room abundantly filled with thousands of dried leaves of multiple shades and sizes (Figures 66, 67, and 68). The thick covering of leaves and a number of dead trees planted throughout the room transformed the exhibition space into the outside. However, the sheer amounts of leaves and the patterns in which the artists grouped them impart a fantastical twist reminiscent of magical realism. This is not coincidental, as El Sindicato invited Gabriel García Márquez to be the guest artist for the project.¹⁰⁵ García Márquez never responded to the request, so the group placed a copy of his novel *La Hojarasca* in the room as a tongue-in-cheek way to nonetheless involve the author in the work.¹⁰⁶ El Sindicato invited the audience to immerse itself in the *Hojarasca*. A faint photograph published in a local newspaper shows the artists standing in the forefront, while visitors wade through the sea of leaves, some of their feet covered by the thicket (Figure 69).

Colgandejos similarly inserted the outside into the internal gallery space, further calling attention to the arbitrariness of gallery walls' delimitations. A "colgandejo" is a cloth or rag that "cuelga" or hangs, typically seen in households where clothes are hung

¹⁰⁴ While El Sindicato's proposal letter states its intent to perform it three times in addition to opening night, an article published after opening night announces instead two more runs. El Sindicato, Barranquilla, May 1977, to II Salón Regional de Artes Visuales ICETEX, typewritten letter. Grupo El Sindicato, "Así es eso del arte," unidentified news clipping, June 11, 1977, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

¹⁰⁵ El Sindicato to Gabriel García Márquez, typewritten letter, June 1977, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

¹⁰⁶ "Pusimos una columna Blanca y arriba de ella su libro *La Hojarasca*. Así lo hicimos participar." Gómez in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 176

to dry. With this in mind, El Sindicato wove a wire cable around the gallery space of Barranquilla's Biblioteca Departamental, hanging from it numerous discarded clothing and rags.¹⁰⁷ The artists hung *colgandijos* high and low, extending them across the space and covering the room's wall decorations. The tension between "high culture" and "low culture" is as evident as ever here, with the erudite space of the library punctuated by objects as seen most commonly in lower-class neighborhoods. *Colgandijos* also played with the senses, its dirty rags simultaneously challenging the viewer's intellectual as well as physical sensibilities.

Critics at the time detected a political tinge in El Sindicato's work. In an interview published on April 3, 1977, the members of the collective asserted, "if our work has a political taste, it is also a tropical taste, this is joyful work; a consequence of the circumstances surrounding our group."¹⁰⁸ In the heated political context of late 1970s, El Sindicato strikingly did not align itself with any political affiliation: "we don't belong to any established political party in Colombia, but this does not imply that we are not defined politically. We protest as conditioned by our circumstances and we are effecting change."¹⁰⁹ This stance is echoed by the group's manifesto, wherein it maintained that its modes of expression would remain within the realm of the visual arts.¹¹⁰ This decision to situate its practice outside the realm of activism is of note, particularly in light of many of its contemporaries and of other artists employing conceptualist strategies in Latin

¹⁰⁷ Barrios, *Orígenes*, 174

¹⁰⁸ "Si nuestra obra tiene un sabor político, también es salsa del trópico, es un trabajo alegre. Una consecuencia de las circunstancias que rodea al grupo." El Sindicato in an interview with Margarita Galindo, "El Sindicato de Barranquilla: una respuesta a la actitud boba de la gente," *El Tiempo* (Barranquilla), *Lecturas Dominicales*, April 3, 1977

¹⁰⁹ Galindo, "El Sindicato de Barranquilla: una respuesta a la actitud boba de la gente"

¹¹⁰ "las formas de expresión del grupo, quedan hasta el momento, dentro de los límites de las artes plásticas[...]." Arrieta, del Castillo, Gómez, Restrepo, and Tobón. "Testimonio y Manifiesto de El Sindicato"

America in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, a striking divergence can be traced between El Sindicato's position and the paradigmatic case of conceptual collectivism, Tucumán Arde of Argentina. The artists of Tucumán Arde also intervened—in this case, in mass communication—to generate an art of counterinformation. However, their strategy of counterinformation hinged on making overt political references.

El Sindicato evaded particular political ideologies, always grounding itself in the belief that art should not be collapsed into life, but that more of the world should be brought into art. This was a delicate balance that largely resulted in a critical misunderstanding of the group's oeuvre. El Sindicato's work did away with all references to traditional media and even to newly accepted conceptual strategies like the use of text as art. It also set aside the didactic political content expected from "committed" art. The critical parameters as they existed in Colombia in the second half of the 1970s therefore did not know how to approach or explain this new type of conceptual practice. Despite its championing by figures like Álvaro Barrios and Eduardo Serrano, many other critics misapprehended much of El Sindicato's work. The ephemeral quality of its projects and the lack of their visual documentation further made it so that El Sindicato's contributions other than *Alacena con zapatos* would go routinely neglected in historiographical accounts of Conceptualism in Colombia.

EL SINDICATO RE-INSCRIBES CONCEPTUALISM

Chapter 3: *Interventions in the cityscape*

El Sindicato navigated between performance and installation with *Salón dentro del Salón*, *Hojarasca*, and *Colgandijos* as a means to intervene in institutional spaces. These works placed equal emphasis on sensory experience and audience participation, as well as on creating tensions between “high” and “low” culture, the gallery space and the outdoors, and on art’s autonomy versus heteronomy. However, the collective’s most compelling interventions were those that engaged with the cityscape of Barranquilla. The four case studies that make up these next two chapters represent the distinctiveness and forcefulness of El Sindicato’s work during its time.

TURNING TOWARDS THE STREET

Colombian conceptual artists working towards the mid-1970s had radically pushed the limits of art, yet their works mostly remained within the confines of the gallery space. Antonio Caro looked to inserting some of his work in the city’s streets, as seen in the previously mentioned *Documentación y información sobre Manuel Quintín Lame, Colombia, 12 pliegos*, and his *Colombia-Marlboro* project of 1975. However, while innovative in their approach, these interventions on the cityscape were subdued, even private, despite their public context. Despite his strategy of using flyers to extend the work beyond the gallery in *Documentación* and in his remake of *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, the viewer/participant nevertheless had to attend the exhibition in order to access these. The audience in these interventions, therefore, was self-selected. In a similar manner, the spectator of *Colombia, 12 pliegos* was also the spectator of the VI

Salón de Agosto, not the average passerby traversing the city. Furthermore, in Caro's images of *Colombia-Marlboro* people are noticeably absent, and the element of these works' subversion lies rather on capturing his Marlboro insertions on film so as to exhibit them as images. As such, the gallery was the underlying foundation for these as well as all other works by Caro.¹¹¹

In addition to Marín and his *Incomunicables*, another artist would later radically turn to the street to bypass the gallery space. For his contribution to the 1979 *Salón Atenas*, Adolfo Bernal (b.1954-) pasted a number of paper posters throughout the streets, each with a peculiar and seemingly random word pairing printed in red ink: *Rana–Jinete*, *Seda–Beatle*, *Amante–Chicago*, *Camisa–Bicicleta*, and *Luna–Papel* (Figure 70). Written in smaller type across the bottom of each poster was an announcement of the artist's work at the *Salón*. These posters emulated advertisements in a similar manner to the works by Marín and Caro. However, Bernal seems to abstain from social critique in this work and focuses instead on mocking advertising, grabbing the viewer's attention through vividly printed, nonsensical expressions. Caro, Marín, and Bernal turned towards the streets in an attempt to create an art that would go unmediated by the gallery walls, thereby expanding their audience beyond the self-selected exhibition audience. However, the works of these artists remained anchored in the institutional system of galleries and biennials, undertaking these interventions only as part of larger exhibition initiatives.

El Sindicato began to truly engage the world outside the exhibition space with its fourth project, titled *Aguinaldos* (December 1976). This was the first instance in which the collective focused on creating an artwork that consisted of a situation rather than of an object for display. The group created invitations to announce *Aguinaldos*, listing the

¹¹¹ Tarver, 331

collective members as well as three invited artists: Antonio Caro, Maria Rodríguez, and Aníbal Tobón (Figure 71). The artists distributed these invitations throughout the city, and also personally invited all the children of neighboring Barrio Abajo to attend the “exhibition opening” at the old theater on December 28th. On that evening a diverse crowd came to the theater, made up of Barrio Abajo families as well as local artists, critics, and other members of Barranquilla’s arts scene (Figure 72). As the crowd gathered and mingled, El Sindicato distributed knickknacks like small toys and colorful stones to the children as gifts:

We managed to make gifts for the neighborhood kids and we brought puppets, because at that time, Aníbal Tobón also did puppets and theater... Santa was riding on a sleigh made from old car tires and his face was a clock, we distributed sweets and, in the end, it became something in which everyone was involved, because the children were part of the work and also what we gave as presents [...]¹¹²

This was the work *Aguinaldos*—staging the convergence of Barranquilla’s multiple residents and demographics in a space. On “display” then, were the social connections taking place amongst the attendees.

Aguinaldos comes across as lighthearted while attending to grimmer realities. Barranquilla in the late 1970s was facing an economic and social crisis as its maritime shipping industry collapsed and an ineffective attempt at industrialization failed to meet the demands of a rapidly swelling population.¹¹³ Like many of Colombia’s growing metropolises, Barranquilla suffered from governmental administrations incapable of

¹¹² “Conseguimos hacerle regalos a los muchachos del barrio y trajimos unos títeres, porque en esa época, Aníbal Tobón también hacía títeres y teatro...El Papá Noel estaba montado sobre un carro hecho con llantas viejas de automóviles y la cara era un reloj, se repartieron dulces, en fin, se fue volviendo algo en el que todo el mundo participaba, porque los niños eran parte de la obra y lo que se regalaba también [...].”Gómez in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 172

¹¹³ Carlos Bell Lemus and Jorge Villalón Donoso, “El período del Frente Nacional y la crisis de los años setenta (1957-58-1974-75),” in *Historia de Barranquilla*, edited by Jorge Villalón Donoso (Barranquilla: Uninorte, 2000), 253-255, 264

instituting adequate infrastructure and public services, especially in middle and lower class neighborhoods. In this bleak context, Barrio Abajo in particular was a downtrodden neighborhood beset with poverty and government neglect, as illustrated by a photograph comparison with the affluent El Prado neighborhood in *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* (Figure 73). At this time neither was Barranquilla exempt from Colombia's larger political hostilities, with thousands participating in protests like the national civic strike of 1977, which resulted in over five hundred arrests.¹¹⁴ El Sindicato's staging of a joyful encounter of the city's different residents temporarily suspends, in the words of Álvaro Barrios, this cycle of "hunger, violence, death, [and] silence," the inhumane chaos of the city.¹¹⁵

With *Aguinaldos* El Sindicato crystallized its sociological approach to art-making. This type of intervention, which El Sindicato would subsequently create in various forms, positioned the audience-participant as a crucial element of the work. The collective would increasingly look to inserting its works within social dynamics of the world outside in the coming months, constituting part of a growing discourse on Colombia's disorderly urban growth and its socio-cultural effects. This discourse was not taking place in the isolated halls of universities or think tanks; many cultural producers examined the relationships between urban forms, social class, and political possibilities. Both *Arte en Colombia* and *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura*, for example, published articles on the interdisciplinary need to consider Colombia's—and Latin America's—changing

¹¹⁴ Medófilo Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1984), 164

¹¹⁵ El ciclo de "hambre, violencia, muerte, silencio," Álvaro Barrios speaking to Colombia in the 1970s, as quoted in Álvaro Medina, "El arte y la violencia colombiana en la segunda mitad del siglo XX," in *Arte y Violencia en Colombia desde 1948* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá; Editorial Norma, 1999), 30

topography and on the social potential of urbanism.¹¹⁶ El Sindicato focused on city space and its social connections with subsequent interventions. These works also were noticeably more sober in tone than *Aguinaldos*.

VIOLENCIA

Carried out on April 9, 1978, the date of the *Violencia* intervention marks the thirtieth anniversary of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's death. An intrepid politician, Gaitán founded the National Leftist Revolutionary Union (UNIR) in 1934, rallying the support of Colombia's working and lower classes during the volatile years of increasing sectarianism between Conservatives and Liberals.¹¹⁷ His assassination on April 9, 1948 during his presidency campaign was both a symptom of a fractured society and a catalyst for heightened hostilities:

The cumulative effects of economic growth and sociocultural change presaged an era of dislocations and conflicts. To face down these challenges, the Colombian political system, like many in Latin America and southern Europe, had to resort to dictatorial methods... The tragic collapse of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's populist Liberal movement in 1948 had several important consequences in this regard. First, it lent credence to the idea that Colombia was not sufficiently mature for democracy, because its political and social movements tended to emphasize income redistribution[...] Second, the violence of gaitanismo's collapse precipitated a turn to authoritarianism[...] Third, the perceived dangers of the moment brought together the disparate capitalist interests that had been at cross-purposes for much of the previous decade[...] This [was] a new plutocracy.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ See Rafael Uribe Rivera, "Política, arquitectura y sistema urbano," *Arte en Colombia* (April-June 1978): 16-17; Galaor Carbonell, "Identidad Latinoamericana," *Arte en Colombia* (July-September 1978): 34-38; Luis Camnitzer addresses the city and public art in "Arte Público," *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 1, no.3 (1979): 23-25. The entire last issue of *Re-vista* is also dedicated to this theme. See *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 2, no.8 (1982)

¹¹⁷ Marco Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002* (Durham: Duke University News, 2006), 112-113

¹¹⁸ Palacios, 126-127

43,000 political killings were reported in 1948 alone.¹¹⁹ Crime, violence, and impunity spread throughout Colombia in the decade following Gaitán's death, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths, including of numerous women and children. This was the outcome of hostilities between Conservatives and Liberals, as well as dissension within each party. Historical accounts call this *La Violencia*, a period that nominally ended in 1958 with the establishment of the *Frente Nacional*.¹²⁰ The *Frente Nacional* was a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal parties, meant to end civil strife by creating an alternating bi-partisan structure of governmental power. In the end, four presidents, alternating Liberals and Conservatives, were elected by popular vote: Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962), Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966), Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970), and Misael Pastrana (1970-1974).¹²¹

While this coalition diffused hostilities throughout the 1960s, it merely masked the underlying and growing rifts within Colombian society. As such, the 1960s in Colombia, far from displaying the calm after *La Violencia*'s storm, heralded a drastic radicalization of the public sphere that would permeate Colombia throughout the decade of the 1970s. For instead of instituting democracy in the country, the *Frente Nacional* crystallized the political leadership of the oligarchic elites, with its alternating structure displacing minorities from the political process and denying them legitimate public voice.¹²² A culture of illegal resistance took root throughout the country. Guerrilla forces formed during the 1960s in reaction to the coalition's exclusionary structure, each following diverse communist veins and developing mostly in rural areas away from Bogotá: the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de

¹¹⁹ Palacios, 157

¹²⁰ A number of historians like Palacios place the end of *La Violencia* in 1965. Palacios, 138

¹²¹ Palacios, 170

¹²² Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia*, 131-132

Liberación Nacional (ELN), the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), and the Quintín Lame guerrilla.¹²³ Alternative political parties also formed, despite the coalition's sanctions against the formation of such organizations: Camilo Torres' Frente Unido del Pueblo, the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal (MRL), and former dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's populist party Alianza Nacional Popular (ANAPO), which by the late 1960s was one of the leading political opposition forces in the country.¹²⁴ Therefore, by the early 1970s, the pact's fragile seams meant to unify Colombia's diverging and conflicting factions had begun to fray rapidly.

The guerrilla movement; the mass mobilization of the country's peasantry and indigenous populations in a fight for land rights; as well as civic strikes and conflicts between workers' unions and the state did not subside with the dismantling of the *Frente Nacional* in 1974. In fact, these social conflicts magnified, marking a shift in the manifestation of unrest and violence that pervaded the country into the 1980s. Hopes for social reforms were quickly dashed with the first post-*Frente Nacional* presidencies of Alfonso López Michelsen (1974-1978) and Julio César Turbay Ayala (1978-1982), both from the Liberal party. A crisis of legitimacy took place, thanks in part to accusations of rampant government corruption as well as to the emergence of drug trafficking and the strengthening of guerrillas.¹²⁵ Upon the proliferation of illicit movements throughout the country, and in the context of the Cold War, Colombia's government successively established a state of siege, unleashing an extreme polarization between opposition forces and the state, particularly the National Army.¹²⁶ Fundamentally, a state of siege limits

¹²³ María Margarita Malagón-Kurka, "Nueva figuración y política en la década de los sesenta y principios de los setenta," in *Arte como presencia indéxica* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2010), 28

¹²⁴ Jorge P. Osterling, "The Colombian Political Parties: Their Clientelist Nature," in *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelist Politics and Guerrilla Warfare* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1989), 189

¹²⁵ Palacios, 171

¹²⁶ Malagón-Kurka, 28

individual rights, restricts freedom of the news, restrains workers' right to organize and strike, and permits the detention of individuals on the basis of suspicion alone.¹²⁷ Colombia's state of siege progressively limited public platforms for non-guerrilla movements like ANAPO and the MRL, leading to their occasional alliances with guerrillas to further political ends.¹²⁸ When López Michelsen reinstated the stage of siege in October of 1976, his administration explicitly stated how disciplinary measures would be taken against those actions that perturbed "normal" daily activity:

Interruption of the pacific development of social activities; the organization of public assemblies without compliance of legal formalities; the obstruction of transit of vehicles and people in public roadways; the placing of derogatory writings (or drawings) in public spaces; incitation to break the law and disobey the competent authorities....¹²⁹

Any transgression made in public spaces was officially condemned and punishable at the discretion of the military. Despite such extreme measures the civic movement grew in numbers and scale, prompting the government to respond with intensifying legal, physical, and symbolic force. A national general strike took place in September of 1977, counting with the participation of both the middle and lower urban classes. While the number strikers' deaths by the military is still speculated upon, it was nonetheless immediately clear that the regime's unpopularity had reached new heights.¹³⁰

López Michelsen held office through August of 1978 and was succeeded by Turbay Ayala, whose presidency marked the height of state renewal in Colombia. As

¹²⁷ Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia*, 136

¹²⁸ Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia*, 137

¹²⁹ "la perturbación del pacífico desarrollo de las actividades sociales; la realización de reuniones públicas sin el cumplimiento de las formalidades legales; la obstaculización del tránsito de vehículos y de personas por las vías públicas; la colocación de escritos ultrajantes (o dibujos) en lugares públicos; la incitación a quebrantar la ley o a desobedecer a las autoridades competentes." Excerpt from the decrees of exception issued on October 18, 1976, as quoted in Pedro Santana, *Desarrollo regional y paros cívicos en Colombia* ([Bogotá]: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 1983), 165-166

¹³⁰ Palacios, 197

Beatriz González expressed, Turbay Ayala's presidency was one in which "thought truly suffered, there were raids on homes, there were raids on libraries, [...] it was one of the most irrational governments we've ever had, one of the most immoral and grotesque."¹³¹ Evidently, by the late 1970s Colombian society was defined by the great hostility between its state and those individuals belonging to the opposition, no matter what shade of Left these individuals leaned towards. El Sindicato had begun to respond to this cycle of "hunger, violence, death, silence" at a local level with *Aguinaldos*, but it was with its 1978 project titled *Violencia* that it began articulating a structural critique of the Colombian context.

The case study of *Violencia* strongly highlights the shift in Conceptualism in the late 1970s towards an art of action and that did away with explicit political references, not merely as a defense mechanism in the face of state repression, but really as an investigation into an art practice that would attain increased effectiveness in engaging the public and in altering current conditions. Colombian society was witnessing a widespread civil initiative to publicly challenge the status quo on all fronts, and within their practice conceptual artists constituted, in various ways, part of this charge that took to the streets. Of course, El Sindicato's *Violencia* did not maintain a neutral position. Indeed, by intervening in the street and publicly reproducing violence on this specific date and in the particularly charged context of 1978 Colombia, this intervention constitutes a political agitation. The intervention maintains resonances with the public actions of protesters at the time, yet it maintains its critique at a broad level so as not to be pegged down to a particular political association. *Violencia* was art posed as an answer to its present, a practice that articulated a cautious radicalism: ambiguous enough to avoid both

¹³¹ "el pensamiento sufrió, hubo allanamientos a las casas, hubo allanamientos a las bibliotecas, [...] fue uno de los gobiernos más irracionales que hemos tenido, de los más inmorales y de los más grotescos." As quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes*, 17

ideological affiliations as well as official punishment, yet condemning the current political environment by visually expressing the permanence of violence and fear underlying Colombian daily life.

The commotion

On the evening of April 9, 1978 the collective created a commotion on the corner of Barranquilla's 68th street and 54th avenue, in Barranquilla's city center. The artists had filled an otherwise empty lot with stuffed figures simulating bodies, strewing them about on the ground and placing them as effigies on stakes (Figure 74). They had constituted the viscera of these bodies with fireworks and detonated them at 6p.m., drawing crowds to the lot and detaining almost two hundred cars on this major intersection.¹³² In fact, as these bodies exploded and burned, many thought in the turmoil that this was a terrorist attack.¹³³ This event however, was El Sindicato's intervention titled *Violencia*.

With *Violencia* El Sindicato experimented in fully foregoing the exhibition space, leaping out into the streets of Barranquilla and attempting to fully transcend the art object in favor of an art of action. In a characteristic manner, the collective announced its upcoming project days before it would "premiere." Guillermo Aragón, who had recently joined El Sindicato, wrote an open letter titled "A propósito de una exposición: El arte como compromiso" ("On the subject of an exhibition: art as commitment") in the local newspaper *Diario del Caribe* on March 27th to announce the collective's next "exhibition." With a vehement tone Aragón problematizes the notion of "committed art"—what is the essence of an artist's commitment, to whom, and why? Rather than serving any one specific ideology, Aragón asserts that "the commitment of art...cannot be other than to question itself and to challenge others. It is a commitment to everyone,

¹³² "Violencia en el Sindicato," *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), April 11, 1978

¹³³ Álvaro Barrios, "El Arte Como Idea en Barranquilla," 24

because we are part of that whole....”¹³⁴ The practice of art ought to have sociological roots. To this end he announces the theme of El Sindicato’s upcoming project, that of violence: violence “as a phenomenon of an era, as a constant of these times, present in every moment.”¹³⁵ The violence of desperation, of every unnecessary cry, of torture and gratuitous deaths—the underlying institutionalized violence of daily Colombian life in the 1970s.

A legacy of violence

Indeed, violence had been a consistent anxiety with which Colombian artists grappled in their work since 1948. Working mostly in the traditional media of painting and drawing, artists in the late 1940s and early 1950s employed narrative techniques to present the devastating events taking place around them—as seen in the chaotic masses and armed civilians of Alipio Jaramillo’s 1948 *9 de abril* (Figure 75). In the early 1960s, however, a particular occurrence had significant impact on how the artistic field would process Colombia’s recent history and its repercussions: the 1962 publication of *La violencia en Colombia: estudio de un proceso social*, by Germán Guzmán Campos, Orlando Fals Borda, Eduardo Umaña Luna (Figure 76). Before this publication, the Colombian public had no access to images of torture and murders that took place throughout the period of *La Violencia*, due to extensive censorship in the public media.¹³⁶ This was the first sociological study of violence in Colombia and it provided ample visual documentation of these atrocities (Figure 77). Most importantly, the study carried a

¹³⁴ “El compromiso del arte...no puede ser otro que el de cuestionarse, y cuestionar a los otros. Es un compromiso ante todos, porque formamos parte de ese todo....” Guillermo Aragón, “A propósito de una exposición: El arte como compromiso,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), March 27, 1978.

¹³⁵ “se tratará de la violencia como fenómeno de una época. Como una constante presente de estas épocas; presente a través de cada momento.” Aragón, “A propósito de una exposición: El arte como compromiso”

¹³⁶ Carmen María Jaramillo, “Arte en Colombia: décadas del sesenta y setenta” (lecture, *Arte colombiano contemporáneo: reflexión, creación e historia* conference, Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogotá, Colombia, January 31, 2010)

powerful thesis: that violence in Colombia was not an isolated circumstance of bipartisan oppositions; rather, that it was a condition affecting all of Colombian society.¹³⁷ Upon encountering the book's haunting photographs, artists like Alejandro Obregón, Luis Ángel Rengifo, Pedro Nel Gómez, Carlos Granada, Normán Mejía, and Pedro Alcántara incorporated them into a highly expressive neofigurative visual language through which they symbolized the violence that ravaged, in particular, Colombia's rural areas.¹³⁸ Three works demonstrate with particular potency how the theme of violence was contended with through a neofigurative lens: Alejandro Obregón's *La Violencia*, from 1962, Pedro Alcántara's *El martirio agiganta a los hombres-raíz*, from 1966, and Normán Mejía's *La horrible mujer castigadora*, from 1965 (Figures 78, 79, and 11). All three works demonstrate the move away from specifically anecdotal references towards symbolic expression, while also displaying a growing tendency towards abstraction. Most saliently, all three prominently present bodies on which violence has been markedly inflicted upon. Obregón and Alcántara focus on the ensuing death after torture, through the depiction of contorted, mutilated bodies. Mejía imparts a sense of movement to the bleeding, disfigured woman in his piece, conveying sentient anguish. Together, these three works can be taken as representative of how neofigurative artists in Colombia gave testimony to the sense of horror precipitated by violence.

In the 1970s many artists produced explicitly political works, condemning, in part, the totality of violence in Colombian society. The use of popular graphic arts like screen-printing and lithography had catapulted since the 1960s thanks to its ease of production and distribution, yet in the 1970s this medium tended towards a "militant

¹³⁷ Jaramillo, "Arte en Colombia: décadas del sesenta y setenta"

¹³⁸ Malagón-Kurka, 15

commitment to reality” through its didactic—if not dogmatic—imagery and themes.¹³⁹ Illustrative of this current is the work by artists of Taller 4 Rojo. Diego Arango’s 1971 series *Conjunto testimonio*, for instance, relies on repetition and juxtaposition to expose the military’s rampant torture and emphasize the tacit complicity of government officials in such crimes (Figure 80). However, as Tarver states, despite its confrontational content, “only in terms of theme does most of this art issue any challenge to the status quo.”¹⁴⁰ Its form nonetheless remained rooted in a traditional medium.

After Feliza Bursztyn, Álvaro Barrios, Bernardo Salcedo, and Beatriz Gonzalez paved the way in the 1960s for new methods of expression, a number of artists in the 1970s developed conceptual practices as a means to both question the limits of traditional media and denounce the current sociopolitical conditions in Colombia. Introducing elements of popular culture and mass media into their works, figures like Antonio Caro focused their practice on the social behavior of art, as well as on an attempt to alter the criteria by which art is valued. The work of these early conceptual artists in Colombia signals a move towards a critical art that had a clear political angle but no didactic intentions. Using mainly text and graphics, and often with a tone of irony, early Colombian conceptual artists formulated more generalized, if not oblique, critiques of the Colombian state. Rarely did these early conceptual works address violence itself, and those that did formulated a critique that inextricably bound violence and its outcomes with the current political regime. This is illustrated by Caro’s aforementioned *AQUINOCABEELARTE* from 1972, a work which functions as a document that simultaneously confronts the Colombian art system as well as the repressive methods at the time deployed by the state (Figure 45).

¹³⁹ Pini, 195

¹⁴⁰ Tarver, 315

Upon tracing this legacy of violence as it was attended to in Colombian art since 1948, El Sindicato's *Violencia* stands firmly as a singular work in which the condition of violence is addressed in itself, and through non-object art that aims for the viewer's transformation of consciousness through his/her active involvement in an art action. Not only does *Violencia* confront the idea of violence, but it also emphasizes the historical continuum of violence in Colombia; indeed, the pervasive violence of the 1970s was merely an iteration of the violence unleashed on April 9, 1948.

April 9, 1978

A striking photograph appeared in a Barranquilla newspaper on April 10, 1978 (Figure 81). The photograph shows a human silhouette lying on the ground, lit by the crude flash of the camera. The silhouette is formed by items of clothing, although the body that wore them seems to have disintegrated into the soil, leaving these remnants behind. The clothing is an imprint of an act of aggression: a sack appearing to be made of burlap stands in for the head, while the shirt and pants demarcate a human figure with legs and arms splayed out, as if the body that wore them dropped in this position. Overgrown grass dominates the composition, threatening to consume the remains and erase the evidence of what appears to have been a murder. However, two pieces of wood appearing to have been fashioned into a large cross are placed near the victim's head, serving as a makeshift gravestone for all to see. Following the diagonal line set by the human figure, our eye passes the cross and encounters a small crowd in the far left background. Cautiously standing away from the scene in the foreground, their expressions remain indistinct due to the lack of light. Are they spectators or participants in this act of violence? With the title of "9 de Abril," the caption underneath reads: "the ninth of April as seen by the local artistic group 'El Sindicato'..."

This is one of just two surviving photographs of *Violencia*. As with much of El Sindicato's oeuvre, there is little visual documentation of this work. However, there was ample written documentation through local newspaper coverage as well as through written accounts by members of the collective, making it possible to reconstruct this event.¹⁴¹ In addition to Aragón's open letter in *Diario del Caribe*, two additional articles appeared between April 4th and 7th announcing the collective's upcoming "exhibition." These two articles present neofigurative painter Normán Mejía as the guest collaborator on El Sindicato's project, a seemingly unlikely collaboration if we focus on aesthetic style alone. Yet it is their shared exploration of violence as something deeply embedded in modern human behavior what brings these artists together. This collaboration bears witness to the artists' belief in the potential of an art of action as a forceful means of structural critique. It also further illuminates the collective's compelling use of collaborations. In addition to Mejía, myriad artists actively worked with El Sindicato throughout their projects, like Antonio Caro, Álvaro Barrios, and the local artist María Rodríguez. Yet other collaborations included Gabriel García Márquez's unwitting participation in *Hojarasca*, as well as the participation of the late poet Luis Carlos López in the collective's forthcoming *Avanzada* project. Collaborations were a clever way for El Sindicato to form connections with prominent figures in the artistic field. Most intriguing, however, is how the peculiar collaborations they made with García Márquez and the late López worked to extend El Sindicato's associations beyond the artistic field to other

¹⁴¹ See Guillermo Aragón, "A propósito de una exposición: 'el arte como compromiso'," *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), March 27, 1978; "El Sindicato abre exposición sobre el tema de la violencia: Normán Mejía, artista invitado." Unidentified news clipping, April 4, 1978, personal archive of Efraín Arrieta; "Violencia en El Sindicato," includes a photograph of *Violencia*, *Diario del Caribe*, April 11, 1978; "9 de abril," photograph of *Violencia* from unidentified news clipping, April 10, 1978, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón; Barrios, "El arte como idea en Barranquilla," 24; and interview with Ramiro Gómez in Barrios, *Orígenes*, 175

fields of Colombian culture, further demonstrating the group's interdisciplinary outlook and its concern for tying its art to broader societal processes.

The two items published in anticipation of *Violencia* disclose information on the general theme, its date, time, and location. This being El Sindicato's twelfth project, by this point the collective was already well known locally for its radical experimentations in art-making. Announcing the work would thus ensure at least a small self-selected crowd of those curious to see what was next in the collective's conceptual project. However, no other details were disclosed to "prepare," as it were, those coming for their impending—and unwitting—subjection to and participation in this act of violence.¹⁴² Hence, despite the precursory notification, this work constitutes an intervention. For, as opposed to a performance, this work intervenes on several terrains—it defies art historical conventions by transcending the object in favor of action; it trespasses urban space and infringes on the norms of public conduct; and it interferes in the state's manipulation of collective memory by revealing the historical continuum of violence in modern Colombia. No one present on that evening of April 9th at 68th street and 54th avenue—whether those hoping to presence the opening of "an exhibition" or, in greater number, those transiting the intersection at the time, not privy to any of this information—were willing participants of this surprise act. Herewith lies the strength in *Violencia's* intervention, however, since it is precisely through the element of intrusion that it seeks to raise awareness and transform consciousness on a large scale.

Violencia relies on spectacle to jolt and confront the spectator. Immolating bodies and producing a cacophony of sounds through fireworks, the intervention induces a

¹⁴² In an interview with Aníbal Tobón from May of 1978, local critic Fernando Castañeda remarks how many who attended as a result of the public announcement were expecting to encounter an art environment ("un espacio ambiental," recalling the term conceived by Marta Traba for the 1968 exhibition she organized at the Museo Nacional in Bogotá).

riotous situation in the public space by creating an immersive environment of disorder and hostility. Fireworks being a prevalent part of public celebrations and commemorations, in *Violencia* they instead serve a sinister purpose, stripped from their festive connotations in a clever act of subversion. Rather than denoting a celebration, they impose themselves onto observers and passersby to underline the continuity of violence. In the words of scholar Ivonne Pini, in *Violencia* “labor, materials, and meaning became, then, focal points of reflection.”¹⁴³ Its spectacle of sights and noise strikingly interrupted this evening, calling for others to go and enact disruption in their own lives to end a static regime of renewal. As such, *Violencia* intrepidly broke with López Michelsen’s state of siege edicts: it interrupted normal daily activity, obstructed transit, stimulated a spontaneous assembly of people, and constituted a powerful incitation to disobey authority. By orchestrating the convergence of live bodies with the representation of bodies made absent by years of violence, *Violencia* salvaged an event relegated to the past and asserted its continued existence in Colombia’s present.

The cartography of power

In addition to examining the elements of the intervention itself, an analysis of *Violencia* necessarily entails looking to the significance of its location in the cityscape of Barranquilla. We must take into account how the intervention engages and interferes in the urban space, presupposing that urban space is both a product and vehicle of social formations. As an intervention in the cityscape, *Violencia*’s form speaks to Colombia’s accelerated, if not uncontrolled, urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s and to the advent of a predominantly urban generation.

¹⁴³ “Obra, materiales y significado pasaban, pues, a ser puntos centrales de reflexión.” Pini, 204

Violencia was carried out in front of the Escuela de Bellas Artes, on a busy intersection of the city's most populated area. This location would assure the greatest impact in terms of visibility and magnitude of observers, especially when taking into account the intervention's start time, when most residents are returning from work. *Violencia* also worked at a more profound level. By the 1970s the city center was home to government buildings as well as financial institutions, its space weaving together narratives of the collapse of the city's maritime shipping in the 1960s and the city's push towards industrialization. Cultural institutions also dominated the area and radiated from 54th avenue, where the intervention took place: consulates, museums, theaters, churches, the Escuela de Bellas Artes. This is no mere coincidence—as urban theorist Manuel Castells indicates, “space is not a ‘reflection of society’, it *is* society....[space] will express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development. [Space] will express and implement the power relationships of the state in an historically defined society.”¹⁴⁴ Mapping Barranquilla's city center is therefore to perform the “cartography of power and control.”¹⁴⁵ With *Violencia* El Sindicato performs this very operation, and intervenes by disrupting—in a literal and figurative sense—traffic within the overarching structure built by oligarchic power. As simulated bodies exploded and burned in the empty lot, cars stopped and crowds gathered, prompting the police and fire department to come and dissipate the growing multitude. El Sindicato had obtained its desired effect, arranging an event that interfered in the daily conduct of urban life inculcated by the capitalist development of Colombia's repressive regimes.

¹⁴⁴ As quoted in Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 70-71

¹⁴⁵ Soja, 63

Violencia's also poses a critique of the institution of art. I must note, however, that although El Sindicato situated *Violencia* directly in front of the Escuela de Bellas Artes, this critique was not specifically directed at the Escuela as an institution. Indeed, this is where all of its members studied under Álvaro Barrios, whose own work served as a precedent for El Sindicato's conceptual strategies, and whose support—in the form of published art criticism and exhibition invitations—provided the group with additional opportunities to develop its artistic project.¹⁴⁶ The Escuela also served as a venue for their projects, like *Hojarasca* from 1977. The location for *Violencia* reveals a complex dynamic, for the intervention then simultaneously enacts a tribute to the school, while articulating a more abstract, theoretical critique of the institution of art; that is, of art as a commodity shaped by hegemonic tastes, of the fetishized art object insulated within the confines of conservative institutions. Therefore, acknowledging their formation at the Escuela under Barrios, and in a nod to Barrios' anti-institutional works like *Grabados populares*, the artists of El Sindicato sought to reclaim art from the institution and insert it in the larger discourses of society by positioning *Violencia* in the street.

In his public letter, Guillermo Aragón declared that *Violencia* was “a tribute to those who seek a new art; to those who strive for change. A tribute to those who fight...even if it seems pointless.”¹⁴⁷ Beginning with *Aguinaldos*, El Sindicato experimented with an art practice that critically examined society in real time and space. However, that El Sindicato leapt out onto the streets did not indicate a desire to collapse its art practice into life. Indeed, the collective always relied on the relative autonomy of the artistic field, a space that provided a vantage point from which it could evaluate its

¹⁴⁶ Note also that Efraín Arrieta would later become a teacher at the Escuela de Bellas Artes

¹⁴⁷ “un homenaje para los que buscan un nuevo arte; para los que se esfuerzan con el cambio. Un homenaje para los que luchan...aunque parezca inútil.” Aragón, “A propósito de una exposición: El arte como compromiso”

volatile context and formulate what it deemed was an art relevant to the contemporary era. This was the ninth of April, as seen by El Sindicato: a day that was not to be ignored or looked past, or have its tragic events casted to a fixed memory of the distant past. *Violencia*'s maneuvers made the invisible visible: on the one hand, it revealed the artistic field's hegemonic values of commodification and individualization. It also connected Colombia's past with its present, unveiling how the structure of its contemporary society was forged by and continuously maintained through violence. By creating an iteration of the upheaval from thirty years before, El Sindicato reactivates this decisive event and makes the assertion that the past *is still* the present. Those who experienced the intervention—either through their presence at the intersection of 68th street and carrera 54 or through the photographs published thereafter in local newspapers—would have to come to terms with the implications of such a revelation.

Chapter 4: *Metonymic Interventions*

It is fundamental to understand the necessity to remain within the system, even if one is against it, as the prime condition to combat, modify, or destroy it.

-Guillermo Aragón, “Las cosas claras y el chocolate espeso”

El Sindicato’s work reverberated in Barranquilla as well as in Bogotá towards 1978, prompting more invitations to participate in institutional initiatives like gallery exhibitions and Salons. In turn, these invitations revealed how ambiguous El Sindicato’s relationship with institutions would turn out to be. As they stated in their manifesto and in interviews, El Sindicato welcomed opportunities to exhibit in additional venues, for they saw these as a means to further disseminate its conceptual project. However, as Aragón indicates above, the collective also acknowledged that participating within institutions clashed with some of their beliefs. There was also the question of how to translate its interventions in the cityscape into the exhibition space—through ingenuity and humor, El Sindicato then transposed its interventions into these spaces while attempting to maintain its critical perspective. What we find is that, in a time when art institutions in Colombia were few and still rather underdeveloped, a critique of these would necessarily be more theoretical than actual. El Sindicato was optimistic about the potential for artistic experimentation to intervene in the development of Colombia’s institutions, and so it chose to partake in gallery exhibitions and, most importantly, in the *Salón*, to give visibility to its alternative propositions.

BARRICADA

Three months after *Violencia*, Barranquilla’s Galería Quintero invited El Sindicato to develop a site-specific installation. This project would be unveiled on July

11th, 1978. An article published on July 10th announces the opening date and theme of the exhibition—*Barricada*—yet does not provide any other details about the work.¹⁴⁸ When guests arrived to what they thought would be a typical gallery opening, they instead came face to face with an enormous barricade that denied them entrance to the actual exhibition space. Cumulating old tires, pieces of windows and doors, twisted scraps of metal, nails, and other waste materials, El Sindicato thus referenced and reactivated the materials it used for *Espacios de actitud*, *Montones*, and *Dispersar* to erect a towering, composite surface that spanned across the length of the Galería Quintero. The barricade’s placement right at the entrance also imparted a sense of aggression and confrontation.¹⁴⁹ In his review for the local newspaper *Diario del Caribe*, the critic and conceptual artist Álvaro Herazo noted that, while the barricades used in protests were typically built at a human scale, *Barricada* instead stood at a “heroic scale,” deploying a “baroque excess charged with symbolic force.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, a photograph published in the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador* shows a portion of the barricade as it soars over four of the collective’s members (Figure 82). *Barricada* did not attempt to simply alter the spectator’s perception of space—as installations generally propose to do. In fact, its height and excess of materials impeded the viewer from looking through it and into the gallery. The barrage of its elements instead impelled the viewer to stand back or even walk away. As such, El Sindicato suspended the standardized relationship between artwork and beholder, making the artwork into the very means of obstruction.

¹⁴⁸ “A partir de mañana 11 de julio, bajo el tema ‘Barricada’, el grupo de arte experimental El Sindicato presentará una muestra de su obra en la Galería Quintero[...].” “El Sindicato en la Galería Quintero,” unidentified news clipping, July 10, 1978, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

¹⁴⁹ “La obra es [...] una superficie, en altura y la distancia que la separa de la puerta por donde penetran sus observaciones ha sido calculada para crear una sensación de agresión, de la estructura hacia el observador.” Álvaro Herazo, “Barricada en la 72,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), July 23, 1978

¹⁵⁰ Herazo, “Barricada en la 72”

A barricade is defined as “an improvised barrier erected across a street or other thoroughfare to prevent or delay the movement of opposing forces.”¹⁵¹ This standard definition not only was the group’s starting point for its creative process, but this also serves to analyze *Barricada*’s institutional critique. That El Sindicato was exhibiting at a commercial gallery—albeit one that fomented experimental art—may have seemed like a paradox. However, this work expresses one of El Sindicato’s strongest attacks against the institution of art, of the idea of art as a field shaped and controlled by the capitalist structure. As the work itself consisted of blocking off the gallery space and prompting spectators/potential consumers to walk away from it, *Barricada* temporarily halted the network of commercial transactions that normally revolve around artworks upon their public display. In turn, the work exposed “the institution of art as a deeply problematical field, making apparent the intersections where political, economic, and ideological interests directly intervened and interfered in the production of public culture.”¹⁵² By assembling waste materials within the gallery context in a gesture of aggressive confrontation, El Sindicato grounded the work’s critique on the assertion that bourgeois values are often congealed in institutionalized exhibition spaces, in the relations that ensue within them, and in the fetishization of the objects on display.

Álvaro Herazo’s sharp review of *Barricada* further reveals the work’s maneuvers. Herazo pointedly places *Barricada* within a genealogy of confrontational art interventions on space: while the article curiously does not include a photograph of the work itself, the text is interspersed with an image of Marcel Duchamp’s *Mile of String*, from 1942, as well as of Jeanne-Claude and Christo’s *Running Fence*, from 1976 (Figure

¹⁵¹ "barricade". Oxford Dictionaries. April 2010. Oxford University News
http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1225012 (accessed February 09, 2011)

¹⁵² Alexander Alberro, *Institutional Critique: an Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge and London: The MIT News, 2009), 7

83). Duchamp's work stands as an icon of an artist's intervention in the traditional relationship between spectator and object. Through a process of negation—obstructing the spectator's access to the works on view and denying him from being able to negotiate the gallery space—Duchamp activates the spectator's consciousness of his body and his surroundings. *Running Fence* is also a keen reference on Herazo's part; a temporary eighteen-foot tall fence erected along twenty-four miles across California's Marin and Sonoma counties, it is a work that stands out in Jeanne-Claude and Christo's oeuvre because its maneuvers are less of a formal aesthetic exercise and more of an exploration into the—often arbitrary—demarcation and defense of territory. Herazo also includes two other images in his review: a detail of German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* from 1933 and an installation view of Alan Neider's *Basement Sculpture* from 1977 (Figures 84 and 85). One is a home transformed into a total sculptural environment, the other an installation of discarded materials assembled into two mounds within a gallery space—both serve as a point of contrast to *Barricada*. As he directly references in the text, *Barricada* was not an environment to be immersed within, like the *Merzbau* (or, I add, like those in the 1968 *Espacios ambientales* exhibition, to draw from a well-known Colombian case). And although Herazo does not refer to *Basement Sculpture* in the text, we can assert that *Barricada* was not an installation along the lines of Neider's either, whose critique, which hinged on the contrast between its unorthodox materials and the sterile gallery space, lies exclusively within the axis of self-referential aesthetic debates taking place in the New York art world at the time. While *Barricada* engages in forceful institutional critique more in the vein of Duchamp's impeding gesture in *Mile of String*, its strength lies rather in its resonance with the form of civic protests taking place in the late 1970s. Herazo draws the connection between *Barricada* and these manifestations by including an inset of one such protest in Barranquilla, asserting that the work “posits

tangential positive effects for art of the [Atlantic] coast as it accustoms the spectator not only to recognize his surroundings...but also posits at the mental level an art of sociological roots” (Figure 86).¹⁵³ A sociological perspective, of course, lies at the crux of El Sindicato’s artistic project. Therefore, that *Barricada* initiates this particular cognitive operation in the spectator is not a tangential effect but is its singular achievement as a work of art in this particular context.

In the face of rising social tensions, *Barricada* critiqued the conditioning of art as an isolated, elitist field by acting as a mirror of the outside, explicitly invoking images of public protests raging throughout Colombia. Such protests, like the national strike of September 1977, involved massive street marches by union workers, students, and other members of civil society in a collective demand for better public services, as well as for economic and political reform. These weren’t passive demonstrations—in Barranquilla, for instance, protesters burned cars and formed barricades across major streets and highways to disrupt order and challenge the apparatus of state discipline.¹⁵⁴ An analysis of *Barricada* therefore needs to focus on the work’s “semiotic functions in order to produce meanings related to its structural position within a larger social circuit or context.”¹⁵⁵ Yet *Barricada* should not be merely read as a sign. Rather, it should be read as a metonym based on its explicit associations; that is, as a substitution for a street intervention. With this work El Sindicato set out enact an institutional critique; barricading a street would have engaged an entirely different audience and may have gone unnoticed by those within the art institution. The most direct way, therefore, would

¹⁵³ “Barricada...plantea efectos tangenciales positivos para el arte de la costa ya que acostumbra al espectador no solo a reconocer el entorno que le rodea...sino que plantea a nivel mental un arte de raíces sociológicas.” Herazo, “Barricada en la 72”

¹⁵⁴ Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia*, 164

¹⁵⁵ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-80,” 428

be to barricade the institution itself. Interpreting the metonymic function of *Barricada* also reveals how the group negotiated its position in the art field during this time, for it created *Barricada* a month after its work *Alacena con zapatos* won the top prize at Barranquilla's *Salón Regional*. Winning first place at the *Salón Regional* foreshadowed the public debate that was to come that November, when *Alacena* would go on to win the top prize at the *Salón Nacional*. Amidst heated local debate over *Alacena*'s merits, and attempting to negotiate its place vis-à-vis the establishment, El Sindicato maintained its critical perspective by creating a work that barricaded the institution and referenced the larger social context instead.

ALACENA CON ZAPATOS

“What is conceptual here...the award or the awardee?”

With this question the critics Antonio Caballero Villa and Carlos J. María launched their particularly fierce criticism of *Alacena con zapatos*, in an article published in *Diario del Caribe* after the jury of Barranquilla's *Salón Regional* announced its prizes. Trying to “recuperate from the shock of the jury's surprise decision,” Caballero Villa and María evaluate *Alacena* and ground their critique in the belief that conceptual art, as that “which developed from Dada and Pop Art,” has no place in Colombia.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, like both authors assert, conceptual art in the United States and Europe arose from particular social circumstances. What the authors fail to recognize, however, is that art could be conceptual without deriving from American or European models. This was just one

¹⁵⁶ “La sorpresa, de la que todavía no estamos recuperados,” “El arte conceptual es un desarrollo del DADA y del POP-ART. Ambos tienen orígenes sociales precisos.” Antonio Caballero Villa and Carlos J. María, “Qué es lo conceptual: el Premio o lo premiado?” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), June 4, 1978. Some critics maintain this view even in present day; Colombian scholar María Mercedes Herrera, for instance, maintains that Conceptual Art has yet to arrive in Colombia. See “Crítica de arte e institucionalización del arte conceptual en Colombia. La década de 1970”

instance of the confusion and outrage that official recognition of this conceptual work engendered. From the venue's custodial workers throwing out what it thought was trash during the exhibition installation, to fiery public debates in the local news, reactions to *Alacena's* imposing accumulation of shoes certainly ran the gamut. Undeniably, these illustrated how conceptual practices were increasingly, yet certainly not yet widely accepted as a legitimate mode of expression in Colombia.

Alacena con zapatos (Cupboard with Shoes) consisted of over three hundred tattered shoes nailed to an old cupboard frame measuring 5x4x2 ft. (Figure 87). The artists had gathered these from the streets of Barranquilla; there are therefore no pairs, and no shoe is really alike. The piece represents women, men, and children, as it contains heels, sandals, work boots, and tennis shoes of all sizes. The sheer amount of shoes makes it so that they completely cover the cupboard, giving the illusion of a swelling mass that spills its contents onto the exhibition space. The shoes apparently also gave off a strong stench, further defaming the sanctity of the institution. Even more shocking must have been the work's placement on the landing of the venue's main stairwell, a prime spot for such a confrontational piece. The overall effect then, as El Sindicato member Efraín Arrieta put it, was that of a "monster [that] presented its objective reality; an assemblage of used shoes on a cupboard, totally covering it like scales made of detritus, scales that turned aggressively against the spectator and confuse him at first glance."¹⁵⁷

The *Salón Regional's* jury comprised Álvaro Barrios, Beatriz González, and Eduardo Serrano, all proponents of experimental art. Critics like Caballero Villa and María attributed *Alacena's* prize solely to this apparent fortuity, as the jury, by the "grace

¹⁵⁷ "este monstruo[...] presentaba su realidad objetiva, un ensamblaje de zapatos usados sobre una alacena, cubriéndola totalmente como escamas de deshecho, que se tornan agrestes al espectador y lo confunden a primera vista." Efraín Arrieta, "Sobre arte: la última palabra," *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), June 19, 1978

and magic of their critico-artistic authority,” converted this heap into a work of art.¹⁵⁸ While the critiques railed against the decidedly unattractive appearance and smell of the work—“how could a bunch of stinking shoes be art?” was the common question—I detect that the underlying disconcertment seemed to stem from whom the shoes represented and brought into the gallery. *Alacena*’s shoes—work boots, canvas sandals, cheap high heels, running shoes—signified people of the working class, challenging the upscale, homogenous audience of the museum. Their presence was unwelcome at the venues like the *Salón*, and less so through their discarded indexical traces. *Alacena* made no attempts to be aesthetic, making it harder for critics to accept. In the words of the collective members, “when one goes to an exhibition one doesn’t expect to run into reality.”¹⁵⁹

The debate over *Alacena*’s merits died down until the opening of the *Salón Nacional* the following November, when the jury of Brazilian critic and curator Aracy Amaral, American curator Waldo Rasmussen, and Colombian painter Santiago Cárdenas awarded the grand prize to *Alacena* (Figure 88). In response, dozens of articles and public letters were published in Colombia’s various newspapers. Even Marta Traba took up the issue, calling *Alacena* a “punk parody.”¹⁶⁰ A number of Colombian critics avidly supported the work, yet the most marked difference this time around was the proliferation of retrospective surveys of the development of conceptual art in the country. With a conceptual work winning Colombia’s foremost institutional honor, and as the seventies

¹⁵⁸ “El jurado que con su juicio crítico hizo posible que la ‘Alacena con zapatos’ se convirtiera, por obra, gracia y magia de su autoridad crítico-artística[...] en obra de arte.” Antonio Caballero Villa and Carlos J. María, “Qué es lo conceptual: el Premio o lo premiado?”

¹⁵⁹ “Cuando uno va a una exposición no piensa encontrarse con la realidad.” El Sindicato, quoted in “El Sindicato de Barranquilla: Un arte reflejo de la realidad,” *El Tiempo* (Barranquilla), November 30, 1978

¹⁶⁰ Traba, Marta. “Una mirada sobre el salón,” in *50 Años: Salón Nacional De Artistas*, Calderón Schrader, Camilo, ed. (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1990), 209

decade approached its end, the moment was opportune to look back on these practices: “this award proposes, inevitably, the urgency of a critical review of all young art that has been realized in Colombia throughout this decade.”¹⁶¹

Eduardo Márceles Daconte published the more nuanced and perceptive of these accounts in his article “El arte conceptual se toma el Salón Nacional,” published in *El Espectador* on December 10th, 1978. Márceles Daconte abstains from giving stylistic definitions of conceptual art, and subsequently focuses on the communicative aspects of a work like *Alacena*: “the work is very eloquent. There is no doubt that Barranquilla today is an old shoe. Just the image of its public market is enough to feel sadness and repulsion for a city that once was known as ‘the golden door of Colombia’.”¹⁶² Indeed, Barranquilla was experiencing such a dearth of public services that El Sindicato found the three hundred shoes on the streets in a matter of days. Márceles Daconte references in his review the Cartagena poet Luis Carlos López, whose poem “A mi ciudad nativa” relates an imagery that parallels *Alacena*:

You were heroic in colonial years,
when your children, soaring eagles,
were not a swarm of Common Swifts.

But today, while teeming with a rancid disarray,
you can still inspire that affection
that one has for a pair of old shoes¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ “Barranquilla: El Premio a ‘El Sindicato’,” *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 1, no.3 (1979): 51

¹⁶² “El trabajo es muy elocuente. No hay duda que Barranquilla es en la actualidad un zapato Viejo. Solo la vision de su mercado público es suficiente para sentir tristeza y repudio en una ciudad que llegó a ser conocida en épocas remotas como ‘La puerta de oro de Colombia’.” Eduardo Márceles Daconte, “El Arte Conceptual Se Toma el Salón Nacional,” *El Espectador* (Bogotá), December 10th, 1978

¹⁶³ “Fuiste heroica en los años coloniales, cuando tus hijos, águilas caudales, no eran una caterva de vencejos. Mas hoy, plena de rancio desaliño, bien puedes inspirar ese cariño, que uno les tiene a sus zapatos viejos.”

This reference is not only fitting because of the poem's imagery. It also serves as a jumping-off point to evaluating *Alacena* as a metonymic intervention. *Alacena* has a clear connection with an intervention that El Sindicato carried out in Cartagena in October 1978, five months after it won the prize at the *Salón Regional*. Titled *Avanzada*, the work consisted of "a long procession of shoes and boots painted in red" placed around the city's *Monumento a los Zapatos Viejos*.¹⁶⁴ This monument was erected in honor of Luis Carlos López (commonly known as "el Tuerto López"), and features an enormous bronze pair of worn out, old shoes as an ode to López's aforementioned poem.

Luis Carlos López belonged to the larger current of Spanish American "antiliterature," a reaction to modernist literature and championed by writers like Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. This antiliterature was a radical rupture with artistic tradition, rejecting linear narratives and parodying canonical literary models through ironic humor and allusion.¹⁶⁵ López was irreverent and brutally honest in portraying his reality through literature. Publishing his first book in 1906, his poetry—or, more appropriately, his antipoetry—was one of the first reactions against modernist tendencies that predominated in the twentieth century, subverting *modernismo*'s ornamentation and idealization.¹⁶⁶ There are therefore unmistakable parallels between López's antiliterature and the Conceptualism of El Sindicato, particularly when viewing López's poetry as a dialectical response to the hermeticism

¹⁶⁴ "consistió en una larga marcha de zapatos y botas viejas pintadas de rojo," "Avanzada por el tuerto López," unidentified news clipping, October 30, 1978, personal archive of Aníbal Tobón

¹⁶⁵ James J. Alstrum, "La poesía de Luis Carlos López y la tradición de la antiliteratura en las letras hispánicas," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico* 7, no. XXIII (1986), accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/publicacionesbanrep/boletin/boleti4/bol7/poesia.htm>

¹⁶⁶ Seymour Menton, "Colombian Literature," in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Hispanic and Francophone Regions*, edited by A. James Arnold (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2001): 66-67

and feigned autonomy of modernist literature.¹⁶⁷ El Sindicato analogously posed its anti-aesthetic art as a dialectical antithesis to hegemonic artistic values: “breaking the forms of beauty with different forms strengthens this historical moment, because it regenerates the reasoning of those who believe in continuity.”¹⁶⁸ El Sindicato staged *Avanzada* on the twenty-eighth anniversary of López’s death, declaring López as the guest artist (see the announcement for *Avanzada*, figure 89). The artists formed a file using shoes as literal signifiers of a vanguard (in the military sense), and as a symbolic nod to López’s ennobling of the homely and quotidian. The procession of red shoes thus formed a temporary monument of its own, a contemporary postscript to López’s oeuvre.

With *Alacena* El Sindicato sought to intervene in the *Salón*, similarly representing Colombia’s reality through the shoes of its people. *Alacena* thus encapsulated the cityscape from which its elements came, standing as an ethnographic archive of those who daily traversed Barranquilla’s streets. Originally, the collective wanted to create a march of shoes that would go up the stairs of the Teatro Municipal, the venue for the *Salón Regional*. The idea changed, however, upon the group considering the possibility that the jury might choose this work for the *Salón Nacional*; it would have been difficult, logistically and economically, for the artists to travel to Bogotá to re-stage the intervention.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, the group decided instead to contain the march of shoes within a standalone structure that could be mobilized as needed—*Alacena con zapatos*, then, became a metonym. The end result was, in turn, more powerful in its confrontation, for in contrast to a uniform, single file like *Avanzada*’s, *Alacena* put forth a chaotic multitude

¹⁶⁷ For an evaluation of López’s antithesis to modernism see Alstrum, “La poesía de Luis Carlos López y la tradición de la antiliteratura en las letras hispánicas”

¹⁶⁸ “el rompimiento de las bellas formas con las formas diferentes fortalece el momento histórico, porque rejuvenece el pensamiento de los continuistas.” Efraín Arrieta, “Sobre arte: la última palabra”

¹⁶⁹ Gómez in conversation with Barrios, *Orígenes*, 176

that barged into the gallery without hesitation. The object was instead a tool by which to stage an intervention on the event, a subversive decoy that inserted the street and its people into the hermetic confines of the *Salón*. While the collective felt compelled to participate in the *Salón* in order to showcase the kind of alternative, conceptual work taking place in cities like Barranquilla, it nevertheless strove to create a work that would not exist as a static object to be contemplated and subsequently collected. As Gómez states, “*Alacena con zapatos* was the first work that we made while striving for a certain perdurability. We were never interested in having the work last, but given that this was an important *Salón*, we encountered [this] logistical problem.”¹⁷⁰ After the exhibition ended, the artists took the cupboard and threw it away on their train ride back to Barranquilla.¹⁷¹

In response to the ruling of the 1978 *Salón Nacional*, artist Édgar Negret remarked that *Alacena con zapatos* was “as brave and scandalous today as my screws and metals were in their time.”¹⁷² Indeed, as with much vanguard works, the propositions of conceptual artists in the 1970s eventually became fully legitimized and institutionalized. Even *Alacena* was wholly incorporated into the system, a 2000 remake of it forming part of the collection of the Museo de Arte de Barranquilla (Figure 90). There were also immediate effects of legitimization within El Sindicato, as the collective disbanded months after winning the *Salón*’s grand prize. While this bright period of intense activity

¹⁷⁰ “*Alacena con zapatos* fue la primera obra que se hizo tratando de que tuviera alguna perdurabilidad. Nunca nos interesó que la obra durara, pero en vista de que este era un Salón importante, se nos presentaba un problema logístico.” Gómez in conversation with Barrios, *Orígenes*, 177

¹⁷¹ María Mercedes Herrera, “Crítica de arte e institucionalización del arte conceptual en Colombia. La década de 1970” (lecture, *Arte colombiano contemporáneo: reflexión, creación e historia* conference, Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogotá, Colombia, February 7, 2011, accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.utadeo.edu.co/programas/humanidades/conferencias_2011.php)

¹⁷² “*Alacena con zapatos* es tan valiente y tan escandalosa hoy en día, como lo fueron mis tornillos y mis metales en su época.” Édgar Negret, as quoted in “Édgar Negret: Una mezcla de lógica,” *Diario del Caribe* (Barranquilla), November 28, 1978.

had come to an end, El Sindicato's works nonetheless echoed through contemporaneous conceptual practices, and continued to trickle through Colombian contemporary art.

Conclusion

“I consider that our deserved national prize becomes for us a double-edged sword, as it obliges us to enter into certain coordinates and relationships”

-Aníbal Tobón

The month following the *Salón Nacional*, El Sindicato member Aníbal Tobón wrote a letter of resignation to his fellow members. With the prize, Tobón maintained, El Sindicato would now become entangled with commercial and individualist tendencies that came in direct conflict with the group’s tenets.¹⁷³ Having treasured this “gigantic adventure” but ultimately finding his own values incompatible with this degree of institutional legitimization, Tobón then left the group. This signaled the disbandment of the rest of El Sindicato soon thereafter, executing its last project in 1979.¹⁷⁴ The group must have realized that their degree of experimentation and critique was unsustainable in the face of institutionalization. Indeed, Aníbal Tobón abandoned art practice for theater, his background prior to joining the collective. The rest of El Sindicato’s members—Efraín Arrieta, Guillermo del Castillo, Ramiro Gómez, and Carlos Restrepo—went back to individual production, all of them creating more conventional objects or installations.

The 1970s in Colombia saw an incredible growth in the plurality of modes that artists availed themselves of to enact institutional and sociopolitical critique. While text-based works dominated much of conceptual art, other works were resonant with El Sindicato’s desire to intervene in public spaces. For instance Sara Modiano, also an artist from Barranquilla, erected large-scale structures or walls in public open spaces using

¹⁷³ “me considero moralmente imposibilitado para sentar mi respectiva posición aue estos casos donde prima de cierta manera el comercio y las relaciones de la producción individual[...].” Tobón, letter of resignation to members of El Sindicato, December 5, 1978.

¹⁷⁴ The last project was *Corraleja*, executed in conjunction with the *I Festival de Vanguardia* in Barranquilla

brick and wood (Figure 91). Not only does the rudimentary aspect of these structures starkly contrast with the surrounding city architecture, but their placement and scale also creates a rupture in the landscape. In *Construcción* from 1981, for example, a massive wall cuts through the space outside the São Paulo Biennial pavilion, forcing the viewer to confront and circumvent the structure. Modiano intervened through these structures solely during exhibition events like the São Paulo Biennial and the *Salón Atenas*, exhibiting detailed architectural plans in conjunction with the built structure.

Alberto Uribe created a similar work for the 1981 Medellín Biennial (Figure 92). Uribe erected a large cube made up of logs attached with plastic bands, and placed it in a public square in Medellín.¹⁷⁵ Comparable to Modiano's, Uribe's structure is conspicuous thanks to its scale, crude appearance, and dramatic placement in the public space. Also like Modiano's, Uribe's work bewilders the viewer by intentionally maintaining the structure's possible "use" a mystery. Uribe's structure, however, seems to have darker undertones, with its allusions to funerary pyres. Pyres, of course, are commonly used as celebratory symbols of remembrance, yet Uribe's reference, taken in the context of 1981 Colombia under Turbay Ayala, conjures grimmer images of overt, violent deaths on part of the state.

More subtle interventions also took place during this time, particularly revolving around the 1981 *Coloquio sobre arte no-objetual y arte urbano* and the Medellín Biennial. Germán Linares, a young and emerging artist, intervened on a public park by placing patterns along some of its walls using colored paper and assorted objects. He then exhibited photographs of these at the *Coloquio's* accompanying exhibition (Figure 93).¹⁷⁶ The understated, geometric pattern almost gets lost among the leaves that have

¹⁷⁵ See Acha, "El Coloquio," 10, 22

¹⁷⁶ See Acha, "El Coloquio," 10, 25

accumulated against the wall. Therefore, much like Marín's *Incomunicables*, only the discerning spectator would distinguish this addition to the public domain.

Álvaro Herazo also participated in the *Coloquio* with his performance *Sellando el mar*. Herazo now had moved beyond his conceptual maps to become a sort of father figure for performance art in Colombia, commencing in the late 1970s a long and rich trajectory of this kind of practice. Most of his performances took place inside exhibition spaces. However, in 1978 he undertook a series of performances that deliberately took place outside. Specifically, these performances intervened on well-known monuments of major European cities, as seen in *Sueños del viajero*, carried out in London's Hyde Park (Figure 94).¹⁷⁷ Like a traveler sometimes dreams of doing upon encountering public monuments, Herazo illegally mounted Patrick MacDowell's allegorical sculpture of *Europe* in the Albert Memorial, a grouping of three women representing peace and liberty. A harp as well as a brush and palette at the foot of the sculpture are also meant to signify Europe's preeminence in the arts and culture. As Herazo intervenes, his stark business suit and suitcase counter the neoclassical figures and their delicate, flowing robes. In addition to filling the empty space between the sculptures' triangular formation, Herazo also notably stands directly above the carved "Europe" inscription on the base, all in a wry gesture that simultaneously feigns a traveler's naiveté while brazenly dismissing European posturings of who is to be considered as "cultured." Herazo furthers this point by blocking the harp and the painting palette from view.

Herazo's emphasis on ephemeral actions more closely parallel El Sindicato's work. Moreover, the interventions above all signal Colombian artists' increased priority of turning towards the street and the public domain with their work. The urban fabric in

¹⁷⁷ See Serrano, "El Conceptualismo," in *Cien años de arte colombiano 1886-1986*, 219 and "Los años setentas: y el arte en Colombia," 36

Colombia—and worldwide—in the 1970s was quickly morphing as growing economic forces called for swift city population growth and concentration. This context therefore called for an art practice that would address the multiplicity of audiences in such complex urban environments. However, as these case studies demonstrate, such interventions remained rooted in the institutional sphere, being conceived solely as part of exhibition initiatives. This includes Herazo's interventions, which were truly meant to be exhibited through documentary photographs. Additionally, all of these works clearly maintained an individualist stance in their creation, diverging from El Sindicato's method.

National discourse on conceptual art ramped up after *Alacena* won the top prize at the *Salón* and artists continued to explore the limits of art practice into the beginnings of the next decade. However, the 1981 *Coloquio*, intended as an international gathering that would in turn further incorporate Colombia into the larger dialogues over conceptual and non-object art, failed to win over new national converts to the experimental wave. In the words of Juan Acha,

It is difficult, therefore, that the public accept 'non-objecthood' as a historical phenomenon whose *raison d'être* is to oppose an objecthood that is corrupt and in the process of degeneration and fetishization. This opposition is not to supersede, but to recapture the importance of human actions toward the object.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, this vein of extreme experimentation subsided in the country after 1981. For one, a rise in the art market favored traditional media like painting and sculpture, leaving conceptual artists little room and with no other recourse than to dedicate themselves to other jobs in order to survive.¹⁷⁹ Perhaps telling was also the ceasing of *Re-*

¹⁷⁸ "Es difícil, pues, que el público aceptase que el no-objetualismo constituye un fenómeno histórico cuya razón de ser está en contraponerse a un objetualismo maleado y en completa degeneración y fetichización. Contraponerse, no con el fin de sustituirlo, sino de recuperar la importancia de las acciones humanas ante el objeto." Acha, "El Coloquio," *Re-vista de arte y arquitectura* 2, no.7 (1981): 27

¹⁷⁹ "Barranquilla también fue cayendo en el agotamiento artístico. La gente que compraba arte en esa época no se interesó en ese tipo de obras, las galerías se fueron acabando [...]" Gómez in conversation with Barrios, in *Orígenes*, 181-182. See also Tarver, 375

vista's publication in 1981, one of Colombia's foremost platforms for experimental art. Iterations of conceptual practices—most notably, performance art and installations—gained traction once again towards the 1990s, enjoying a meteoric rise in the works of emerging, post-conceptual artists.

El Sindicato was posed as a concentration of the 1970s' spirit of radical experimentation, pushing art towards its very limits by doing away with all traditional values of aesthetics, technical skill, and individualism. This push was perhaps the very reason for its fall—not having generated the structural change in the art field that it strove for throughout its oeuvre, its practices could not endure within an artistic field that, despite opening itself to experimentations, ultimately favored more traditional media. In truth, El Sindicato's interventions, even when they took place within their own alternative gallery, never transcended the confines of the artistic field. *Violencia* stands as the one work, amongst the collective's oeuvre as well as within the narrative of Colombian conceptual art, that took place exclusively in the street and without any connections to an exhibition. The question then remains—why was *Violencia* the only intervention of its kind within El Sindicato's body of work? Perhaps such a radical transgression on the public sphere, with its resonances to both guerrilla and civil movements, proved to be too dangerous to repeat in the context of 1978 Colombia, where the threat of persecution was too great. After all, this was a time in which artists were commonly persecuted for their beliefs, even when their works did not contain explicit political references. Feliza Bursztyn, for instance, left Colombia in exile in 1981 as a result of intense persecution on part of the state.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ See her obituary written by Gabriel García Márquez, "Los 166 días de Feliza," *El País*, January 20, 1982, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/COLOMBIA/166/dias/Feliza/elpepiopi/19820120elpepiopi_11/Tes

Perhaps this same reason may also help explain why so little Colombian art of the 1970s dared to step outside of the gallery; transcending the boundaries of the artistic field would further blur the lines between art and activism, and thus leave such works more vulnerable to outside scrutiny like the state's. However, as comments by the members of El Sindicato illustrate, completely sidestepping the gallery also means forgoing opportunities to build the symbolic capital needed to have influence on the course of national cultural production. When the objective is to expand the boundaries established by the art system, perhaps it is antithetical to operate completely outside of it.

A number of factors then ultimately hindered the incorporation of El Sindicato's oeuvre beyond *Alacena* into the narrative of Colombian art, as well as in that of Conceptualism as it developed internationally: the volatile political context of Colombia and its threat of persecution, the contemporaneous lack of a local critical language that could speak to the collective's projects, and the dearth of visual documentation of its works. Furthermore, as it was the case in most Latin American countries, there was little, if any, institutional awareness and desire to even preserve archives of these ephemeral works. While bright, El Sindicato's flame burned out as quickly as it was lit. This period of artistic rebellion and dissent nonetheless proves to be incredibly relevant as a significant, yet overlooked chapter in the narrative of Latin American confrontational art, and as a beacon for those who may look back to it in their own explorations into disturbing or destabilizing accepted notions of art.

Figures