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by

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A ‘Revision’ of Antonio Caro’s Formative Period: 1970—1976

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A 'Revision' of Antonio Caro's Formative Period: 1970—1976

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Dedication

To the Bossa family and in memory of my brother Alejandro.

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Abstract

A 'Revision' of Antonio Caro's Formative Period: 1970—1976

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This thesis will examine the conceptual strategies articulated by a corpus of six works created within the first seven years of Colombian conceptual artist Antonio Caro's career (1970-1976.) The works—*Cabeza de Lleras* (1970) [Head of Lleras], *Aquí no cabe el arte* (1972) [Art Does Not Fit Here], *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* (1972) [Manuel Quintín Lame, Information and Visual Variation], *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* (1973) [Imperialism is a Paper Tiger], *Colombia—Marlboro* (1973-1975), and *Colombia—Coca-Cola* (1976)—despite stressing dematerialization, displaying simple designs, and communicating concise messages addressing political and cultural issues that are tied to a historical and geographic specificity, have been repeated until acquiring an iconic status. As a crucial tactic that is central to Caro's work, this thesis will analyze both the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the strategy of repetition and how these have altered or enhanced the meaning of the works through time. Furthermore, five out of the six works in question employ text in a very particular way that results from Caro's keen awareness of the visual potential of words. Likewise, they display anti-conventionalisms particularly with regards to the implementation of informal procedures (i.e. photocopying, posters, art actions, etc...) and the utilization of

precarious materials (i.e. salt) that are often charged with historical meanings; the inherent short-lived nature of the materials used by Caro also points to the ephemeral quality of his production and to the rejection of the notion of art as a commodity. Finally, the works enact institutional critique on two fronts: they criticize the art institution from within, while simultaneously denouncing the politics of the state apparatus and the hegemonic values imposed by the dominant sectors of society. All in all, the salient features present in these six works point to Caro's commitment to his environment while also contributing to the development of contemporary Colombian art.

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Introduction

Looking at the Present: Three Recent Events

On October 23, 2010, Casas Riegner Gallery—one of Colombia’s most distinguished contemporary art galleries located in Bogotá— inaugurated a solo exhibition by artist Antonio Caro titled *Réplikas* (Fig.1.1-1.4). As part of the exhibition, the gallery also launched the first book solely dedicated to the work of Caro, which focused on the early years of his artistic conceptual production. Less than two months following these events, the artist donated to the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá his personal archive, put together in an oversized book that includes original works, newspaper articles from the early 1970s, hand-written texts, and newspaper cut-outs. These three events—motivated by the institutions’ awareness of the value of Caro’s oeuvre and its inestimable contribution to the development of Colombian art—act as a useful entry point for a retrospective analysis of the artist’s formative period (1970-1976) that will ultimately serve to highlight the meaning of his interventions within the development of contemporary Colombian art, while giving the artist visibility and guaranteeing his relevance.

The opening of Caro’s exhibition at Casas Riegner Gallery came as a surprise to many because the artist had refrained from exhibiting at commercial venues for over twenty years. In addition, the artist’s practice is well known for questioning the logic behind consumerism and his rejection of the commodification of art. Nevertheless, Caro’s presence in this particular gallery was only to be expected, as Casas Riegner is well known for presenting cutting-edge projects and representing young and mid-career contemporary artists’ whose practices—like Caro’s—are conceptually oriented. An alliance between one of the country’s leading art galleries that strives to disseminate Colombian contemporary artistic production both locally and abroad and, one of the precursors of Colombian conceptualism who is a crucial reference point for a younger

generation of artists, is both logical and fruitful.¹ The exhibition, titled *Réplicas*, featured a commercial edition on sheet metal of his iconic piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, the work that had originally earned him a medal at the XXVI Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales in 1976. A text by Brazilian art critic Frederico Morais, originally published in the book *Artes plásticas na América Latina: Do transe ao transitório* (1979), accompanied Caro's exhibition.

From outside Casas Riegner Gallery, visitors and passers-by could discern through one of the gallery windows, what seemed to be a color-reversed version of Caro's original *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, made up of an enormous white panel with red curvilinear letters (Fig.1.5) Upon entering one of the gallery's exhibition halls, the spectator was greeted with the iconic white-on-red version of the same work, measuring approximately 39 x 55 inches, the ruby-red rectangle standing out in the white snowy hall. This other version was in fact mounted on the opposite side of the same white panel that could be viewed from outside the gallery window. In a playful manner, the visitor was drawn into the gallery by the appealing sight of Caro's symbolic letters, only to encounter an even more imposing piece that, since its first appearance in 1976, has continued to impact and engage viewers.

The whiteness of the exhibition space and the chocolate wooden floors contrasted with the rich red of the painted sheet metal, and the white curvilinear letters spelling out "Colombia." On the opposite side of the hall stood a dark brown wooden table, on top of which sat a pile of olive green books. Green vinyl letters matching the color of the books and reading *Antes de Cuiabá*, decorated the wall closest to the table. Across from that wall, was a printed text, also in vinyl letters directly on the wall, authored by Brazilian critic Frederico Morais.

In addition to the presentation of the *Colombia—Coca-Cola* edition, Casas Riegner Gallery also launched the first book dedicated to the work of Caro titled *Antes de Cuiabá*. The book is highly original and, like its author, it defies convention. This claim

¹ For detailed information on Casas Riegner Gallery, see www.casasriegner.com.

is further supported by Andres Buitrago's statement: "What is attractive and unique about the publication is its resistance to its own inscription within what one could call the sphere of legitimate knowledge (one must not forget that the 'academic manner' of treating a certain theme makes part of a colonial legacy and the exercise of power.)"² The brief book brings together a "selection of illustrated texts"³ referring to certain aspects of the artist's artistic production during his formative period, the early seventies. Caro starts out by dedicating the book to his aunts Aura and Paulina Caro, and then taking us through the early years of his career by presenting to us reproductions of newspaper articles and images accompanied by anecdotes and short explicatory sentences. The book ends by calling our attention to a special instance in Caro's career that is signaled by Aline Figueiredo's invitation to exhibit at the Museu de Arte e de Cultura Popular in Cuiabá, Brazil (1980); this is one of the artist's first invitations to exhibit internationally. The year 1980 marks the beginning of a new stage in the artist's career as he began to explore the *Maiz* series of corn silhouettes in a more intense and constant manner. The artist's trip to Brazil was a turning point in his treatment and approach to his *Maiz* series because, while visiting the region of Mato Grosso, the artist became aware of the grain's importance both within and outside the region. After returning to Colombia, Caro began to repeat, rework and transform the corn silhouettes in different media and contexts.⁴

A third event that took place shortly after the inauguration of the exhibition and the launching of the book, was Caro's donation of his personal archive of the 1970s to the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá, the same institution that had witnessed the artist's participation in a group exhibition back in 1971. Caro made the donation on December 14, 2010, in a public event that included a conversation with artist and critic Lucas Ospina. In an article titled "No quiero que mi archivo se pudra en mi casa:

² "Lo que llama la atención de esta publicación y la hace singular: su resistencia a inscribirse dentro de lo que uno podría llamar la esfera del conocimiento legítimo (no hay que olvidar que la 'forma académica' de tratar algún tema, hace también parte de un legado colonial, y del ejercicio de ciertos poderes.)" Andrés Buitrago, *Untitled Text*, Artist's archive. Bogotá, November 2010. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise noted.

³ Antonio Caro, *Antes de Cuiabá* (Bogotá: Casas Riegner, 2010), 1.

⁴ For an in-depth examination of Caro's corn pieces, see Maria Clara Cortés, "Acercamientos a la obra de Antonio Caro" (master's thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 2001).

Antonio Caro” [I Don’t Want My Archive to Rot in My House: Antonio Caro] published in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, journalist Paola Villamarin provided a description of Caro’s archive in the form of a bound book which in fact has the same title as the book published by Casas Riegner Gallery (Fig.1.6). As claimed by Villamarin,

The volume...contains original documents and artworks of the 1970s—of his first steps—that attempt to explain the origins of the artist and what went through his head, what scandalized people for his rebelliousness and rejection of *glamour*, and above all for his particular way of doing and thinking about art.⁵

In addition, Villamarin speaks of the archive’s additional contents that include handwritten texts by the artist, newspaper clippings, illustrations done by the artist for cultural magazines, as well as the first edition of his iconic works *Colombia—Marlboro*, and *Todo esta muy caro*.⁶

What seems striking about Villamarin’s article is her inclusion of a few humorously mild phrases that evoke the artist’s personality, along with her praise of Caro’s generous and significant donation, all of which reveal aspects of the artist’s persona and his eagerness to self-promote himself and his work. For instance, at the outset of the article, the artist declares that his archive should be placed in the library’s rare book collection given that it is indeed unique and unlike anything that has been donated to the library. Due to its rarity, I would argue that Caro’s archive is a relic that can be understood as a surviving trace of a period of Colombia’s art history that still remains in relative obscurity. Later in the article, he admits that the archive no longer belongs to him, but rather, belongs to everyone: “This is no longer mine.”⁷ The donation of the archive is the “materialization of an idea that was brought forth in 1990.”⁸ This idea refers to Caro’s distinctive phrase and later work: *Caro es de todos* [Caro Belongs to All] while also revealing a significant aspect of his persona, hence different features of

⁵ “El tomo...contiene documentos y piezas artísticas de los 70, de sus inicios, que intentan explicar cómo surgió y qué pasaba por la cabeza de este artista, que escandalizó por su rebeldía y su rechazo al glamour, pero sobre todo por su forma de hacer y pensar el arte.” Paola Villamarin, “No quiero que mi archivo se pudra en mi casa’: Antonio Caro,” *El Tiempo*, December 11, 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Esto ya no es mio.” Antonio Caro quoted in “No quiero que mi archivo se pudra en mi casa.”

⁸ Ibid.

his artistic production. On the one hand the article points out Caro's detachment and openhandedness, which indirectly speak of his eagerness for making art widely accessible to all. On the other hand, the article also reveals his strong desire for disseminating his oeuvre. At the same time the assembled archive itself speaks of the simple, unpretentious and precarious means utilized by the artist, which are often re-contextualized and converted into bold and effective political and cultural commentaries capable of generating impact on the spectator. Furthermore, both the archive itself and the article allude to the logical and natural connection that exists between the artist's life and his artistic practice as the two converge in an organic manner.

In a recent documentary titled *Caro es Caro*, produced and directed by Colombian filmmaker Juliana Flórez, artists Jaime Avila and Bernardo Salcedo provide insightful and articulate testimonies about the artist, that further reveal the cohesiveness that is inherent in Caro's art and life⁹. In a poetic way, Avila explains:

Antonio has an open intimacy. I see him as a migratory bird that takes his own story, his world, his cloud, and his landscape wherever he goes... In each luminous point where he stops as a migratory bird, part of his intimacy gets taken away from him, yet no one really knows what happens in each stop.¹⁰

As suggested by Avila's comment, Caro's world is his artistic practice that cannot be divorced from his own self. Moreover, wherever the artist goes, he is bound to leave an indelible mark due to his simplicity, resoluteness, and eccentricity that make him stand out among a crowd. Bernardo Salcedo asserts: "Caro is a work of art and that is precisely what distinguishes him from other artists. All the other artists are valued by what they do. Caro is worth more for what he is."¹¹ Salcedo's commentary ratifies the breakdown of the boundaries between art and life that is central to Caro, while Avila's remark causes one to

⁹ *Caro es Caro*, directed by Juliana Flórez (Bogotá: Interferencia Filmes, 2004), DVD.

¹⁰ "Antonio tiene una intimidad abierta, una intimidad propia...yo lo veo como un ave migratoria... que siempre se va con su historia, su mundo, con su nube, con su paisaje... Esos puntos luminosos en donde para como ave migratoria, le roban parte de una intimidad y nadie sabe que sucede en el otro punto." Jaime Avila in *Caro es Caro*.

¹¹ "El en sí es una obra, y eso lo distingue de los demás artistas. Los demás artistas valen por lo que hacen, pero él a veces vale más por lo que es." Bernardo Salcedo, in *Caro es Caro*.

consider the artist's desire to affect his social environment through his communicative art.

It comes as no coincidence that during 2010—the year that commemorates Caro's forty years of artistic career and sixty years of life—the artist chose to exhibit an edition of his iconic piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola* in a commercial gallery, publish his first book with Casas Riegner Gallery, and donate his personal archive to the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia. These three events, in addition to his participation in exhibits and conferences within the art circuit, highlight the continuing relevancy of Caro's work while reminding us that his pertinence results from what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the “ensemble of agents and institutions”¹² that in unison participate in giving value to the artist's work. Furthermore, this ensemble of voices—endowed with the ability to discern and recognize the value of the artist's work—is granting a renewed visibility to Caro's work while helping guarantee his relevance.

Achieving recognition within the art world is no easy undertaking as it involves more than just the mere production of a work of art that could potentially have social value. As suggested earlier, recognition and consecration in the art world are subject to what Bourdieu refers to as the: “ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in the production of the value of the work via the production of the belief in the value of art in general.”¹³ Bourdieu also says that the art world is a “the field of production” that should be seen as “a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as a fetish by producing belief in the creative power of the artist.”¹⁴ He claims that since the artwork does not inherently exist as a “symbolic object endowed with value unless it is known and recognized”¹⁵ then it is important to consider other factors, as well:

the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.), but also the ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in the production of the value of art in general...We may include critics, art historians, publishers, gallery

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 229.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

directors, dealers, museum curators, patrons, collectors, members of instances of consecration like academies, salons, juries, etc. and the whole ensemble of political and administrative authorities.¹⁶

In other words, the art world as a field of production with its inherent network of relations of exchange and position-takings is responsible for producing and circulating the power of consecration of an artist.¹⁷ Likewise, struggles among agents and institutions within the field, each guided by the desire to advance their own interests, results in the subversion or perpetuation of conventions that can also help determine the production of the value of a work.

Through this thesis I will investigate a corpus of six works from Caro's formative period, all of which were produced between 1970—1976: *Cabeza de Lleras* (1970) [Head of Lleras]; *Aquí no cabe el arte* (1972) [Art Does Not Fit Here]; *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* (1972) [Manuel Quintín Lame Information and Visual Variation]; *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* (1973) [Imperialism is a Paper Tiger]; *Colombia—Marlboro* (1973-75); and *Colombia—Coca-Cola* (1976). These early works will be the core of my investigation because they have led the field of art to arrive at a consensus regarding the value and significance of Caro's production that has further resonated within the larger context of Latin American conceptualism. Furthermore, these have acquired an iconic status within the Colombian artistic context, while also articulating major innovations and the fundamental conceptual strategies structuring the artist's production. The particular time frame I have chosen is crucial because during the first seven years of the artist's career, Caro managed to articulate the most essential ideas structuring his work that have also contributed to our understanding of his later production from the eighties and nineties. Although his artistic production is scarce, his work has acquired visibility through the strategy of repetition. I would argue that repetition in Caro's work is crucial and consequential because not only has the artist re-made and re-exhibited certain artworks from his formative period over the years, he has

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.,230.

also repeatedly referenced institutional structures (the field of production) that have enhanced and contributed to his work. Likewise, he has repeated certain tactics and themes in various artworks that have contributed to the works' iconic value. However, as artworks, tactics and the affirmative discourses produced by institutional structures get repeated over time, their original context is lost, consequently altering their meaning. In other words, as the six works in question have become iconic through the strategy of repetition, their meaning has changed, as some of their subtleties and relevance have been lost or, their intention and essence have been enhanced. For instance, *Cabeza de Lleras*, an artwork and significant referent that holds a prominent place in the artist's portfolio, was an ephemeral artistic action that has never been re-made, yet has often been cited due to the impact it generated when presented at the XXI Salon de Artistas Nacionales. The famous article by journalist Alegre Levy, which was published in the newspaper *El Tiempo* in 1970, has also been repeatedly reproduced. *Aqui no cabe el arte*, originally made and exhibited in 1972, was re-made and re-exhibited after the original did not stand the passing of time. Even though the piece has been presented in various venues and contexts, its precise referents seem to have been forgotten, making its relevance more general than specific. *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* first exhibited in 1972, has also been re-worked on numerous occasions and re-exhibited in local and international exhibitions concerning recent and other histories. The piece continues to hold relevance as it deals with issues of *indigenismo*, sociology and anthropology and, within the past decade, it has acquired more significance. *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, Caro's first overtly political work, was exhibited in 1973 in a group exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO), and was later re-made and presented in Alvaro Barrios' gallery in Barranquilla. Although highly criticized due to its content, this was the first instance when the artist set out to repeat a work in a different context. Despite being re-made only once, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* continues to hold a major place in the artist's portfolio, yet it lacks the prominence that other pieces have; like *Cabeza de Lleras*, it has been often cited and images of the installation presented at the MAMBO have been reproduced. *Colombia—Marlboro*, a project comprised of four

different stages and completed in a period of two years (1973-1975), has been re-exhibited on various occasions, while still holding much relevance as it points us to past and recent problems relating to contraband and mafia issues.¹⁸ Likewise, *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, Caro’s most famous piece, has been re-made numerous times (including versions that combine the original with the Colombian flag) and still continues to impact viewers both within Colombia and abroad. In addition, it has been reproduced and cited endlessly in different contexts. Although the strategy of repetition became a constant feature in Caro’s oeuvre since the early seventies, it nevertheless carries with it certain drawbacks as well as advantages. The repetition of works over the years, results in the loss of an original context that feeds them, as well as overlooking precise referents that give meaning to the pieces. Nevertheless, the repeated references to those institutional structures that have contributed to his work, and the repetition of themes and tactics, have enhanced the general relevance of the works and their iconic quality by ensuring their continued visibility.

The title of this thesis “A ‘Revision’ of Antonio Caro’s Formative Period: 1970-1976” draws attention to the fact that I will assess the significance of the first seven years of Caro’s artistic career in light of recent events that both reaffirm the artist’s significance, and prompt a retrospective revision of the artist’s formative period. In his book *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation*, Luis Camnitzer, puts forward a discussion of the term *revision* that draws from Robert Morgan’s definition of the term which claims that “at its best, revisionism suggests that what was given precedence in the past should be weighed in relation to other histories.”¹⁹ I employ the term *revision* because this investigation is an examination of Caro’s early body of work from the perspective of new events and readings that shed light on a particular moment in Caro’s production and that can help us understand the social value of his work. Some of

¹⁸ Some of these recent issues recall former senator and powerful cigarette smuggler Samuel Santander Lopesierra, better known as “El Hombre Marlboro” [The Marlboro Man], who was extradited to the United States for drug trafficking in 2003. See Sergio Gómez Maseri, “Acusan a Lopesierra de narcotráfico” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), September 13, 2003.

¹⁹ Robert Morgan, quoted in Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 5.

these recent events include not only the exhibition, book publication, and donation already mentioned but also the artist's recent inclusion in renowned collections like Daros Latinamerica in Zurich and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Other significant events that attest to the value of Caro's oeuvre and also encourage its analysis include the artist's retrospective exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia in Cali (2002), his anthological exhibition at La Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango in Bogotá (1996), and his participation in the blockbuster exhibit *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* organized by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss at the Queens Museum in New York (1999.)

Theoretical Framework of Conceptualism

Antonio Caro is regarded as one of Colombia's most important artists and as stated by Luis Camnitzer "an unavoidable point of reference"²⁰ that fits into the artistic current of Latin American conceptualism due to the specific strategies that structure his work, and that retrospectively we are able to identify. In order to understand Caro's place within the art historical discourse, we must first look at the features that characterize this particular artistic current while treating it as a legitimate cultural phenomenon, with its own roots, that is far from being a derivative product of what was current in the artistic centers of New York and London. An analysis of the emergence of conceptualist strategies in Colombia is also necessary, as it will help elucidate Caro's place within the history of Latin American Art. In doing so, I will draw from the writings of scholars like Mari Carmen Ramírez, Andrea Giunta, and Luis Camnitzer as these provide a useful framework for which to study the salient features that structure Caro's conceptualist-oriented practice.

It is important to provide a definition of the term *conceptualism* in order to begin to understand artistic practices like Caro's that embraced this specific current.

²⁰ Luis Camnitzer, "Antonio Caro Guerrillero Visual," *Poliester* 4. no 12, (summer 1995), 44.

Furthermore, a distinction between the terms *conceptualism* and *conceptual art* must be drawn in order to avoid any misinterpretations. In the book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* Luis Camnitzer advocates a distinction in the use of *conceptual art* and Latin American *conceptualism* for numerous reasons. First of all, the term *conceptual art* has increasingly been used to describe the “stylistic shape that conceptualism took in North America (language, grid, paper, a degree of ephemeral quality, documentation, etc.).”²¹ Camnitzer also suggests that the term often is related to a group of artists—a few Europeans and mainly North Americans—like Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Sol Lewitt and Hans Haacke. Secondly, the term prioritizes those works that resemble conceptual works produced in the center while often ignoring works that stand apart from the canon because they have elements of content or form that point to the works’ geographic specificity. Thirdly, the use of *conceptual art* as a blanket term does not allow us to see the different roles that the work may play in different histories; this can be particularly dangerous for our purposes, since “one of the major claims of mainstream conceptual art, as a postminimalist form, is an aspiration to purity. Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner try to isolate meaning from any form, narrative, or material support as far as possible.”²² Finally, very few Latin American artists employing conceptualist strategies were subscribing overtly to the term *conceptual*, which serves to highlight the authentic character of the local impulses that shaped their artistic productions.²³ It must be stressed however, that Caro was one of the few artists that subscribed to the term *conceptual* a posteriori, after curators and critics used the term to describe his work.

In the essay “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980,” Mari Carmen Ramírez—although highly aware of the complexities inherent in the term *conceptualism*—provides a clear description of the term:

After the initial artistic revolution undertaken by the historical avant-garde movements (particularly cubism, futurism, and dada), conceptualism can be

²¹ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art*, 22.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity” 54.

considered the second major 20th-century shift in the understanding and production of art. By canceling the status and preciousness of the autonomous art object inherited from the Renaissance, and transferring artistic practice from aesthetics to the more elastic realm of linguistics, conceptualism paved the way for radically new forms of art. For this reason, conceptualism cannot be seen as a style or movement. It is, rather, a strategy of antidiscourses whose evasive tactics call into question both the fetishization of art and its system of production and distribution in late capitalist society. As such, conceptualism is not limited to a particular medium but can appear in a variety of (in)formal, (im)material, or even object-based “manifestations.” Furthermore, in every case, the emphasis is not on “the artistic” but rather on specific “structural” or “ideatic” processes that extend beyond mere perceptual and/ or formal considerations. Thus, in its most radical form conceptualism can be read as a “way of thinking” about art and its relationship to society.²⁴

Ramírez presents a broad definition of the term because it allows her to engage with works by different Latin American artists as “local responses to the contradictions posed by the failure of post-World War II modernization projects and the artistic models they fostered in the region.”²⁵ Moreover, Latin American conceptualism was far from being a homogeneous phenomenon due to the complex and disparate nature of the continent, which immediately cancels out consideration of uniformity in regional or national artistic developments.²⁶ In fact, different versions or modes of conceptualism arose in distinct urban centers within a same country, or as Camnitzer points out: “different countries placed different emphases on the varied ingredients that fed into Latin American conceptualism.”²⁷ Through the analysis of conceptual artistic practices emerging in cities like Buenos Aires, Rosario, Rio de Janeiro and similar developments in Mexico City and Bogotá, Ramírez is able to characterize general aspects of the conceptualist shift in the Latin American context. But before I begin to describe the different features that characterize this change, I will first examine the emergence of this shift in relation to the artistic centers in order to highlight the fact that Latin American conceptualists responded

²⁴ Ibid., 53.

²⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 162.

to the question of art's function first raised by Marcel Duchamp in some of the most creative ways.²⁸

In the catalogue to the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, the organizers Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss explain:

Latin America, as Mari Carmen Ramírez points out, has been for centuries in a “dialogical” relationship to Euro-North American culture by virtue of the colonial experience and legacy. While there are shared referents, to conflate the two situations is a major distortion—it was and is a highly contested relation. The forces that created modernism or development in Latin America produced radically different effects from those in the colonialist and imperialist centers. This resulted in an “autonomous version—or even inversion” of conceptualism, as understood in the North.²⁹

Versions of conceptualism in Latin America arose autonomously as Latin American artists created art to fit the difficult Latin American socio-political and economic reality; as a result and in many ways, their art was frequently opposite of North American conceptual art. Ramírez has argued that the processes leading to the emergence of conceptualism were not the sole efforts and contributions of North American and British artists; these processes also involved the participation of Latin American artists, who, as affirmed earlier, by virtue of their colonial legacy, have been in a dialogical relationship with European and North American traditions. She develops her argument by claiming: “as with any other tendency originating in nonhegemonic areas, however, the work of these artists engaged in a pattern of assimilation/conversion largely guided by the internal dynamics and contradictions of the local contexts.”³⁰ Ramírez’s approach may be somewhat problematic as it presents Latin American conceptualism as an inversion of North American practices, rather than as an autonomous phenomenon that was mostly unrelated to mainstream conceptual art and that came about as a result of different choices on behalf of certain artists. Likewise, it is important to note that artistic production in Latin America differed from that of the centers not because artists wanted

²⁸ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” 54.

²⁹ Jane Farver, Luis Camnitzer, Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), x.

³⁰ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” 54.

to differentiate their production from that of North America and Britain but rather, artists were responding to distinct stimuli and in some cases were responding differently to similar stimuli.

A few key scholars have attempted to identify the major characteristics of Latin American conceptualism. Ramírez sketches out generalized features of Latin American conceptual practices that were both devised by artists and identified by curators after the fact. Some of these characteristics include: an ideological and ethical profile; a changed relationship to the materiality of art; the utilization of communication and information theories to investigate the methods by which meanings are conveyed to an audience; and the redefinition of audiences as a vital component of the conceptual program. All of the above characteristics, in addition to Luis Camnitzer's discussion of the notions of locality, place, and the specific use of the written word within the context of Latin American conceptualism, and Andrea Giunta's notion of conspiracy as applied to art, complement each other and provide a framework for which to study works produced by Caro during his formative period.

Caro's work is characterized by a strong "ideological and ethical profile"³¹ and hence cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical context from which it arises, as he is calling the spectator's attention to gain awareness of political and cultural problems affecting Colombia. This particular feature outlined by Ramírez is informed by Spanish art historian Simon Marchan Fiz's notion of *ideological conceptualism*, an idea he developed in 1972, when he observed the emergence of a tendency towards focusing on ideology that was beginning to develop in peripheral societies like Argentina and Spain. Marchan Fiz saw that Spanish and Argentine conceptualist manifestations were distinct from North American institutional critique, which grew out of and still maintained a focus on art; instead the former delved into an analysis of political and social issues. In other words, Ramírez expanded Marchan Fiz's idea of *ideological conceptualism*, while realizing that his description of conceptual art in Argentina and Spain also suited some

³¹ Ibid., 55.

artistic manifestations that were developing in other peripheral areas like Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico.

Caro's practice—like other Latin American conceptualist practices—reveals an engagement with reality that also points to a changed relationship to the materiality of art. The term *dematerialization* was first introduced by Lucy Lippard in 1967, and has come to be associated with conceptualism. Within the context of North American conceptual art, the word is understood as a way of reducing material. Camnitzer claims that this material reduction is a part of the formalist reductionism that was in vogue during the 1960s. *Antimaterialism* according to Camnitzer, may have been a more appropriate word to describe North American artists' fascination with essential ideas and their desire to let the message exist on its own rather than being materially confined.³² Ramírez asserts that within the context of Latin American conceptualism, artists inverted the principle of *dematerialization* as they recovered the art object in the form of the “mass produced” or “assisted readymade.”³³ She also argues that the recovery of the object implied “questioning the object's visual and semiotic functions in order to produce meanings related to its structural position within a larger social circuit or context.”³⁴ According to Camnitzer, artists in Latin America resorted to *dematerialization* because it became a convenient “vehicle for political expression”; it was also efficient, easily accessible and low in price.³⁵ All in all, artists producing conceptual art pieces in the periphery were not particularly interested in eliminating the art object, rather they chose to “downgrade the material vehicle.”³⁶ The majority of Caro's production, and particularly the works that will be analyzed, insist on *dematerialization* in a particular way. Caro's practice does not attempt to recuperate the art object as part of his strategies rather, through textual based works carried out in ephemeral materials (i.e., cardstock, salt, photocopies, achiote, etc.),

³² Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 31.

³³ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” 56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ For a detailed explanation of the term “dematerialization” within the context of North American and Latin American conceptualism see Luis Camnitzer's *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, 29-31.

³⁶ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 31.

Caro articulates his conceptual program which is reinforced every time the artist chooses to re-work, re-produce or re-place one of his pieces.

The third feature laid out by Ramírez concerns the use of communication and information theories to investigate the methods by which meanings are conveyed to audiences. Although Caro did not appropriate the existing forms of mass media, like billboards, television, or other technological means of communication as artists outside of Colombia did (e.g. Tucumán Arde), he nevertheless gained awareness of their importance during his early days as an artist. Thanks to a short yet crucial experience at a publicity agency and a familiarity with Marshall McLuhan's theories, Caro was able to learn about communication tactics, which he then applied in his work. On several occasions he used the press to his advantage in order to engage audiences and stimulate their participation like in the creation of his work (e.g. *500 Paquetes*, 1975.) Besides being aware of the far-reaching effects of certain notions inherent in publicity, Caro's keen intellect drove him to self-promote by capturing the media's attention on several key occasions; there is no doubt that these spectacular encounters with the media helped him further his career. Moreover, Caro's work—both through its formal characteristics and materiality (or lack thereof), and the tactics employed by the artist to give visibility to his work—displays an urgency that evidences the artist's effort to communicate new values to his spectators so as to reveal and denounce hegemonic forces.

The redefinition or education of audiences as an integral component in Latin American conceptualism is the last feature discussed by Ramírez. She claims that what was at stake in an idea-based art of broad communicational reach was the “conscious effort to counter-circulate messages or communicate new values to audiences.”³⁷ Caro's early work—circulating within a socio-political context that lacked political legitimacy and was highly oppressive, but nevertheless supported by artistic institutions—was in certain cases consciously trying to counter-circulate messages, just like some artists living in countries with authoritarian military regimes. It is important to note that during

³⁷ Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” 57.

the late sixties and early seventies, Colombian artistic institutions supported experimental artists working in a similar vein as artists from the center, partly as a response to the project of developmentalism.³⁸ Caro insisted on communicating values that countered “hegemonic values”³⁹ imposed by the dominant sectors of society as if attempting to generate what Raymond Williams conceptualized as “counter-hegemony.”⁴⁰ According to Williams, a “counter-hegemony” is that which constantly resists, limits, and challenges the dominant forms of hegemony often through exterior pressures.⁴¹ Through his work, Caro is communicating new values to a local audience in an attempt to stimulate the viewers into gaining awareness of the harmful effects of the political and economic forces at play within Colombia’s government and ultimately effect change.

The notion of the redefinition of audiences within the context of Caro’s work inevitably points us to the issues of locality and place. According to Camnitzer, the notions of place and context are synonymous. The notion of *place* “acts like a frame that not only introduces different readings into objects, but also gives political signification to the style of expression.”⁴² Caro’s work addresses issues of identity, culture and the political character of his locality. On several occasions, Camnitzer has pointed out that Caro has completely focused on his context thereby distancing himself from any international expectations; this presupposes that Caro’s work is “public-specific” and that only people knowledgeable of Colombian history, culture, politics, and traditions are able to apprehend truly his work. On several occasions, Camnitzer has stated that Caro’s work deals with a geographic specificity and that the work loses its impact once it crosses Colombian borders.⁴³ I would argue that, although Caro’s work is without a doubt geographically specific, it also has an intrinsic universality that activates itself through

³⁸ Gina McDaniel Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions: Early Conceptual Art and Its Antecedents, 1961—1975” (PhD.diss. University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 19.

³⁹ Alvaro Robayo Alonso, *Crítica a los valores hegemónicos en el arte colombiano* (Bogotá: Convenio Andres Bello, Ediciones Uniandes, 2001), 93.

⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴² Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 158.

⁴³ Camnitzer, “Antonio Caro Visual Guerrilla,” 43.

the formal aspect of the work, the symbols he appropriates, and the publicity strategies that structure his work. This is particularly evident in works like *Colombia—Marlboro*, *Colombia—Coca-Cola* and the *Maiç* series.

The use of the written word is also a feature occupying an important place within mainstream and Latin American conceptualism. However, it must be stressed that text was used differently in each case. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the ways in which it has been used in Latin American conceptualism, while paying close attention to the Colombian context and Caro's work. As a direct and clear way of communicating an idea, text was more versatile and open to many possibilities. As stated by Camnitzer, it was "free to become a vehicle for other ideas within the art context."⁴⁴ In the United States, the utilization of text is partly derived from the influence of linguist and pioneer semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure and structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss; artists were impressed by the fact that visual art consisted of signs and therefore could be read.⁴⁵ Camnitzer explains:

In the United States, the fact that the interest in reading signs took place shortly after minimalism came on the scene meant that reading signs became part of the same project. Analysis of language in art was tautological.⁴⁶

In Latin America, the use of text was disconnected with the project of minimalism, therefore it was open to many other possibilities; in the majority of cases textual works in Latin America were political.⁴⁷

As we think of the use of text within Colombian visual arts, both Antonio Caro and Bernardo Salcedo immediately spring to mind. As pointed out by Colombian curator and critic Maria Iovino: "These two artists adopt—for the process of Colombian art—the semantic strength that the use of text acquired in the idea-based art of the 1970s."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 35

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ In Brazil, concrete poetry was an important source for concretism in visual arts. See Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 35.

⁴⁸ "Estos dos artistas adoptan para el proceso del arte colombiano la fuerza semántica que el uso de la escritura adquirió en el arte idea de esos años." Iovino, "Después del límite," 175.

Iovino's statement suggests that Caro and Salcedo revolutionized Colombian art during the seventies due to the ways in which they incorporated text, consequently leading to the redefinition of the concept of the pictorial that prevailed in Colombia.⁴⁹ The artists' particular way of using text is described by Iovino as the "fusion of the open and exclusive use of words with the image."⁵⁰ In a similar manner, art historian Gina McDaniel Tarver has argued that both Salcedo and Caro make of the written word a visual image. According to Tarver they:

Used the written text with close attention to its visual impact and to the visual images it produced in the mind's eye of the viewer. In fact, they saw that there are no words without images, that the two are inseparable...Far from denying visuality as an important aspect of art, these artists embraced it as key to written communication.⁵¹

Unlike mainstream conceptualism, which, as Benjamin Buchloh sustains, sought a "rigorous elimination of visuality,"⁵² Caro and Salcedo insisted on the visuality of the written word, as highlighted by Iovino and Tarver's arguments. The ideas set forth by these two scholars not only illuminate our understanding of the particular position occupied by text within conceptual practices arising in Colombia, they also describe one of the varied ways in which text was used in Latin American conceptualism.

The features and tactics laid out by Camnitzer and Ramírez complement each other and provide a useful set of parameters from which to analyze conceptualist practices originating in Latin America. Moreover, these features help us differentiate Latin American conceptualism from its North American and British counterparts while providing key aspects of conceptualist practices originating in Colombia.

Equally important to the features discussed above is the theme of institutional critique, which has been a recurrent concern within mainstream conceptual art. This is no exception within the broader context of Latin American conceptualism and the immediate

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Tarver, "Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions," 23.

⁵² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, Vol.55 (winter, 1990): 107.

context of Colombian conceptualist practices, where artists were carrying out a critique of social, political and artistic institutions through their work. In referring to institutional critique within mainstream conceptualism, Peter Osborne has claimed: “The art falling under the heading of ‘institutional critique’ takes as the object of its interventions the totality of institutional conditions that contribute to the understanding of something as ‘art.’”⁵³ Osborne’s definition suggests that the negation and critique of the relations structuring the field of art is carried out by the artist in a variety of different forms, all of which seek to bring about the transformation of the art institution. Osborne’s description of institutional critique in mainstream conceptual art somewhat resonates with ideas of institutional destabilization within Latin American conceptualism. Although institutional critique within Latin American art of the late 1960s and early 1970s aimed at attempting to radically transform the art institution, it nevertheless extended its criticism to other fields of society like education, politics, and economics.

In Colombia, the critique of institutions was primarily staged from within the art institution.⁵⁴ This not only suggests that art institutions were willing to support the few conceptual art practitioners and their anti-institutionalism, it also points to the mutually beneficial relationship between conceptual artists like Antonio Caro, and art institutions. Art historian Gina McDaniel Tarver attributes the art institution’s support for conceptual artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the desire to push internationalism forward, hence to bring about the nation’s cultural development. Triggered by *desarrollismo* (developmentalism), the Colombian corporate sector’s international interests grew. Furthermore, the economic development sought after by entrepreneurs and government planners involved taking risks at many levels. Tarver states that “since economic, social, political, and cultural development were seen as being interdependent, it was deemed necessary for the companies driving and profiting from *desarrollismo* to

⁵³ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London – New York: Phaidon, 2002), 43.

⁵⁴ For a thorough discussion of the relationship between artists and institutions in Colombia during the 1970s see Tarver’s “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions.”

support the development of international modernism in the arts.”⁵⁵ In other words, sponsorship of the arts and the organization of international exhibitions often accompanied by educational programs, were to a certain extent fueled by *desarrollismo*. During the early 1970s, artists like Antonio Caro and Bernardo Salcedo, were perceived by Colombian art critics as artist’s that were producing idea-based art, a type of art that at the time was receiving notice by curators and prominent art journals in North American and Western Europe. Therefore, the term conceptual art was synonymous with internationalism, hence it suited “the image of the national culture that art institutions, with the support of private industry, were creating.”⁵⁶ Tarver argues that “despite affinities for international art generally known as conceptual, Caro and his fellow iconoclasts, with their insistence on specificity and context, were not only not interested in creating an art that could cross borders, they had little interest in following international trends.”⁵⁷ Moreover, she highlights the fact that artists took advantage not only of art elements coming from countries other than Colombia in a very particular way, they also made good use of institution’s push for internationalism as they garnered their support in the local art scene. Artists like Caro and Salcedo saw the institution as a favorable place that was open to showcasing their work, regardless of the artistic tactics they used that could potentially weaken the institution. Likewise, art institutions saw that these young provocative artists were producing a type of art that although anti-institutional in nature, shared some similarities with what was being produced abroad.

In the text titled *Conspiracy and Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Imageries of Institutional Destabilization*, art historian and curator Andrea Giunta claims that the era of the sixties offered a broad array of responses to institutional critique. She explains that these range from:

The playful irony that Duchamp had inaugurated to a complete inversion of power that turned works—not necessarily institutions—against the power of the State, the power of art circuits and the fiction of celebratory, conflict-free exchange. The

⁵⁵ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions,”19.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

regime of conceptual art, particularly when it turns to transitional objects and diagrammatic structures as mechanisms for altering established order does so based essentially on conspiratorial thought. The objective was to probe in order to find the institutional limits and then stage an exposé; once the possibility of effectiveness is recognized, the intention of modifying them or pushing them to the brink of an abyss arises. What I would like to propose here is that an exaggerated, even paranoid way of thinking in regard to institutional power is not far from the Latin American inscription of artistic thought.⁵⁸

Giunta puts forward an intriguing theory—based on conspiracy—through which we can approach conceptualism in Latin America that could be seen as a defense mechanism or disguised tactic of resistance that is confronted by different forms of power. Conspiracy, says Giunta, is:

That imaginary moment when destabilizing theory is concocted... A conspiracy means thinking of parallels, of an organization equivalent to the one in power, contrived with the aim of de-structuring it more than taking it over. It looks to threaten the State and naturally, its institutions. It even aspires to erode the defensive strategies that the State administers to disarm any attempt at revolution in the cultural field...If the State uses censorship as a preemptive action, the conspiracy designs a plan to dismantle the anathema.⁵⁹

Giunta's ideas about conspiracy as applied to the field of art imply the subversion and destructuring of existing hegemonic values through parallel forms of power, and the change of a "model of acceptance" through distortion rather than through direct and open confrontation. This resistance in disguise that is understood as conspiracy, also presupposes having a keen awareness and understanding of what Bourdieu calls the "objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc)"⁶⁰ that are at play in the field of art in order to launch an effective dismantling plan so as to take possession of the institution.

Considering Giunta's proposition of conspiratorial thought as a lens through which to analyze the strategies articulating Antonio Caro's early works may be insightful

⁵⁸ Andrea Giunta, Unpublished paper. Andrea Giunta archive. "Conspiracy and Conceptualism in Latin American Art. Imageries of Institutional Destabilization," 2010, 1-2.

⁵⁹Giunta, "Conspiracy and Conceptualism," 3.

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 231.

and productive. First however, it must be stressed that in Colombia, the relationship between art institutions and artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s was a mutually beneficial one, nevertheless, artists like Caro were constantly taking advantage of the institution's privileged position in order to advance their ideas and career. I would argue that in spite of this reciprocity, we certainly can find instances in Caro's body of work where, thanks to a carefully disguised resistance or hidden logic, the artist has been able to penetrate the spectators' consciousness with the truth regarding some specific political or cultural situation. Works like *Cabeza de Lleras* and *Aquí no cabe el arte*, and *Manuel Quinítin Lame información y variación visual*, are pieces motivated by ideas of justice, and that upon dissecting each of their material and conceptual components, one is able to find these acting as destabilizing elements that seek to de-structure forces of power while showing us some kind of hidden truth.

The heterogeneous nature of Latin American conceptual practices cannot be denied. Nevertheless, words like referentiality, activism, mediation, contextualization, recontextualization, and locality accurately describe some of the features that characterize this cultural phenomenon that becomes even more complex upon looking closely at different urban centers whose local circumstances gave way to unique manifestations. The work of Antonio Caro exemplifies one of the most significant yet scarce manifestations of Colombian conceptualist practices emerging in the city of Bogotá. As described above, some of the key features defining Caro's body of work include: a strong connection to its sociopolitical context, a particular use of communication tactics to reach large audiences, a different approach to the value of materiality, and the redefinition of audiences as integral components of the conceptual program. All of these characteristics including Luis Camnitzer's discussion of the written word and Andrea Giunta's conspiracy theory as applied to art, are attributes that enable his placement under the category of Latin American conceptualism while granting his work social value. There are some features however, that are unique to Caro's work, partly as a result of his response to the forces of power at play in Colombian society and the specific ways in which the objective relations within the national artistic field were playing out. All in all,

these characteristics testify both to the lack of homogeneity in Latin American conceptualism and to the originality and complexity of Caro's responses to his immediate context, all of which will be my main concern throughout this thesis.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis will focus on analyzing the specificities of a body of work that, despite stressing dematerialization, has been repeatedly reproduced over time, until acquiring an iconic status. On the one hand, the corpus of works to be discussed, through their simple design, communicate short, concise messages while addressing political and cultural issues that are tied to a historical and geographic specificity. Although this suggests that Caro created some of his pieces with a specific audience in mind, it does not preclude the works capacity to elicit a more general and open reading, which in my view is triggered by the formal complexities and materiality of the pieces. Five out of the six works to be analyzed also employ text in a very particular way that results from Caro's keen awareness of the visual potential of words, which he is able to activate. On the other hand, they display anti-conventionalisms particularly with regards to the implementation of informal procedures (i.e. photocopying, posters, art actions, etc...) and the utilization of precarious materials (i.e. salt) that are often charged with historical meanings; the inherent short-lived nature of the materials used by Caro also points to the ephemeral quality of his production and to the rejection of the notion of art as a commodity. Finally, the works enact institutional critique on two fronts: they criticize the art institution from within, while simultaneously denouncing the politics of the state apparatus and the "hegemonic values"⁶¹ imposed by the dominant sectors of society. All in all, the salient features present in these six works point to Caro's commitment to his environment while also indicating a move towards a breakdown of the boundaries between art and life.

Caro's work cannot be divorced from the socio-political context that conditions and feeds it. It is for this reason that I will pay close attention to the historical context

⁶¹ Robayo Alonso, *Crítica a los valores hegemónicos en el arte colombiano*, 93.

surrounding Caro's early production, which he brought forth during the period of *El Frente Nacional* [The National Front, 1958–1974]. *El Frente*, a bipartisan arrangement created for preventing all political conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties by forcing them to share power and office, marked the sixties and seventies in Colombia. In theory, the arrangement attempted to bring peace to the nation that had been driven into war by the same two parties as well as stimulate economic development and create the structure of a modern society. However, in practice, *El Frente Nacional* turned out to be a highly illegitimate and anti-democratic political period during which, its creators institutionalized a one-of-a-kind repressive system that incessantly attacked the common people by resorting to the creation of laws and the strengthening of the military apparatus. *El Frente's* originators overstepped the rights of citizens due to the implementation of the State of Siege. Caro's early work was thus responding to the effects of *El Frente Nacional* while also reacting to hegemonic forces such as imperialism that, like *El Frente's* policies, were negatively affecting society in various ways.

The first chapter of the thesis is an examination of Caro's *Cabeza de Lleras*, a bust made out of salt representing former president Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970) that was destroyed in situ as a denunciatory act against the illegitimacy of *El Frente Nacional* and all that Lleras Restrepo stood for, consequently criticizing the power of the state from within an artistic venue. As Caro's first official artwork presented within the art circuit, *Cabeza de Lleras* served as a catalyst in Caro's career because not only did it lay out some of the fundamental ideas structuring his work, it also marks the beginning of Caro's career as an iconic figure that comes about thanks to his wit and effective self-promoting tactics. Despite being an anomaly within Caro's practice due to the formal characteristics of the work, it nevertheless acts as a crucial antecedent to his entire production.

Besides dealing with *Cabeza de Lleras*, chapter one also focuses on Caro's early years as an artist, as it considers the academic and intellectual context that structured the artist's way of approaching art, hence his life. In doing so, it explores the artist's fruitful

and life-long friendship with fellow artist Bernardo Salcedo, his short experience as a student at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, his early encounter with local groundbreaking exhibitions that stimulated his creativity, and his exposure to the international art scene.

Chapter two of the thesis examines the text-based works *Aqui no cabe el arte* presented at the controversial XXIII Salón de Artistas Nacionales in 1972, and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual*, simultaneously exhibited at I Salón Independiente Jorge Tade Lozano organized by Eduardo Serrano and Rita de Agudelo. Like *Cabeza de Lleras*, both of these works acted as visual protests against the wrongdoings of the government that ultimately attempted to stimulate an audience to think critically about their social context, hence to educate and transform society. On the one hand, *Aqui no cabe el arte* specifically references a period of institutionalized repression against popular sectors of society including indigenous communities living in the region of Vichada, and university students and professors from different parts of the country. As an artwork participating in an official art salon, *Aqui no cabe el arte* enacted institutional critique on two fronts: it criticized the State, and questioned an art salon supported by the government that seemed to resist cultural manifestations that were critical and counter to hegemonic forces. On the other hand, *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* displaying a fragment of a Lame's signature, acted as a critique against the government's negligence while recuperating a significant historical figure that dedicated his life to defending the rights of indigenous communities against the State's oppression. The act of recuperating and republishing Lame's ornamental signature not only evidences Caro's commitment to exploring the theme of *indigenismo*, it also shows his involvement with social issues that are relevant to all. Furthermore, the simultaneous presentation of these two artworks acting as bold political and cultural commentaries that complemented each other conceptually is crucial because it reinforced their denunciatory power while giving more exposure to Caro.

The third chapter explores *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, one of Caro's earliest installation pieces that like *Aqui no cabe el arte*, was overtly political. Presented

at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, in a group show curated by Eduardo Serrano, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* materially and visually rendered Mao Tse Tung's famous expression "Imperialism is a Paper Tiger." While acting as a critique of traditional notions of art, the piece also comes forth as the first instance in which the artist addressed the issue of imperialism that he subsequently develops in later pieces. Although the piece was highly criticized by political circles, it nevertheless acts as a crucial step in the process of consolidating Caro's conceptually oriented practice. Moreover, it is the first instance in which the artist chooses to repeat and re-work the piece in a different context.

Chapter four focuses on exploring the works *Colombia—Marlboro* and *Colombia—Coca-Cola*. Like *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, the two works in question also examine the notion of imperialism through the appropriation and intervention of widely popular international brand logos. *Colombia—Marlboro*—a multimedia project carried out in four different stages between 1973 and 1975—that addressed smokers while critically reflecting on a harsh reality characterized by an increasing consumerism, is visually conquering an international brand that after penetrating Colombia, brought devastating social effects.

Upon the realization that the brands Marlboro and Coca-Cola were symbols of imperialism, consumerism and popular culture, Caro ventured into exploring the formal and conceptual potentials of the Coca-Cola logo so as to continue reflecting on the negative effects of these hegemonic forces in the construction of Colombia's national identity. *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, Caro's most famous work, has been widely reproduced and circulated; the most recent example of this was his solo show at Casas Riegner Gallery described earlier. Although a fierce critic of the issue of consumerism and the fetishization of art, Caro's exhibition at Casas Riegner Gallery articulates a paradoxical dynamic with art institutions while also exemplifying Bourdieu's idea of the art world understood as a field of production or a universe of belief that produces the value of the work of art.

Curator and critic Maria Iovino agrees that the artist's production, although scarce, results from a long meticulous process of gestation and conceptual refinement that has allowed him to achieve full meaning and impact; the semantic force, the multiplicity of meanings and historical, social and cultural references elicited by Caro's images—all of which have allowed him to put forth works that are timeless in content—"grant him a clear position among the classics of Colombian art."⁶² Likewise, curator Miguel González believes that one of Caro's most important contributions is his ability to generate a diverse array of powerful symbols that act on our conscience and defy the passing of time.⁶³ The opinions of both of these preeminent Colombian curators are indicative of Caro's prominence within the national artistic milieu, suggesting that he is indeed a crucial protagonist in Colombia's art history and a key puzzle piece for apprehending current artistic practices, as he dared to explore unconventional approaches to art that led him to redefine traditional media and introduce radically novel ways of making art. Furthermore, they are indicative of the fact that Caro's position makes him influential and assures that what he values in art will be repeated by younger generations.

⁶² "le otorga una clara ubicación entre los clásicos del arte colombiano." Maria Iovino, *Todo esta muy Caro* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1996).

⁶³ Miguel González, *Todo esta muy Caro* (Cali: Museo de Arte Moderno la Tertulia, 2002),6.

Chapter 1: *Cabeza de Lleras*: An Artistic Action that Became a Crucial Antecedent to Caro's Entire Body of Work

Presented in October 1970 at the XXI Salón Nacional de Artistas that took place at the Museo Nacional in Bogotá, Caro's *Cabeza de Lleras*— as it is commonly called— was a bust of Colombia's former president, Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-70) [Fig.1.7]. The bust, made out of salt and outfitted with a pair of black glasses, was placed inside a glass vitrine that rested on a pedestal. Water was poured inside the vitrine as a denunciatory act that “accidentally” created a puddle within the museum, leading the journalist Alegre Levy to publish her article “¡Se inundó el salon!” [The Salon Flooded!] in Bogotá's major daily newspaper *El Tiempo*.⁶⁴ Although very peculiar within Caro's limited body of work, *Cabeza de Lleras* is emblematic of the denunciatory, critical and poignant nature of Caro's art that reacts against what Alvaro Robayo Alonso calls the “hegemonic values” imposed by the dominant sectors of society.⁶⁵ It is a work of art with an inherent performative quality that marks the beginning of Caro's artistic career, hence of the gestation of himself as an iconic figure that comes about thanks to his wit and effective self-promoting tactics. Moreover, it is the first instance when Caro's work gained exposure and recognition thanks to the help of institutions (in this case, art criticism), because as stated earlier, an artwork/artist is made important not by themselves, but with the help of an ensemble of agents and institutions.

A crucial aspect of the work in question is the socio-political context that informed it. The decade of the 1960s and the 1970s in Colombia was marked by *El Frente Nacional* [The National Front] that began in 1958, supposedly ending in 1974, but was in fact prolonged until 1978.⁶⁶ It was created for preventing all political struggle between Colombia's two antagonistic political parties—the Liberals and the Conservatives—by forcing them to share power and office for a period of four

⁶⁴ Alegre Levy, “¡Se inundó el Salón!” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), October 17, 1970.

⁶⁵ Robayo Alonso, *Crítica a los valores hegemónicos en el arte colombiano*, 13.

⁶⁶ “Cuatro años de represión: De qué se ríe?” *Revista Alternativa* no.11 (July 8, 1974): 16.

presidential terms. In other words, this was a bipartisan arrangement of power between the two main political parties that attempted to bring peace to the nation that had been driven into war during the period of the *Violencia* (1945—1964).⁶⁷ Although its first priorities were to bring peace and to restore the constitutional order, its purpose also became to stimulate economic development and create the structure of a modern society not divided by the inequalities that were typical of the past (and continue to characterize the present). As claimed by historian Robert H. Dix, *El Frente Nacional* was:

Genuinely seen by some of its originators as a means for educating Colombians in the arts of political compromise and for inculcating the most difficult part of democratic political culture—the acceptance of the legitimacy of opposition....The National Front was to be the instrumentality for retaining real power in elite hands while at the same time carrying forward Colombia's economic development, and instituting those changes in the social order which would both advance elite material interests and ward off social revolution. Finally, the Front was conceived by a few as the political expression of a great national enterprise of development. By setting aside ancient political hatreds, it would permit the country to move toward the goals of greater social justice, real national independence, and an enhanced measure of political participation for the majority of Colombians.⁶⁸

For others besides *El Frente's* creators, it was an institutional project created and guided by the political and business elites and the Catholic Church hierarchy that intended to overcome the authoritarianism and violence of the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁶⁹ Due to *El Frente Nacional's* defining feature of bipartisanship—which excluded other political

⁶⁷ The *Violencia* resulted from hostilities between Liberals and Conservatives that only brought the parties farther apart. It was a popular and largely peasant convulsion that persisted over the years, leaving thousands of dead people, numerous families displaced from their homes and groups of raging people seeking to rebel. During the sixties some of these rebellious groups assisted the first guerrilla movements like the communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Che Guevarist National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Maoist Popular Liberation Army (EPL). On April 9, 1948 Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, a populist and charismatic leader of the Liberal Party, was fatally shot in Bogotá. His assassination aggravated the *Violencia* period consequently setting off the *Bogotazo*, a nightmarish episode involving disturbed crowds that burned churches and public buildings and forced open the prisons, resulting in the death of thousands of people. The rise to power of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-57) by means of a political coup d'état supported by Liberals and a faction of the Conservatives was another significant aspect of the *Violencia* because his rise to power has come to be seen as an attempt on behalf of the government to deal with the consequences of this convulsion. Although Rojas was brought down from power in a relatively peaceful way, the government furthered tried to deal with the *Violencia* by the rise of *El Frente Nacional*. For a detailed account of the *Violencia* see Marco Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875-2002* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 135-154.

⁶⁸ Robert H Dix, *Colombia: The Political Dimensions of Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 131.

⁶⁹ Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence*, 170.

groups—and the Cold War context in which it existed, *El Frente* according to Marco Palacios “repressed political dissidence and sought to co-opt and control both the poor and the emerging middle classes by widening their patronage networks. It created a cynical alternative to the promised reconstruction of the world of citizenship.”⁷⁰ The article “Cuatro años de represión: De qué se ríe?” [Four Years of Repression: What are You Laughing At?] published in *Alternativa*, a magazine that circulated during the seventies and was directed by Gabriel García Márquez, Orlando Fals Borda and Bernardo Villegas, describes the emergence of *El Frente Nacional* as:

The perfect formula devised by the ruling class to “establish peace and long-lasting harmony among Colombians,” and to eliminate a dictatorship that had become uncomfortable. A period of effective and peaceful coexistence between the leaders of the traditional parties is inaugurated. It is a period when the ruling class shares class interests and perfects its exploitation mechanisms against the working class.... Throughout these sixteen years, Colombian peasants experience and increased aggression on all fronts, unleashed by an oligarchic minority that is embedded in power.⁷¹

In other words, the supporters of *El Frente Nacional* that included Colombia’s oligarchy institutionalized a repressive system that incessantly attacked the common people as they resorted to the creation of laws and the strengthening of a military apparatus in combination with shootings and an indiscriminate judicial code.⁷² They came up with “a state of siege democracy”⁷³ that ended up overstepping the rights of citizens.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “La fórmula perfecta de la clase dominante para ‘instaurar una paz y una concordia duradera entre los colombianos,’ y para eliminar de paso, una dictadura que se había vuelto incómoda. Se inaugura así un período de efectiva convivencia pacífica entre los dirigentes de los partidos tradicionales, durante el cual sus intereses de clase se identifican aun más estrechamente y se perfeccionan los mecanismos de explotación de las masas trabajadoras... Con otros métodos, bajo diversas formulas, los obreros y campesinos colombianos experimentan durante estos 16 años una agresión en todos los frentes, desatada por la monarquía oligárquica incrustada en el poder.” Quoted in “Cuatro años de represión: De qué se ríe?” 16.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ During *El Frente Nacional*, the government declared a State of Siege has come to be seen as a constitutional measure used by the state to counteract the mobilization of the urban masses. Through the declaration of this measure, the President and the Executive branch working in unison with the armed forces were given ample permission to defend the nation’s rights by solving political situations, suppressing uprisings and fighting against common delinquency. Defending the nation’s rights often translated into the removal of people’s basic human freedoms and power if they presented themselves as a threat to the public order. Since the creation of Colombia, the state of emergency has been constantly considered and reviewed in the constitution. In 1968, through a constitutional reform, a

Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970) as well as the three other presidents of *El Frente Nacional*—Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962); Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966); Misael Pastrana Borrero (1970-1974)—were seen by many Colombians as the orchestrators of a highly illegitimate political system that only grew with the passing of time due to financial scandals, the emergence of drug trafficking and the strengthening of the guerrilla. In addition, the election of these presidents pointed to a serious lack of democracy and to illegality in a state that paradoxically sought to promote democracy. *El Frente's* undemocratic alternation of the presidency that automatically prohibited the participation of other political parties, its political class' preoccupation with distributing favors at a local level, and its concern for seeking support from the wealthy landowners and businessmen rather than helping peasants as had been promised agrarian reform, pointed to a discredited state lacking in political legitimacy.⁷⁵ In other words, *El Frente Nacional's* lack of legitimacy and its illegality inevitably sowed the seeds of political corruption, resentment and violence that worsened with the passing of time.

Besides a critical reflection on his socio-political context that led to an aversion towards *El Frente Nacional* and Carlos Lleras Restrepo's government in part due to his authoritarianism and firm actions towards the university, there were other factors—personal, specific and incidental—that led Caro to create *Cabeza de Lleras*. The viewing of the documentary *El hombre de la sal* [The Man of the Salt] by Colombian poet, storyteller and film director Gabriela Samper made a huge impact on Caro as it tells the story of Marcos Olaya, one of the few remaining artisans to employ indigenous working methods in Zipaquirá—like those used by the Chibcha indigenous civilization—for obtaining salt.⁷⁶ However, Olaya and his craft appear threatened by the existence of a salt refinery. Through Olaya's prolongation of an ancient manual craft—salt making—

clear distinction between State of Siege and State of Emergency was established; the first was for political situations and the later for economic junctures. The firm establishment of the State of Siege gradually supplanted the intervention of the legislative branch, thereby granting even more power to the executive branch and the armed forces. Wo as hinted at earlier, were often guilty of an authoritarian and extreme exercise of power in the service of protecting life. For a detailed explanation of the notion of State of Siege as it pertains to the Colombian context see Eduardo Umaña Luna, *Un sistema en estado de sitio* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional- Divulgación Cultural), 45.

⁷⁵ Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence*, 194.

⁷⁶ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, January 19, 2011.

which is inextricably linked to the identity of the Chibcha civilization, hence of Colombia, Samper attempts to inculcate a real sentiment of national identity in her viewers while also highlighting the importance of rescuing cultural manifestations that are in the process of becoming extinct.⁷⁷ For Caro, the film made him even more aware of the significance of salt as an element that played a fundamental role within the realm of politics and economics of the Chibcha civilization. Caro attempted to emulate the salt making process he had seen in Samper's documentary, applied basic clay molding and modeling techniques, and experimented with salt solidification. When the time came to participate in the Salón Nacional de Artistas, Caro "intuitively" decided to produce a salt bust of the former president Carlos Lleras Restrepo, who was an iconic figure.⁷⁸

The work's original title was *Homenaje tardío de sus amigos y amigas de Zipaquirá, Manaure y Galerazamba* [Late Homage From his Friends of Zipaquirá, Manaure and Galerazamba], alluding to the famous opening phrase used by president Lleras Restrepo when delivering public addresses on radio and television: "Amigos y amigas."⁷⁹ The first part of the title, *Homenaje tardío*, alludes to the fact that Lleras had already stepped down from office.⁸⁰ Due to the length of the original title, the piece has come to be known as *Cabeza de Lleras*. The original title, however, provides important information for the overall understanding of the piece. The three towns mentioned in the original title—Zipaquirá, Manaure, and Galerazamba—are salt-producing areas in Colombia. Zipaquirá, is a town located near the capital city of Colombia that is famous for its rock salt mine that has been exploited for centuries and houses an astounding salt cathedral. Manaure and Galerazamba are towns situated along the Caribbean Sea; their main economic activities include the exploitation of sea salt. Through the original title of the work, but more so through the salt utilized for making the bust, Caro seems to be paying homage to Marcos Olaya and his craft, hence to the almost extinct Chibcha

⁷⁷ "Gabriela Samper," Corporación Festival de Cine Santa Fé de Antioquia, Accessed March 2011, http://www.festicineantioquia.com/3v_gabriela_samper.htm

⁷⁸ Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

culture. In so doing he is reviving an ancient craft while also encouraging us—like Gabriela Samper—to rescue Colombia’s past from oblivion in an attempt to instill in the nation a real sentiment of identity.

Salt is an ephemeral, inexpensive material with multiple connotations that before 1970 as claimed by Gina McDaniel Tarver, “had never before been used in the ‘fine arts’ in Colombia.”⁸¹ However, its power as a signifier heightened when formed into a bust representing one of Colombia’s former presidents that was regarded by the “hegemonic sectors” as an intelligent statesman and talented economist capable of imposing his authority on the nation and then symbolically destroyed when dissolved in water.⁸² Despite Lleras’ authority, Caro’s work made visible an image of the former president that was both feeble and prone to be destroyed. As stated by Alvaro Robayo Alonso “the authority and intelligence of Lleras dissolved amidst the purifying waters of history.”⁸³ Likewise, Colombian scholar Maria Clara Cortés claimed that the “destruction of the bust inspired by the image of Carlos Lleras Restrepo consolidated the destruction of a symbol of repressive authority for many Colombians.”⁸⁴ As suggested by Cortés and Robayo, the act of destroying the bust was in itself a bold and powerful gesture. It was a direct critique—enacted from within the art institution—of *El Frente Nacional*, Lleras’ presidency and all that he stood for.

In terms of form and technique, *Cabeza de Lleras* became an unusual piece within Caro’s limited body of work. This was the first and only instance in which he ventured into making a somewhat traditional looking work of art that employed “techniques specific to conventional artistic practices.”⁸⁵ Since antiquity, portrait busts were used to commemorate and honor individuals. In the case of *Cabeza de Lleras*, Caro replaced the

⁸¹ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions,” 284.

⁸² Robayo Alonso, *La crítica a los valores hegemónicos*, 84.

⁸³ “La autoridad y la inteligencia de Lleras se disuelven entre las aguas depuradoras de la historia.” Robayo Alonso, *La crítica a los valores hegemónicos*, 84.

⁸⁴ “la destrucción del busto de la Cabeza de Lleras (1970), inspirada en la figura del expresidente Carlos Lleras Restrepo, consolidaba la destrucción de un símbolo de autoridad represiva para los colombianos.” Maria Clara Cortés, “Acercamientos a la obra de Antonio Caro,” 25.

⁸⁵ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions,” 283.

marble, stone, or bronze of a traditional bust sculpture with a precarious yet historically charged material: salt. Through the creation of a commemorative sculpture made out of salt of a Colombian president and exhibited at the Museo Nacional, an institution that per se is loaded with history, not only did the artist humorously downplay traditional art forms and techniques, he also demoted the image of a former head of nation.

The act of destroying the ephemeral sculptural bust points to the *performative* aspect of the work, as well as to Caro's self-promoting tactics. The destruction of the work—which involved pouring water inside the glass container—turned out to be a spectacle that several high-class ladies deemed disastrous as salty water began to pour down the pedestal and onto the floor, consequently wetting their feet. In fact, the artist took advantage of the situation by continuing to pour water in despite the leak to increase the size of the puddle, making it big enough to attract the attention. Caro constructed the glass case but never got the chance to test it. The artist's lack of care in constructing the case actually turned out to be a favorable mistake that attracted the attention of the press, generating publicity for the artist. Moreover, the outcome of this spectacular incident was the launching of Caro's artistic career.

Cabeza de Lleras marks the moment when Caro begins to gestate his public image as a bold and transgressive artist. With the passing of the years, his self-promoting tactics would become more conspicuous, hence the relationship between his work and the field of advertising and publicity. When asked what he intended to sell through his art, Caro responded:

It is evident that I want to sell myself. I do so, by using advertising strategies as if I were some sort of garment. I want to sell myself as an artist and I want to place and position myself—as advertisers say—as a good artist. Everyday that I can, I try to do something to accomplish that goal.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ “Evidentemente yo me quiero vender y utilizo la estrategia publicitaria como si yo fuera un vestido, yo me quiero vender como una artista y me quiero ubicar, posicionar, dicen los publicistas, me quiero posicionar como un buen artista y todos los días que puedo trato de hacer algo para eso.” Antonio Caro quoted in Maria Clara Cortés, “Acercamientos a la obra de Antonio Caro,” 88.

As per Caro's commentary, it becomes evident that the artist has always worked hard towards promoting his image as an artist. This becomes even more evident as he develops consequent works that are showcased in different biennials and group exhibitions around the country. For instance, at the Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas (1971) in Cali, Caro, along with fellow artist Jorge Posada presented the work *Dar para ganar* [Give to Win], which involved giving away five thousand photocopied drawings as if they were flyers. By giving away rather than selling their artworks, the artists rejected the notion of art as a commodity while promoting their names. In other words, Caro utilized the art institution to stage a critique of it, while also furthering a poignant and often revelatory commentary of "hegemonic values" that, for the most part, contribute to the promotion of the artist's image.

The tactics articulated in *Cabeza de Lleras* also may be illuminating to approach from the point of view of the conspiracy paradigm put forward by art historian Andrea Giunta in her text "Conspiracy and Conceptualism in Latin American Art, Imageries of Institutional Destabilization." According to Giunta, the sixties offered various responses to institutional administration that included Duchamp's brand of irony, as well as a radical inversion of power that set works against the power of institutions such as the State and the art circuits. She also claims that conceptual art employed mechanisms for altering established orders based on conspiratorial thought as some conceptual manifestations sought to uncover information in order to push the limits of the institution and then stage a public exposure of facts. Giunta puts forward a method based on conspiracy that could be seen as a defense mechanism or a disguised tactic of resistance that confronts different forms of power. According to her, conspiracy is synonymous with threat and destabilization; it means thinking of parallel forms of power capable of de-structuring hegemonic forces like the State and its institutions.⁸⁷ The resistance in disguise that is understood as conspiracy also presupposes having a keen awareness of the different types of relations and their dynamics that are inherent in the field of art. I

⁸⁷ Giunta, "Conspiracy and Conceptualism in Latin American Art," 3.

would argue then that *Cabeza de Lleras* was the embodiment of a disguised resistance because through the creation of a bust made out of salt that represented a former president and even alluded to a cultural identity issue resulting from the carelessness of the State, Caro was able to de-structure and downplay the powerful image of a head of nation. In fact, Caro made sure that Lleras had stepped down from office in order to avoid any problems, before presenting the bust.⁸⁸ In other words, through the calculated construction of an artistic action involving some fortuitous tactics, Caro was able symbolically to undermine the power of the State from within an artistic venue—El Museo Nacional de Colombia—that paradoxically belongs to the State.

A few days after the opening of the XXI Salón Nacional de Artistas (1970), Juan Calzadilla—a Venezuelan artist, poet and critic serving as jury member of the Salon—published a series of articles in *El Espectador*, one of the leading daily newspapers in the country.⁸⁹ In these reviews, the first of which he titled “Soy espectador de un funeral” [I Am the Spectator of a Funeral], Calzadilla argued that the salon was in need of transformation and reform. He firmly believed that the salon’s foundations needed to be altered, and that artists were key figures in providing valuable feedback for the organization of the event. In his first review, he expressed his admiration for Caro’s *Cabeza de Lleras* while also wishing he could have granted the work a prize:

I thought (and I mean I thought because the statue has probably melted by now) this work contained an original idea that has been wisely resolved in an anti-artistic manner corresponding to the political art of our days, that is to say, a type of poor art that is based on the concretization of ideas through forms that have been elaborated to contest and disturb thereby departing from all aesthetic purposes.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Antonio Caro in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 109.

⁸⁹ *Marca Registrada, Salón Nacional de Artistas: Tradición y vanguardia en el arte Colombiano*. (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2006),123.

⁹⁰ “Me pareció (y digo me pareció porque a estas alturas la estatua de sal debe haberse ya deshecho) que esta obra contiene una idea original, sabiamente resuelta en una forma anti-artística que corresponde al arte político de nuestros días o sea a un tipo de arte pobre que se basa en la concretización de ideas y consignas mediante formas elaboradas con el sólo fin de impugnar y molestar, lejos de todo propósito estético.” Juan Calzadilla, “Soy espectador de un funeral,” in *50 Años del Salón*, (Bogotá: Colcultura Instituto Colombiano de Cultura,1990),173.

Calzadilla's second review expressed a concern for the lack of serious art criticism in the Colombian art scene. It is important to note that Marta Traba had abandoned the country in 1969 to move to Uruguay.⁹¹ In his last review Calzadilla directed his criticism—subjective and sincere—at some of the works exhibited at the Salon which according to him were unoriginal and poorly executed. Despite the fact that most of Calzadilla's comments were negative, these were seriously taken into account by the board of consultants of the Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, or Colcultura (The Colombian Institute of Culture), resulting in the implementation of new measures and regulations in subsequent salons.⁹²

In the XXIII Salón de Artistas Nacionales of 1972, the organizers instituted two drastic measures: (1) the abolishment of prizes to avoid competition among artists and (2) the consignment of the selection of the participating art works to a committee.⁹³ Upon the disclosure of the new rules established by the organizers, the artists responded with indignation, consequently boycotting the salon. A group of artists, including Bernardo Salcedo and Alvaro Herrán, responded by singing parodies of *vallenato* songs with lyrics of protest composed by the poet Darío Jaramillo Agudelo.⁹⁴ It is for this reason that the 1972 salon only featured works by forty-six artists, exhibited according to five different categories: Arte Político [Political Art]; Grabado [Prints]; Primitivos [Primitives]; Dibujo Figurativo [Figurative Drawing]; and Arte Geométrico [Geometric Art].⁹⁵ As a response to the controversy unleashed by the official salon, art critic Eduardo Serrano and Rita de Agudelo—the gallery directors of two of the most experimental galleries at the time—organized an alternate independent salon called *Primer Salón de Artes Plásticas* or the *I*

⁹¹ Traba is known for having contributed to the professionalization of Colombian art criticism “by bringing to it a rigor and consistency that had been generally lacking.” Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions”, 68.

⁹² *Marca Registrada Salón Nacional de Artistas*, 124-125.

⁹³ Prizes in the salon usually came in the form of money or grants for the development and production of art projects. These were an important source of income for artists.

⁹⁴ *Vallenato* is a popular folk music genre that is originally from Colombia's Caribbean Coast. *Marca Registrada Salón Nacional de Artistas*, 125.

⁹⁵ *Salón de Artistas Nacionales 1972-1973*, (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1972).

Salón Independiente Jorge Tadeo Lozano.⁹⁶ The alternate salon proved to be a complete success by featuring the work of 133 artists and awarding prizes.

Rather than joining his fellow artists in boycotting the salon, Caro chose to protest in his own way by taking advantage of the opportunity to present *Aquí no cabe el arte*. It was a bold, political work that stood out from the rest of the figurative artworks exhibited in the category of political art, and like *Cabeza de Lleras*, it elicited a critique of the salon, hence of the nature of art. His participation in the salon and the presentation of yet another denunciatory piece was Caro's response to the controversy sparked by the establishment of new reforms in the salon, while also acting as a visual protest against the art institution and the government's repressive acts.

Caro's Early Years

After presenting an overview of the political context in which Caro's early practice came about, it is important to also consider the academic and intellectual atmosphere that structured Caro's way of approaching life, hence his art. Thanks to Caro's short experience as a Fine Arts student at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and his subsequent experiences outside the academic realm that included his close friendship with fellow artist Bernardo Salcedo, the artist was able to formulate a type of art—based on the use of text—that while deviating from any conventions, referred to its particular context in a transgressive manner.

Antonio Caro's encounter with art began around 1966, when the artist was still attending high school. In an interview conducted by artist Alvaro Barrios, Caro refers to two particular exhibitions that were fundamental in structuring the way he conceived of art. The first was *Tributo de los Artistas Colombianos a Dante* [A Tribute by Colombian Artists to Dante, 1966] organized by the Italian Embassy in Colombia, and the second was *Espacios Ambientales* [Environmental Spaces, 1968] organized by Marta Traba and artist Alvaro Barrios, which, as Caro later stated, "became a milestone in Colombian art

⁹⁶ *Marca Registrada Salón Nacional de Artistas*, 125.

history.”⁹⁷ What struck the young artist about these two exhibitions were the particular ways in which the works were communicating a specific message to the audience. In remembering the excitement invoked by these exhibitions Caro stated:

Back then I was just an observer, an ordinary little boy. At that moment—with all the excitement and commotion that resulted from appreciating something that was communicating things in a different way—I really began to get interested in the Colombian art that was being exhibited in Bogotá.... In other words, I got attacked—in a very unpremeditated way—by the virus of art, by that something that is art during my last years of high school.⁹⁸

Enticed by artworks that were communicating ideas in uncommon ways, Caro ventured into exploring art; the two aforementioned exhibitions never ceased to act as important referents in his practice.

The first of these exhibitions was in fact an art competition and featured work by artist Bernardo Salcedo who was granted first prize. However, Salcedo’s work generated great controversy due to the fact that some of the organizers of the event considered the work to be irreverent, while not meeting the requirements of a real painting, or fitting in with the theme of the exhibition that attempted to honor the supreme Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Salcedo presented the piece *Lo que Dante nunca supo: Beatriz amaba el control de la natalidad* [What Dante Never Knew: Beatriz Loved Birth-Rate Control] (Fig. 1.7) consisting of an assembled white box containing diminutive eggs and miniature fragmented toy parts.⁹⁹ Although some of the jury members rejected Salcedo’s piece, others saw its value and innovative character as it introduced new ideas in Colombian art. At the time of the exhibition, Salcedo was an unknown artist with a degree in architecture who had the support of Marta Traba, the director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de

⁹⁷ “Espacios ambientales fue un hito en el arte Colombiano” Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

⁹⁸ “En ese momento, yo era simplemente un observador, un muchachito comun y corriente. A partir de entonces comencé a interesarme en el arte colombiano que se presentaba en Bogotá un poco más profundamente, con esa emoción y, finalmente con esa conmoción...de apreciar algo que comunicaba cosas de una forma diferente.” Antonio Caro in Alvaro Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual en Colombia* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogota, 1999), 104.

⁹⁹ Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 15.

Bogotá located within the campus of the Universidad Nacional.¹⁰⁰ Salcedo—like Caro a few years later—gained recognition in the local art scene as a result of the controversy unleashed by the transgressive nature of his work that defied conventions and established notions of art. It was precisely this transgressive nature and anti-academicism displayed by Salcedo’s piece that captured Caro’s attention during the exhibition.

The second exhibition mentioned by Caro was *Espacios Ambientales* opening on December 10, 1968 at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Bogotá. The exhibition was brought forth thanks to a collaborative effort between Marta Traba and the artist Alvaro Barrios who had recently arrived from studying art history in Italy. While in Umbria, Barrios visited an exhibition that left an indelible mark on him; *Lo Spazio dell’ Immagine* was particularly striking because it featured artistic interventions by preeminent contemporary Italian artists in a medieval building in Foligno.¹⁰¹ *Espacios Ambientales* evidently drew its inspiration from the exhibition in Foligno as it showcased unconventional works by a wide variety of artists including Alvaro Barrios, Feliza Bursztyn, Santiago Cárdenas, Ana Mercedes Hoyos, and Victor Celso Muñoz. Bernardo Salcedo, although not an official exhibitor but a participant by choice, took part in the exhibition with a highly radical gesture for the time, which involved appropriating the museum’s bathroom and declaring it as his own work of art by placing a label beside one of the bathroom doors. According to Marta Traba, the show attempted to attack the passiveness of the viewer and demonstrate that: “(1) The spectator will never find what he/she is looking to find in today’s art and, (2) the spectator will find everything that he/she never expected to find.”¹⁰² Traba’s declaration—published in the major daily newspaper *El Espectador*— not only pointed to the unusual and ground-breaking nature

¹⁰⁰ It was through Fernando Martínez, Salcedo’s architecture professor, that Salcedo met Marta Traba. Salcedo began working on his objects and boxes while still being an architecture and sociology student at the Universidad Nacional. He would use the leftovers from the models he would make, and mix those with found objects. Martínez visited Salcedo in his studio, and saw great value in the student’s works.

¹⁰¹ Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 16.

¹⁰² “1) Que lo que busca el espectador en el arte actual, nunca lo encontrará; y 2) Que encontrará todo lo que no busca y que ni siquiera sospechaba que existía.” Marta Traba quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 17.

of the show, it also foreshadowed the radical change in art that came about in the late sixties and early seventies.

To the surprise of many, the exhibition was assaulted by a couple of students from the Universidad Nacional that were members of a leftist organization who on the opening night staged a protest at the museum's entrance demanding art for the masses. Despite the inconvenience of the damaged works, the exhibition proved to be stimulating for many people including Caro, for not only did it encourage spectators' participation, it also featured some of the first idea-based art in Colombia that undoubtedly defied traditional notions of art. When asked about *Espacios Ambientales* and its effects Caro explained:

Besides the sensorial impact, the most interesting thing, in some sense was *nothing*. The most interesting thing about the exhibition was that nothing was compatible with a traditional conception of art... This nothingness, which in fact irritated the learned and moderate representatives of Colombia's left who got offended by it, is highly incongruous...It is very interesting to see how something which is regarded as nothing, seeks to affect such rational people as the leftists of the time.¹⁰³

In 1969, at the early age of 18, and after graduating from high school and having been seduced by the exhibitions he had seen, Caro decided to enroll in the Fine Arts program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. His experience as a university student was brief in part due to the difficulties he had with meeting the requirements of the curriculum. Moreover, he often complained of not having a real guide at the university.

Although Caro never found a true guide at the university nor did he receive rigorous formal training, he established a life-long friendship with artist Bernardo Salcedo. Salcedo became the young artist's guide, friend and tolerant professor that Caro never had, while opening the path for him to do different things. The friendship shared by Caro and Salcedo was so fruitful that together they became two of the most

¹⁰³ "Además del impacto sensorial, lo interesante era que, en algún sentido...no había nada. Lo más interesante de la exposición era que no había nada con respecto a una concepción tradicional del arte...Tan cierto era que no había nada, que logró irritar a los muy doctos y comedidos representantes de la izquierda colombiana, quienes se ofendieron por esa nada, lo cual es incongruente...Es muy interesante cómo algo que es nada logra producir un efecto en personas tan racionales como eran los izquierdistas de esa época." Antonio Caro quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 106-107.

groundbreaking artists of the early 1970s. Despite the fact that Salcedo exceeded Caro in age and experience, they both ventured into exploring the visual potential of text for which both artists became well known; in fact Caro processed and built on Salcedo's knowledge and experiments with text.¹⁰⁴ Their contribution to the development of Colombian art is deemed as significant because their work translated into the rupture that gave way to the growth and progress of Colombian contemporary art. As explained by Colombian curator Maria Iovino:

In the decade of the seventies, Colombian painting took the most decidedly conceptual elements it required for its development from its interaction with the work of Bernardo Salcedo and Antonio Caro... These two artists adopt, for the process of Colombian art, the semantic force that text acquired in the idea-based art of the time... Paradoxically, in view of the lack of a solid foundation in craft of drawing and painting, the two artists decide to take a strictly conceptual path and become the reformers of both mediums.¹⁰⁵

Iovino's claims direct us to the discussion of Salcedo and Caro's first experiments with text that will serve to illustrate the rupture process. The definitive event that marks Salcedo's move towards the exploration of text was the creation of *Hectárea de heno* [Hay Hectare, 1970] (Fig. 1.8), an installation made up of five hundred sacks of polyethylene filled with hay, all of which were marked, stacked up in a pile and presented at the Segunda Bienal Internacional de Arte de Coltejer in Medellín.¹⁰⁶ As expected, the work generated much controversy due to its radical appearance and its supposed intentional imitation of international trends. One of the first instances of Caro's use of text was his piece *SAL* [Salt] (Fig. 1.9) presented in Cali, at the Primera Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas in 1971. *SAL* was a plaque made in salt featuring the word "Sal" that drew attention to the ephemeral and material qualities of the piece. Iovino's argument also insists on the fact that Caro and Salcedo's work lacks a foundation in

¹⁰⁴ Maria Iovino, *Bernardo Salcedo: El universo en caja* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2001), 32.

¹⁰⁵ "Estos dos artistas adoptan para el proceso del arte colombiano la fuerza semántica que el uso de la escritura adquirió en el arte-idea de esos años... Paradjicamente, los dos artistas que deciden tomar el rumbo conceptual más estricto, ante la carencia de un sustento de oficio en el dibujo o en la pintura, se convierten en reformadores de los dos medios." Iovino, "Después del límite," 175.

¹⁰⁶ Iovino, *Bernardo Salcedo: El universo en caja*, 29.

drawing and painting; it is precisely because of this that they could “launch themselves into the audacities of text from an artistic project that still maintained certain links with craft.”¹⁰⁷ The use of text in Caro and Salcedo’s work—although somewhat different for each artist—is crucial because their contributions helped push even farther “the definitive rupture that facilitates the settlement of a new artistic project”¹⁰⁸ that took place in the sixties.

There are various reasons that led Caro to explore text. In addition to the fact that there was a general concern with text during the seventies partly because of earlier advancements in France in semiotics and structuralism, there were also other important non-artistic sources influencing Caro in his awareness of the potentials of text. Some of these included his readings of Noam Chomsky and his attendance to a symbolic logic class.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, some of the artistic sources that were indirectly driving him to explore text were: Robert Indiana’s *Love* which he first saw on a mail stamp, and then in an image in a newspaper article that talked about the hippie movement; occasional news relating to conceptual artists in artistic centers;¹¹⁰ an exhibition titled *Road Show* about English conceptual art seen at the Universidad Nacional; and the catalogue of the exhibit *Information* showcased at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1970.¹¹¹ Other more direct sources were Rubens Gerchman’s work *Air* seen at the I Salón Austral y Colombiano de Pintura, that was part of the VIII Festival Nacional de Arte in Cali (1968), Salcedo’s *Planas y Castigos* [Written Pages and Punishments, 1970] (Fig.1.10) and his well-known triptych *Bodegones* [Still Lifes, 1972] (Fig.1.11), and Carlos

¹⁰⁷ “lanzarse a las audacias del texto desde un proceso artístico que aún mantenía apegos con el quehacer.” Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁸ “la ruptura definitiva, que da lugar al asentamiento de un nuevo proyecto artístico,” Iovino, “Después del límite,” 173.

¹⁰⁹ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, April 24, 2011.

¹¹⁰ In an interview with Caro from December 23, 2010 he talks about the significance of seeing Robert Indiana’s “LOVE” on a mail stamp, which became an important source for him. It is important to emphasize the fact that he encountered Indiana’s piece by chance, within a non-artistic context.

¹¹¹ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, April 24, 2011.

Ginzburg's *Piedra* [Stone] exhibited in Medellín at the III Bienal de Arte Coltejer (1972).¹¹²

Caro's exposure to current events taking place in the international art scene resulted from different encounters and sources. Events such as the art biennials—the Bienal Internacional de Arte Coltejer in Medellín, and the Bienal de Artes Gráficas in Cali and its antecedent exhibitions—became didactic venues that brought together works by international artists, while also stimulating important intellectual exchanges. The presence of international curators and critics also sowed the seeds for important projects like Jorge Glusberg's CAYC (Centro de Arte y Comunicación) exhibitions that on a number of occasions featured Colombian contemporary artists including Caro. In fact, Caro has spoken highly of his experience with Glusberg's international exhibitions because they allowed him to get familiar with a community of artists that were working in ways similar to him, while disseminating his work on an international scale. When referring to the CAYC exhibitions Caro stated: "it was gratifying to know that forty or so crazy artists outside of Colombia were working with similar ideas."¹¹³ Even though these international events were beneficial, the up-to-datedness of Caro also came from Salcedo's occasional sojourns. One of Salcedo's prized belongings, which Caro regarded as "the Bible," was the anthology accompanying the exhibition *Information* curated by Kynaston L. McShine and featured at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970.¹¹⁴ As stated by McShine, the exhibition intended to be an "international report" of the activity of young artists around the world. The material featured in the show was "considerably varied, and also spirited, if not rebellious which is not very surprising, considering the general social, political, and economic crises that are almost universal phenomena of 1970."¹¹⁵ The exhibition showcased what seemed to be the predominant style or international movement of the last three years. In doing so, it included works by

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ "Era muy satisfactorio saber que habia cuarenta locos con las mismas ideas en otra parte." Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, January 19, 2011.

¹¹⁵ Kynaston L. McShine, *Information* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 138.

artists such as: Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Helio Oiticica, Joseph Kosuth, Cildo Meirelles, Marta Minujin, Adrian Piper, and The New York Graphic Workshop among many others. “The Bible” became a valuable source of information for Caro that provided a repertoire of endless innovative artistic possibilities.

Although Caro and Salcedo were aware of mainstream conceptual art, they were not involved in a constant exchange of ideas with other artists living in artistic centers, unlike conceptual artists in other Latin American countries like Argentina and Brazil. This also speaks of the fact that during the early seventies, the majority of young Colombian artists like Caro insisted on critically analyzing their immediate reality through clear, concise messages rather than purposefully creating art that sought to imitate mainstream conceptual art. Even though local critics were categorizing Caro’s art as conceptual due to the fact that his work displayed some resemblance—both formal and conceptual—to what was being produced in the centers, the artist has admitted that he used theoretical elements only a posteriori in his work. In Rodriguez’s interview with Caro, the artist explained:

I can say that I never used theoretical elements a priori, only a posteriori in my work. I just took them as they were given to me. In 1970, somebody wrote that one of my pieces was povera art, that it was a conceptual and political expression. The next day I knew: I am conceptual, my art does have a povera tendency, and politics interest me. All this I did not know until it was stated. Classified as such, I had to take it on. Partly, being political was fashionable; remember the people who were around during the late 60s and early 70s—Carlos Granada, Umberto Giangrandi, the people from the Cuatro Rojo workshop, especially Clemencia Lucena. They all produced leftist art. It was easier for me to make political art than to make erotic art. It sounds like a joke, but it’s true; at the time these were the trends and the political trend was easier to assume.¹¹⁶

Caro’s comment reveals the somewhat incidental nature of his work and the fortuitous manner in which he “assumes” certain labels. In addition, it suggests that he was somewhat apathetic towards certain aspects of the art world while also being sufficiently astute to take hold of what was beneficial for him. The fact that he assumed the label of

¹¹⁶ Antonio Caro quoted in Victor Manuel Rodriguez, “Antonio Caro,” trans. Brandon Holmquest, *Bomb* no.110 (winter 2010): 20.

political art rather than resisting it also serves to show that he was committed with society, and that he allowed himself to get absorbed by his environment.

Caro's days as a teenager were marked by the impact of two groundbreaking exhibitions and the beginnings of a strong relationship with Bernardo Salcedo that grew with the passing of time. Given the lack of a theoretical ambiance within Bogota's art world and Caro's scarce and limited academic training, he was able to begin to formulate an audacious art that was responding to its local reality in authentic ways. His days at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá—the nation's most important public higher education institution—were significant as they brought him closer to politics, hence his own country, as he began to follow frequent debates and controversies. In fact he had begun to follow political debates ever since he was a child as he used to listen to the news about the Cuban revolution. As explained by Caro:

I listened to the news of the Cuban revolution when I was eight years old; I heard that Fidel had prevailed in Havana, that they were revolutionaries. As a child I had that image of revolution, and, although this sounds funny, of Sputnik as well. At the time there was an image of revolution—bearded gentlemen living in Cuba—that was pretty to some and ugly to others. Ten years later, I naïve and all, would go to the debates at the university on art and politics.¹¹⁷

Even as a student at the National University, the issue of the Cuban revolution continued to spur significant debates that Caro became aware of. Thanks to an early exposure to political debates and to his participation in the university's prevailing discourse regarding revolution, Caro gained a keen awareness of his context, which eventually filtered into to his work.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 2: *Aqui no cabe el arte & Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual*

Aqui no cabe el arte: A Political Protest

Exhibited at the XXIII Salón de Artistas Nacionales (1972) in Bogotá, Caro's *Aqui no cabe el Arte* [Art Does Not Fit Here] (Fig.2.1) was one of the forty-four art works featured in this controversial art salon. Unlike any of the pieces presented in the exhibition, Caro's political artwork was a text-based work displaying a blatant message made up of sixteen white poster board pieces, each of which displayed a black square-like angular, capital letter with smaller lettering beneath all painted by the artist with a mixture of black acrylic and industrial paint. The sixteen poster boards were mounted side by side—without any spacing between the letters—along a horizontal line measuring more than eleven meters long, so that it resembled banners and posters such as those utilized in a political protest.¹¹⁸ In this section I will analyze Caro's *Aqui no cabe el arte*, an artwork that while stressing visual urgency through simple, unrefined yet bold means, is eliciting a simultaneous critique of the art system and *El Frente Nacional* from within the art institution, while also enacting a political protest on behalf of the victims of state control and repression whose names and death dates are mentioned through the small lettering positioned beneath the black capital letters. Although entirely textual, the work manages to evoke what Gina McDaniel Tarver calls the “visual power of the written word,”¹¹⁹ thereby urging the spectator to gain awareness of the repressive nature and wrongdoings of the government. Like a “visual guerrilla,”¹²⁰ the artist uses limited resources and elements to effectively attack the institution and different power structures in an attempt to change society. Moreover, this analysis will pay close attention to the

¹¹⁸ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, January 19, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions,” 276.

¹²⁰ Camnitzer, “Antonio Caro: Visual Guerrilla,” 44.

conceptual strategies utilized by Caro in staging a dual institutional critique from within the art system, while also examining the work's immediate and broader contexts from which it cannot be divorced.

Before delving into the analysis of Caro's *Aquí no cable el arte*, it is important to recall Caro's *Cabeza de Lleras* and its socio-political context for not only does it serve as antecedent to the former piece and the rest of his works from the formative period, it also serves as a useful entry point from which to address the salient features of Caro's conceptualist oriented practice. In addition, it helps us elucidate, in a more concrete manner, the relationship between artists and art institutions and how the later became, as critic Eduardo Serrano put it, a "platform for launching their healthy skepticism."¹²¹

According to the artist, several factors came into play in the creation of this piece. On the one hand, *Cabeza de Lleras* had positioned Caro as a "child prodigy" within Bogotá's art scene; the artist felt he had to take advantage of the recognition he had achieved in previous years. On the other hand, Caro's academic life at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia had become so unfavorable that the artist decided to drop out. Despite his dissatisfaction with many aspects of academic life, his experience at the university left an indelible mark—in the political sense—on him.¹²² Remaining outside the university realm and participating in art exhibitions became a fundamental aspect in the development of his artistic career. The XXIII Salón Nacional became a critical juncture due to the controversy surrounding it. Caro decided to participate in it in an attempt to launch his own protest against Colombia's complex political situation and the specific circumstances surrounding the Salon. He initiated his own protest by creating an enormous work of art that featured the names—all of which were found in newspapers—of victims of state control, all organized in chronological order. It is for this reason that he opted to give the work a rather crude and unrefined appearance, one that would be appropriate for the theme that he sought to explore. When explaining the visual

¹²¹ "plataforma de lanzamiento de su sano escepticismo." Eduardo Serrano, "Antonio Caro," *Un lustro visual: Ensayos sobre arte contemporáneo colombiano* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1976), 141.

¹²² Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, January 19, 2011.

characteristics of the piece the artist stated: “I wanted the visuality of the piece to correspond with the theme and context that I was exploring.”¹²³ In addition, Caro believed he did not possess the skill or ability to execute a refined work of art. Despite his insistence on his lack of manual skill and sophistication, he came up with, what for different reasons could be considered, one of his most effective works due to the message it conveyed and the manner in which it interacted with its context.

Aqui no cabe el arte was one of Caro’s text based works that visually proclaimed that it purposefully failed to comply with standards of conventional art. At first glance, the painted black letters evoke a certain tension that is perceived through their form and execution. Although the artist utilized a type of lettering that is direct, square-like, and seeks uniformity, nevertheless one will find that some of the letters escape this consistency through subtle variations in their shape and size, thereby defying the oppressive context of the time. This lack of uniformity not only evidences Caro’s lack of manual skill, it also heightens the sense of urgency reiterated through the message conveyed by the work. At once confrontational and overwhelming for the viewer, *Aqui no cabe el arte* gains more strength and becomes even more complex upon discerning the meaning of the small lettering positioned beneath each of the capital letters; these refer to places, dates and names of indigenous people from the Guahibo community and university students that were killed by government-led operations mostly during president Misael Pastrana Borrero’s term of office. In explaining the origin of these small names Caro stated:

For some time, I compiled newspaper articles that referred to the killings of different individuals during public order incidents. Some of the murdered individuals were unknown while others were almost mythic like Romulo Carvahlo.¹²⁴

¹²³ “Quería que la visualidad correspondiera al tema y al contexto.” Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

¹²⁴ “Durante un tiempo fui recopilando noticias de personas que habían muerto en sucesos de orden público. Unos nombres son NN, otros son casi míticos como Romulo Carvahlo.” Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

As mentioned earlier, Misael Pastrana Borrero was one of the presidents of the *El Frente Nacional*. He was appointed president of Colombia by the Electoral Court and began his term of office in 1970. With the famous slogan *Frente Social* [Social Front], Pastrana Borrero initiated a government that aimed at fighting poverty, hunger, sickness, and unemployment while integrating the marginalized population with the rest of the country. However the leftist magazine *Alternativa* claimed that Pastrana Borrero's *Frente Social* and its reforms that aimed at bringing "peace," were simply the perpetuation of *El Frente Nacional's* politics.¹²⁵ For instance, during the majority of Pastrana Borrero's administration, the country remained under permanent State of Siege; that is to say that martial law was imposed for some time, so as to enforce military rule over the public, consequently suspending civil laws and rights. In addition, there was a systematization of violence as well as an increase in repressive mechanisms, in the suppression of political opposition, and in the stabilization of protests, among other things. According to *Alternativa* magazine, the violence was expressed in a diversity of ways that included:

A progressive cut-down in trade union rights and in the right to strike; a drastic cancelation of popular organization's right to mobilize, organize and express themselves; the institutionalization of the State of Siege as a government norm; the application of military law or military justice to civilians; a "selective" elimination of popular leaders in rural and urban areas; the "illegalization" of independent trade unions; the militarization and destruction of public universities; an increase in the control of key national economic sectors on behalf of private foreign capital; and the control of an increasing concentration of income and land by an exploitive minority.¹²⁶

Although the above-mentioned manifestations of violence are not as extensive as in other Latin American countries under dictatorship, they serve to convey an overall atmosphere

¹²⁵ "Cuatro años de represión: De que se rie?", 16—17.

¹²⁶ "Recorte progresivo de los derechos sindicales y de huelga; cancelación drástica de la libertad de movilización y expresión de las organizaciones populares; institucionalización del Estado de Sitio como norma de gobierno; absorción de la justicia ordinaria por la justicia penal militar; eliminación "selectiva" de los dirigentes, populares consecuentes en el campo y la ciudad; "ilegalización de los sindicatos independientes; militarización y destrucción de la Universidad pública; agudización de la dependencia económica y del control de sectores claves de la economía nacional por parte del capital privado extranjero; concentración creciente del ingreso y de la tierra en manos de la minoría explotadora," Ibid.

of coercion that characterized Pastrana Borrero's *Frente Social*, where the government responded with repressive tactics, regardless the nature of the conflict.

The small texts included beneath the letter 'A' in *Aqui* refer to the massacre of Romulo Carvahlo, a student, university leader of the Universidad Nacional, and an alleged member of the guerrilla group ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) who was murdered in Bogotá in 1969 during Carlos Lleras Restrepo's administration.¹²⁷ As the first victim to be included in Caro's piece, Carvahalo's death is seen as antecedent to the other two government-led operations referenced by Caro. Moreover, I would argue that Carvahalo's inclusion in the piece alludes to the student movement of 1971 which led to a brutal student massacre during the same year; this atrocious event took place during Pastrana Borrero's term, which was considered to be one of the most brutal stages in the history of the Colombian university system.¹²⁸

The small texts in "Aqui no" [Not Here] (Fig. 2.2.) also refer to the massacre of the Guahibo indigenous community that took place in 1970, in the region of Planas located in the department of Meta. The first five letters included the names of the natives that were killed by the army as well as the date and place of their death. Beneath the letter "Q" the viewer will notice the inclusion of "Operación Control" [Operation Control]; this refers to the name the government gave to the operation engineered and carried out by the army, which attempted to protect the large landowners from the Guahibo Indians and repress the Cooperativa Integral Agropecuaria, an agricultural cooperative promoted by the human rights activist Rafael Jaramillo Ulloa.¹²⁹ During Operación Control hundreds of innocent Guahibo Indians were tortured, murdered, violated and furthered dispossessed from their lands, therefore generating an enormous scandal that brought about a debate in the Senate. The Planas massacres point to the complex problem of land

¹²⁷ "Carvalho," "Fundación Patrimonio Filmico Colombiano," Accessed February 12, 2011, <http://www.patrimoniofilmico.org.co/noticias/185.htm>

¹²⁸ "Frente Social: La universidad destruída," *Revista Alternativa*, no 9, (June 10-24, 1974): 6.

¹²⁹ Rafael Jaramillo Ulloa was a young man that defended the rights of the Guahibo community. *Planas: Testimonio de un etnocidio*, directed by Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva (Bogotá: Gustavo Perez [ICODES] Fundación Cine Documental, 1971), DVD.

distribution and reform while also revealing the complicity of the government in perpetuating the unjust treatment of the Guahibos.¹³⁰

In order to further elucidate the impact of the Planas massacre on Colombia's youth, and of the crude reality lived by a large portion of the population, we must turn to discuss Marta Rodriguez and Jorge Silva's documentary titled *Planas: Testimonio de un etnocidio* [Planas, Testimony of an Ethnocide, 1971].¹³¹ It is a shocking and powerful source of knowledge that, according to Juan Guillermo Ramírez, is able to provide "visible evidence reinforcing its worth as knowledge of the social sphere, of human aspects and of time."¹³² As the rest of Rodriguez and Silva's ethnographic documentaries, *Planas: Testimonio de un etnocidio* reflects their fascination with portraying the complex, cruel and contradictory reality of Colombia, and their true commitment to "giving a voice to those that do not have one."¹³³ In the case of the Planas documentary, Rodriguez and Silva give a voice to the Guahibo indigenous community by focusing on the tortures and persecutions suffered by this minority so as to denounce the abuse of power by the military and the landowners of the region of Vichada. It captures the memory of those that survived the genocide and seeks to visualize an unknown and unjust reality through the testimonies of those that greatly suffered. The documentary was carried out in a period of two weeks due to the fact that there was an urgent need to support the Guahibos' testimony before the Colombian Senate.¹³⁴ The production of testimonies was in fact, a distinguishing feature of Rodriguez and Silva's documentaries. In conceiving

¹³⁰ It is important to note that in 1971, Misael Pastrana Borrero's government suspended land redistribution. This initiative faced numerous obstacles.

¹³¹ Marta Rodriguez is a recognized Colombian filmmaker and anthropologist and Jorge Silva (1941-87) was a self-taught photographer born in the city of Girardot. They met in 1965 after Rodriguez had returned from France, and shortly after decided to work on their first collaborative project dealing with child exploitation in the locality of Tunjuelito.

¹³² "Las pruebas visible que ofrece apuntalan su valía para el conocimiento de lo social, de lo humano y del tiempo." Juan Guillermo Ramírez, "Marta Rodriguez nuestra voz de imágenes," in *Jorge Silva Marta Rodriguez, 45 Años de Cine Social en Colombia* (Bogotá: Cinemateca Distrital, 2008),7.

¹³³ "darle voz a los que no la tienen," Margarita de la Vega-Hurtado, "El cine documental de Marta Rodriguez y Jorge Silva: La compleja expresión de la realidad nacional," in *Jorge Silva Marta Rodriguez, 45 Años de Cine Social en Colombia*, 12.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*,15.

the medium of film as a “weapon of resistance,”¹³⁵ they utilized testimonies as a key element in their process of denunciation and political struggle.

A clear parallel can be established between Caro’s *Aqui no cabe el arte* and Rodriguez and Silva’s *Planas: Testimonio de un etnocidio*.¹³⁶ As “the most important icons of political and denunciatory film during the 1960’s and 1970’s in Colombia,”¹³⁷ Rodriguez and Silva were clearly invested in researching about marginalized minority groups, especially indigenous communities and worker movements. Caro on the other hand, through the utilization of a variety of different media such as salt, acrylic paint, and poster board to explore and reflect upon the situation of indigenous communities—whether ancient or current—also demonstrated his true commitment to the condemnation of unfair acts by an exploitive minority, and to rescuing a nation’s history and identity; this political consciousness is not only manifested in *Aqui no cabe el arte* and *Cabeza de Lleras*, it will become even more discernible in later works such as *Homenaje a Manuel Quintín Lame*, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, *Colombia—Marlboro*, and *Colombia—Coca-Cola*.

During the early 1970s Caro was one of the several Colombian artists that was involved in the creation of art that had political implications. Artists like Clemencia Lucena, El Taller Cuatro Rojo, and Caro were invested in creating a type of art that above all criticized institutions, and questioned the complex reality of the time. By making a direct reference to the massacre of Planas, Caro’s *Aqui no cabe el arte* becomes a political protest banner amidst an official art salon sponsored by the government, displaying highly diverse artistic proposals, most of which were figurative and lacked Caro’s unique linguistic approach and conceptual strength. Like Marta Rodriguez and Jorge Silva’s documentary, Caro’s piece acquires a denunciatory quality that shows proof of a high level of consciousness that existed among a certain sector of Colombians regarding the harsh reality enveloping a large segment of the population during Pastrana

¹³⁵ Ibid.,16.

¹³⁶ *Planas: Testimonio de un Etnocidio*, DVD.

¹³⁷ “el icono del cine político y de denuncia más importante de los años sesenta y setenta.” Juan Guillermo Ramírez, “Marta Rodriguez Nuestra Voz de Imágenes,” in *Jorge Silva Marta Rodriguez, 45 Años de Cine Social en Colombia*, 8.

Borrero's administration. Moreover, it explains Caro's willingness to visually resist and defy violence, oppression, and the loss of a collective memory.

In contrast to the first part of the title *Aqui no* that refers to the death of Romulo Carvalho and the Planas massacres, the small inscriptions underneath the capital letters that make up the phrase *Cabe el arte* allude to the complex situation surrounding the Student Movement of 1971 called *Programa Mínimo* that was deemed to be one of the largest student demonstrations ever to take place in Colombia. The repression of the movement represented one of the most brutal episodes in the history of Colombia's higher education system that began in the 1960s during Carlos Lleras Restrepo's administration, and became worse in Pastrana Borrero's term of office. A series of significant national and international circumstances informed the development of the student movement and consequent strikes. Significant international events included the national liberation wars in Southeast Asia, Mao's Cultural Revolution in China and his battle against the Soviet Union's revisionism, the Cuban Revolution, student movements in Mexico and Venezuela, young people's opposition to the Vietnam War, and May 1968 protests in France, which in 1971, still resonated strongly. On a national level, the crisis was incited by and partly contributed to the unstable political situation that reigned in the country following the disputed and alleged fraudulent presidential elections of 1970 and the installment in office of the elected president, Misael Pastrana Borrero.¹³⁸ There was an outbreak of disorder among rural and urban masses that paralleled student disturbances. Dissenting groups seemed to be uniting as they shared a strong dissatisfaction with the United State's imperialism and the Colombian oligarchy. Students around Colombia became aware of the need to establish links with exploited groups—such as workers and peasants—in order to bring about change in society. In addition, the emergence of the MOIR (Revolutionary Independent Labor Movement), a left-wing party founded by Fernando Mosquera, attracted students from several universities. Mosquera's ideas—clearly influenced by Chinese Communism—were

¹³⁸ For a detailed account of the disputed 1970 elections in Colombia see Marco Palacio's *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875-2002*, 185-192.

embraced and defended by some university students thereby fueling their critical spirit and sharp criticism of Colombian society.

The political and military offensive against the university system was an essential part of a global economic and social development strategy devised by North American financial entities for developing countries; within this strategy, education played a significant role. During Carlos Lleras Restrepo's presidential term, the government's politics aimed at "rationalizing" the university so that it could adapt to the economic development projects that were intimately connected with the interests of foreign firms.¹³⁹ In other words, the government sought to impose what it considered to be the "ideal pedagogical concept" that was based on an "education framed within a neo-colonial domination and an ideology of technicality inspired by a technocratic model."¹⁴⁰ This explains the gradual closedown of Humanities and Social Science programs due to the fact that these fostered critical thinking and a sense of rebelliousness, while presupposing the government's need to hinder university access to the popular sectors therefore making it available only to individuals possessing sufficient economic resources.

Through the provision of grants and loans, North American foundations began to interfere directly in the internal politics of universities.¹⁴¹ Richard Pelczar explains the reasons behind the United States' interference in Colombian higher education in an elucidating manner:

North American foundations eventually expanded their activities. By the mid-sixties they were heavily supporting major programs in several universities and related institutions. In these endeavors foundations were joined by AID, UNESCO, the Inter-American Development Bank, and several other multi-national and U.S government agencies...By 1970, over 85 million dollars in grants and loans had been issued to Colombian universities...Besides the impressive financial input, there were also other kinds of influence. The Department of State sponsored three seminars (in El Paso Texas, 1962-1964) that were attended by

¹³⁹ "Frente Social: La universidad destruída," 6.

¹⁴⁰ "Educación enmarcada en una dominación neo-colonial con una ideología tecnicista e inspirada en un modelo tecnocrático." Ibid.,7.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.,6.

almost all rectors of Colombian universities... These seminars had...a striking impact on the development of Colombian higher education. Several rectors, upon returning to their universities, almost immediately attempted to implement the seminars' recommendations...The theme of the period became the "modernization" of the university, and this usually meant "modeling" the North American University...This manner of promoting university development was essentially an "elitist strategy," similar to the capitalist model of economic development...It personified the U.S. tendency to project its own political, technological and, in this case, educational biases into its aid program. With the immense amounts of money spent, there was doubtless little local participation in the shaping of reforms. Students especially were rarely consulted....¹⁴²

Pelczar's explanation suggests that the U.S.'s financial support in the form of grants and loans had serious negative repercussions on Colombia's higher education system because according to him these "perpetuated serious imbalances, failed to overcome traditional rivalries, or unwittingly exacerbated existing inequalities and fissiparous tendencies."¹⁴³ Furthermore, students continuously resisted attempts at reforms as they rejected and fought anything that seemed like foreign influence while also attempting to maintain established ways.¹⁴⁴

In addition, Pastrana Borrero's government, in accordance with American researchers and consultants such as Rudolph Atcon, attempted to introduce the controversial *Plan Básico* for the development of higher education in Colombia. Once the plan was made known, it received excessive criticism, especially from students who according to Pelczar, believed it was a "devious scheme perpetrated by U.S. imperialists in cooperation with local capitalists to depoliticize the university and to impose the American university model to meet the high level manpower needs of foreign firms."¹⁴⁵ Although the government was forced to abandon the *Plan Básico*, the fight against its implementation marked a rise in the student movement while also revealing its highly anti-imperialist orientation.

¹⁴² Richard S. Pelczar, "University Reform in Latin America: The Case of Colombia" in *Comparative Education Review* 16, no.2, (June 1972): 246-247. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1187022>

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The year 1971 began with the appointment of Luis Carlos Galán as Minister of Education. Although the young politician began his term by proposing a reform that sought to democratize the internal structure of the university thus granting students and professors greater participation in the institution's politics, the promotion of the reform was halted due to the break-out of the first brutal confrontation between the government and the students taking place in Cali on February 26, 1971.

On February 7, 1971, an enormous student strike was unleashed at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, consequently leading to the student massacre of February 26. In the first protest, students were demanding rector Ocampo Londoño's resignation due to his arbitrary actions like appointing a dean that had not been recommended by students and professors of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. After expelling Ocampo, students took over the rector's office, consequently disclosing important documents that showed "proof of the extent of the United States' intervention in the academic orientation of the Universidad del Valle."¹⁴⁶ In view of the situation, the government reacted by ordering military troops to forcefully enter the university, resulting in the massacre of several students including Edgar Mejía Vargas whose name appears in Caro's piece under the letter "C" that makes up the word *Cabe* [Fit]. The protests went beyond the university as local civilians such as workers, peasant leaders, teachers and secondary school pupils joined in support of the students that were massacred leading the government to declare martial law in the city and a State of Siege in the entire country. The conflict quickly spread out to other universities and cities such as Cartagena, Barranquilla, Medellín, and Bucaramanga among others, thus resulting in the shutdown of academic activities throughout the country; in March 4, 1971 the student Carlos Augusto González or "Tuto" as he was commonly called, was assassinated in the streets of Popayán.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, in October of the same year, Julian Villareal was murdered in Barranquilla while military troops occupied a school. Caro pays tribute to both of these students by including "Tuto's" name under the letter "L," and Villareal's

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.,7.

name under the letter “A.” The catastrophe that resulted from the student strike at the Universidad del Valle marked the beginning of a long and violent struggle between the universities and the government. Throughout 1971, clashes between these two opposing factions were continuous.¹⁴⁸

Caro’s *Aqui no cabe el arte* directly references this period of institutionalized repression of university students and professors, the popular sectors of society, and indigenous communities living in the region of Vichada. The artist referred to this horrid episode of Colombia’s history by including the names of victims that were massacred by military troops. This gesture is not only indicative of Caro’s desire to bring offenders to justice, it also speaks of his bold and courageous character in analyzing and revealing Pastrana’s anti-democratic *Frente Social*. *Aqui no cabe el arte*—a statement that expresses certain ambivalence—announces that art does not fit within an environment saturated with repression, violence and injustice. The work—through its complex underlying concepts and aggressive visual qualities—seems to be emphatically stating

¹⁴⁸ Although there is some confusion as to the details of the assassinations of some university students and civilians, evidence confirms that the military overstepped the law and violated human rights while restoring order in the different cities where the uprisings took place. In fact, the military operated within the terms of the State of Siege while the president operated as a sort of authoritarian dictator; the boundaries of power were so precarious as to threaten the lives of hundreds of people. The students, teachers, and even workers that supported the students’ cause were removed of their rights by the army, and placed in a state of what Giorgio Agamben calls *zoé* (bare life). Having complete control over the life of many students, the army removed the power of each individual and their basic human freedoms. Michel Foucault’s notions of *biopolitics* and *biopower* are useful lenses for further analyzing the army’s manner of functioning during their forceful entrance into the universities, as they serve to highlight the dangers of an extreme exercise of power in the service of protecting life. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault speaks of the West’s profound transformation of mechanisms of power that were established since the classical age. Starting in the seventeenth century, power begins to be situated and exercised at the level of life. Now the main role of power was to “ensure, sustain and multiply life,” hence political power had now assigned itself the task of administering life. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 138.

The government’s implementation of regulatory controls over populations for the purpose of protecting life is what Foucault termed *biopolitics*; Giorgio Agamben defines Foucault’s notion as “the growing inclusion of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power.” *Homo Sacer Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 119. *Biopower*, as a concept that goes hand in hand with *biopolitics*, is a form of power used to control populations and to maintain the power of the state, it is “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.” *The History of Sexuality*, 140.

In relating these two concepts to the student massacres of early 1970s, I would argue that in attempting to protect and safeguard public order and the interests of the state from being threatened by student protests, Misael Pastrana Borrero was acting under the norms of *biopolitics*. In response to the president’s decisions, the armed forces staged an extreme form of *biopower*. The army eradicated students, professors and workers as they were all harming the state and altering public order. In other words, the armed forces implemented genocide—an extreme form of *biopower*—with impunity.

that there is no room for art in a context that seeks to suppress with violence cultural manifestations that seem to be critical, thought provoking, and counter to hegemonic forces. Likewise, through his proclamation, the artist is declaring that his textual, idea-based art does not fit in within a traditional art institution, hence with canonical notions of art and beauty. As claimed by Alvaro Robayo Alonso, Caro's proposal does not fit in with the "art of the masters and of grand aesthetic gains that determines itself in specific genres and becomes materialized in a fabricated work that is made to last and be commercialized."¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, this statement in all probability resonated with great force within the immediate context of the Salon given that the rest of the works exhibited in the "Political Art" section were figurative (Fig.2.3–2.5).¹⁵⁰ Both the conceptual impact and visual immediacy of Caro's piece must have been startling as Caro, through his work, was staging a visual protest against the government from within the art institution. In other words, through his art Caro was eliciting a form of political and cultural activism that ultimately attempted to stimulate an audience to think critically about their social context, hence to educate and transform society.

Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual: Caro's Presence at the I Salón Independiente

Caro was the only artist that featured his work in both the official salon and the new alternative salon brought about by Eduardo Serrano and Rita de Agudelo. At the I Salon Independiente Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Caro exhibited *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* [Manuel Quintín Lame Information and Visual Variation], his earliest version of a series of works that he would continue to develop in 1978, replicating the ornamental signature of the historical figure *Manuel Quintín Lame* (Fig.2.6). The work consisted of posters made of white poster board and red vinyl paint

¹⁴⁹ "Arte de los genios y de las grandes conquistas estéticas que se manifiesta en géneros determinados y se materializa en una obra fabricada expresamente para perdurar y ser comercializada." Robayo Alonso, *Crítica a los valores hegemónicos*, 92.

¹⁵⁰ The figurative works included in the "Political Art" section of the Salon were by Clemencia Lucena, Maria Teresa Nieto, Mario Salcedo, Maria Victoria Benito-Revollo, Enrique Hernandez and Amalia Iriarte.

covering the exhibition hall, displaying part of Quintín Lame’s embellished signature that ended with an intricate symbol that sprang from the letter “E” in Lame. In addition to the posters, Caro handed out flyers containing part of Lame’s signature, a description of the indigenous leader and the artist’s project.

“General Lame,” as he was often called, was an indigenous leader and self-taught lawyer born in 1883 in the region of Popayán, Colombia.¹⁵¹ From an early age, he grew within a family that for a long time had resisted and fought against outsiders like conquistadores and settlers in order to preserve communal lands and their ancestral culture.¹⁵² As a teenager, influenced by his experience in military activities and the profound religiosity of his family, he arose as a nativistic rebel who, according to Gonzalo Castillo-Cárdenas, “becomes the catalyst of Indian resentment, and the vehicle for their protest against white-mestizo domination.”¹⁵³ Quintín Lame stood against aristocrats, hacienda owners, white mestizo settlers who intruded on *resguardo* lands, urban centers interfering with Indian communities, and above all against injustice and the “generalized ‘contempt’ that characterized white and mestizo attitudes towards Indians.”¹⁵⁴ Thanks to his “messianic consciousness,” Quintín Lame fought incessantly against injustice and in defense of the Indians.¹⁵⁵ According to Luis Camnitzer, he “had been jailed over two hundred times for his insistence on defending the rights of his people. He used an extremely ornate signature—something between a pictogram and baroque writing—for the documents he drew up for his legal causes.”¹⁵⁶ Quintín Lame devoted much of his life to defending innocent Colombians against the oppression and negligence of the government. Caro declared the following about the series:

Now I decided to quit kidding around and deal with *indigenismo*.

¹⁵¹ Gonzalo Castillo-Cárdenas, *Liberation Theology From Below: The Life and Thought of Manuel Quintín Lame* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 30.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*,32.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*,33.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*,59.

¹⁵⁶ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 219.

I have done an exhibition as homage to Quintín Lame, the indigenous *caudillo* from Cauca who insightfully created a reserve in Chaparral, fought for the validity of indigenous legislation, and was persecuted by landowners and President Valencia at the time. I took the signature from him and added indigenous motifs. This has to do with art, sociology, and ethnography...but really this is terribly important.¹⁵⁷

The exploration of the notion of *indigenismo* as stated by Caro is a crucial aspect of the artist's production, which he began to explore—in a subtle way—in his first piece *Cabeza de Lleras*. Thanks to Marcos Olaya, the artisan featured in Gabriela Samper's documentary, Caro attempted to apply vernacular working methods for producing salt in the creation of his salt bust. In *Aqui no cabe el arte*, Caro continued to deal with issues pertaining to the indigenous problem in Colombia yet in a more explicit and confrontational way. Finally, in *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* and later variations, the artist continued to show his commitment to the issue of *indigenismo* by “internalizing”¹⁵⁸ Quintín Lame's signature and repeating it in a variety of different contexts and media, often using natural pigments. As argued by Luis Camnitzer “Caro's decision to ‘republish’ his signature, without political commentary or explanation, became a way of revitalizing the power of the letter that Quintín possessed, forcing others to realize that Colombia still has ongoing histories.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, Caro's use of Quintín Lame's signature was the artist's way of shedding light upon that against which the indigenous leader fought, of recuperating a significant personage pertaining to Colombia's history, hence of combating a nation's loss of collective memory. It should be stressed, however, that the simultaneous presentation of the works *Aqui no cabe el arte* at the official Salon and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* at the alternative independent salon, complemented each other conceptually reinforcing their

¹⁵⁷ “Ahora decidí de dejar de hacer bromas y meterme con el indigenismo. He hecho una exposición como homenaje a Quintín Lame el caudillo indígena del Cauca que con clarividencia hizo un resguardo en Chaparral y luchó entre el año 10 y el 40 para que la legislación indígena tuviera vigencia; perseguido por el presidente Valencia de entonces y los hacendados. De él tomé la firma y puse motivos indígenas. Esto tiene que ver con el arte, la sociología, la etnografía y queda uno bien con todos. Pero de verdad esto es terriblemente importante.” Antonio Caro quoted in Miguel González, “Todo esta muy Caro,” *Arte en Colombia* no.13 (October 1980): 42.

¹⁵⁸ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*, 220.

¹⁵⁹ Camnitzer, “Antonio Caro Visual Guerrilla,” 43.

denunciatory power. Moreover the presentation of these two works indicates —from very early on—a certain cohesiveness in both Caro’s artistic production and his life, as he will continue to come up with bold political and cultural commentaries that are indicative of his involvement with social issues that are relevant to all.

Antonio Caro’s *Aqui no cabe el arte* and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* together gather multiple conceptual strategies that ultimately aim to subvert hegemony and educate an audience. As stated by Luis Camnitzer stated, “to subvert a situation means to create a perceptual distance from the status quo, one that prompts reevaluation and elicits the will to make changes. Subversion allows for the introduction of common sense and the missing justice into stultified conditions.”¹⁶⁰ Through simple, bold designs that convey tension on many levels, the artist communicates short, concise messages addressing complex political issues that are tied to a historical and geographic specificity. The works employ text in visual way that allows Caro to subvert and question traditional notions of art, while also powerfully directing our attention to a socio-political context from which it cannot be divorced. Through the precarious and inexpensive materials used, Caro also points us to the ephemeral and dematerialized nature of his production, and to the rejection of the notion of art as a commodity. Finally, the works enact institutional critique on two fronts: they criticize the art institution from within, while simultaneously denouncing the negative effects of measures adopted by the state. All in all, the salient features that are present in *Aqui no cabe el arte* and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* are indicative Caro’s commitment to his environment while also indicating a move towards a breakdown of the boundaries between art and life.

Aqui no cabe el arte and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* both deal with the strategy of repetition in specific ways that have enhanced the iconic quality of the pieces. For instance, with *Aqui no cabe el arte*, the issue of replacement stems from Caro’s decision to give away the individual sheets of poster board presented

¹⁶⁰ Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America*,”19.

at the XXIII Salón Nacional in 1972.¹⁶¹ In 1999, after receiving an invitation from Colombian curator Alvaro Medina to participate in the exhibition *Arte y violencia* at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Bogotá, Caro decided to replace the original version of *Aquí no cabe el arte* with a new one. The newly repeated version of the piece was later included in the retrospective exhibition *Todo está muy Caro* curated by Miguel González and presented at the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia in Cali in 2002; this retrospective exhibition including the piece in question, traveled to Quito in 2003, and Caracas in 2006. While in Caracas, the piece was requested by the Ministry of Culture for inclusion in the exhibition *Marca registrada* at the Museo Nacional de Colombia; on this occasion, Caro created a second replica to be included in the exhibition. Both of these replicas—one belonging to the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia and the other belonging to the artist—have been included in recent exhibitions like the 41 Salón Nacional de Artistas that took place in Cali in 2008.

The existence of two replicas of *Aquí no cabe el arte* speaks of Caro's insistence on reiterating a powerful idea that when originally articulated in 1972, resounded strongly within a socio-political context that was marked by violence, repression, and persecution of students and indigenous communities. Back then, part of the work's strength was its novelty in terms of formal and material qualities and its conceptual relevance as it revealed the government's wrongdoings of the time. However, when repeated and presented more than twenty years later in contexts lacking the specificities of that first moment of impact, the work loses the relevance of its precise referents while acquiring a more general pertinence. Inversely, as the work loses its original context due to repetition, it gains an increased iconic value thanks to the ensemble of agents and institutions that through time have come to recognize the work's conceptual strength and relevance.

The strategy of repetition has played out somewhat differently in *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* because, rather than producing an exact replica of the original version over time, Caro chose to re-work the piece—often presenting it as a

¹⁶¹ Antonio Caro, correspondence with the author, July 9, 2011.

site-specific installation—while introducing new compositional elements that have enhanced its overall meaning. For instance, in 1978, at the Centro de Arte Actual de Pereira, Caro presented a different version based on Quintín Lame that was titled *Homenaje a Manuel Quintín Lame*. On this occasion the artist painted the ornamented fragment of Quintín Lame’s signature with white vinyl paint on a dark brown wall. In 1979, after being invited to participate in the I Festival de Vanguardia in Barranquilla organized by Alvaro Barrios, the artist presented for the first time, at the Museo de Antropología de la Universidad del Atlántico, Quintín Lame’s full signature.¹⁶² The exhibition was comprised of posters and flyers as well as a conversation with the artist about the importance of Quintín Lame in the socio-political and indigenous history of Colombia. In addition, the artist reproduced Quintín Lame’s signature on a window with yellow vinyl paint. In 1980, *Homenaje a Manuel Quintín Lame* was presented at the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia in Cali, as part of the traveling exhibition *Arte de los años 80* curated by Álvaro Barrios. On this occasion, the artist repeated Quintín Lame’s signature on the museum walls, while also presenting flyers, posters and an informative talk. In the 1992 versions presented at the XXXIV Salón Nacional de Artistas and at the exhibition *Ante América* organized by the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Caro introduced new compositional elements like achiote ink and amate paper. For the exhibition *Fragilidad* presented at the Universidad Nacional in 1998, the artist also utilized achiote to create a mural with Quintín Lame’s signature.

Besides being featured in important retrospective and anthological exhibitions, and considered to be one of Caro’s most important works, *Homenaje a Manuel Quintín Lame* has also received great international exposure and attention. For instance, it was included in the *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s* catalogue and in the exhibition *Define “Context”* presented in Apex Art, New York in 2000. Likewise, renowned international scholars and curators such as Mari Carmen Ramírez, José Roca, and Luis Camnitzer among others have referenced it on several occasions. As a symbol

¹⁶² Iovino, “Después del límite,” 212.

of *indigenismo* and as a form of protest in favor of highly complex social problems, Manuel Quintín Lame's signature has acquired greater relevance as time has progressed because of its profound content that points to anthropological, sociological and political issues.

Aqui no cabel el arte and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual*, two anti-institutional artworks that acted as political protests, were potent and compelling responses to the harsh socio-political climate of the time. Although both of these works have been repeated and re-exhibited over the years, their semantic force has changed. On the one hand, my analysis of *Aqui no cabe el arte* performs the important task of recuperating the meaning that has been lost, as the piece has been repeated over time. On the other hand, my discussion of *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* aims to potentiate the social value of one of Caro's most important series based on the signature of the indigenous leader Quintín Lame.

Chapter 3: *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*

Caro's strong debut at the XXI Salón Nacional de Artistas quickly introduced him as a young genius artist. Works like *Aquí no cabe el arte* and *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* were artworks that contributed further to his notoriety due to their defiant nature. His next significant step in establishing his reputation came in 1973, when curator and critic Eduardo Serrano invited Caro to participate in the exhibition *Nombres nuevos en el arte de Colombia* [New Names in the Art of Colombia], which, as suggested by the title, brought together works by a group of promising new artists at the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá, at the time located on the second floor of the District Planetarium. On this occasion, Caro presented an explicitly political installation titled *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* [Imperialism is a Paper Tiger] (Fig. 3.1 & 3.2) that materially and visually rendered Mao Tse Tung's famous expression "Imperialism is a Paper Tiger." While acting as critique of traditional notions of art, the work in question also comes forth from an impulse to intentionally create a piece that did not follow political dogma and that therefore wasn't received well by political groups. Although some of the conceptual strategies at play in this work differ from those used in previous pieces, it nevertheless can be understood as a crucial step in the process of consolidating his conceptually oriented practice. Furthermore, this work is the first instance in which the artist is overtly addressing the issue of imperialism, which he then develops in subsequent works like *Colombia—Marlboro* and *Colombia—Coca-Cola*. Likewise, it is the first example of repetition that we see in Caro's oeuvre; by repetition I mean the insistence and reiteration of a concept through its re-working and re-installation.

El imperialismo es un tigre de papel consisted of a horizontal red silk banner displaying white painted Russian-looking letters painted in white that made up Mao's famous phrase. The use of a banner like the ones carried by protestors during a public demonstration seems to borrow formally from *Aquí no cabe el arte*. On opposite ends of

the banner hung a total of twelve large tiger silhouettes done in paper, all of which resembled the “Greyhound dog.”¹⁶³ Together these elements constituted an *espacio ambiental*¹⁶⁴ or environmental space as these articulated the exhibition space and were strategically situated at the entrance of the museum. It is important to stress that Caro chose to hang the tigers during the opening reception, while the spectators were already walking through the halls, in an attempt to stage an action. The inclusion of an experiential moment involving the attendees of the show would have recalled the opening of the XXI Salón Nacional de Artistas and the destruction of the piece *Cabeza de Lleras* involving the accidental flooding of the exhibition hall. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that Caro’s action was captured in a photograph that was published in the local newspaper *La República* with a caption about his stealing the show.¹⁶⁵ Capturing the attention of the media while mounting his installation emphasizes the fact that Caro’s notoriety is the result of the field of production. Likewise, the recognition of his work comes about partially as the result of repeating a certain approach that began as a tactic (developing something on the spot in response to a specific situation), but now has become a strategy.

Caro’s action on the evening of the opening reception should be highlighted because on the one hand, it demonstrates Caro’s astuteness and his keen self-promoting tactics. On the other hand, it speaks of a conceptual process that is structured by guidelines based on experiences rather than theory.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, the experiential component or interactive characteristic acts as a strategy and a sort of signature element of his practice that he will continue to incorporate in subsequent works like the *Marlboro—Colombia* project.

¹⁶³ “al galgo de la Greyhound.” Antonio Caro in Alvaro Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 114.

¹⁶⁴ The term derives from the exhibition *Espacios ambientales* (1968) that showcased interactive, installation type works. Back in the early 1970’s this was a term that was commonly employed by artists to refer to installation pieces. Caro used this term to describe this particular work in his notes from January 2011.

¹⁶⁵ Caro, *Antes de Cuiabá*, 17.

¹⁶⁶ Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 114.

The meaning of Mao's phrase "Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger" is relevant because, through the appropriation of the famous motto, Caro made an overtly political work. The appropriation of Mao's phrase however, resulted from Caro's keen observation of his environment, where Mao's *Little Red Book* had become an enormously influential source of ideas, especially for young people. When recounting the gestation process of this piece Caro stated: "The phrase came to me by inertia, through the context. What I did was convert the phrase into a palpable thing."¹⁶⁷ During the early seventies, being political was associated with the left. As explained by Caro:

Being from the left was like a pleonasm because it was assumed that politics had to come from the left. Any person who knew what was going on had to speak starting from Marxism, Maoism, and of course with a heart filled by the Cuban revolution. The right was considered to be made up of born aristocrats or oligarchs. It was an absolute Manichaeism; one was political, obviously from the left, clearly very intelligent, evidently living according to one's principles, or one was a lackey to imperialism, a pariah, revolting, reactionary, an idiot.¹⁶⁸

Caro's political move in fact turned against him because the piece generated much debate among leftist artists and rejection from the leftist political orthodoxy due to its irreverent nature, open-endedness and lack of dogmatism, which left unclear which faction it might support. Gina McDaniel Tarver explains the bases for this rejection in an elucidating manner:

Continuing insurgency characterized the 1970s in Colombia, as multiple leftist guerrilla groups that were founded in the last half of the 1960s operated in the country. Active at this time were: the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL—The Popular Liberation Army), a small, orthodox Maoist group; the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN—National Liberation Army), the university-spawned, Cuban-backed Marxist organization that counted their fallen comrade Camilo Torres as a martyr; and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP— Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army), peasant-based, Marxist- Leninist, and the largest of the guerrilla groups. These various groups were the most extreme evidence of the current and heated debates over Marxist theory. All the groups, however, were united—ideologically but not functionally—under an anti-imperialist banner. All opposed the influence of

¹⁶⁷ "La frase llegó como por inercia, por el context. Lo que hice fue volverla palpable." Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, December 23, 2010.

¹⁶⁸ Caro quoted in Victor Manuel Rodriguez, "Antonio Caro," 21.

the United States and of multinational corporations in Colombia. *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* must be seen against this backdrop of ideological discordance and concordance.¹⁶⁹

From then on, Caro was no longer associated with the left. Although rejection often comes hard, Caro took it as an opportunity to really reflect upon the relationship between politics and art while coming to the conclusion that “what one should do is make art, just make art that could have political implications.”¹⁷⁰

Despite the rejection from the political left, Caro’s appropriation of Mao’s motto also points to the exploration of the theme of imperialism.¹⁷¹ For instance, in *Aqui no Cabe el arte*, Caro deals with the notion of imperialism in an indirect way; that is to say that while enacting his artistic protest of *Operación control* that implied the massacre of students that were involved in an anti-imperialist oriented movement, he was implicitly rejecting North American imperialism. In the work in question however, the concept of imperialism gains preponderance through the creation of a piece that visualized a direct reference to this notion. The examination of the notion of imperialism, as we will see, will remain a constant in his artistic production of the early seventies.

Caro employs the phrase “Imperialism is a Paper Tiger” in a quite literal and tautological way partly thanks to the intellectual climate that absorbed him which led him to create a work with a political sense. This literalness was then transposed to Barranquilla, when the artist was invited to exhibit at Galeria Barrios in December 1973. This is the first time that the artist chose to repeat and re-work one of his pieces. When

¹⁶⁹ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious institutions,” 314.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Mao Tse Tung claimed in 1957 that: “All the reputedly powerful reactionaries are merely paper tigers. The reason is that they are divorced from the people. Look! Was not Hitler a paper tiger? Was Hitler not overthrown? I also said that the czar of Russia, the emperor of China and Japanese imperialism were all paper tigers. As we know, they were all overthrown.” Mao’s statement points to his belief that reactionaries encompass the ruling classes who with the passing of time decayed until easily defeated like paper tigers. The peasant, slave and proletariat classes on the other hand, gained strength as they fought against the ruling classes. Imperialism, feudalism and capitalism are all notions that are directly connected with the ruling classes and therefore must be destroyed as these perpetuate aggression and oppression. “Imperialism and All Reactionaries Are Paper Tigers,” Quotations From Mao Tse Tung, last modified in 2000, accessed April 19, 2011, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/index.htm>

talking about the presentation of *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* in Barranquilla the artist declared:

I think that repeating a work in a different context, before a different audience is valid; I have done this instinctively and perhaps that has become the latest constant element of my “style.”... As of that moment my signature style involved the repetition of a work in different contexts; I did it for the first time in Barranquilla.¹⁷²

The re-working or repetition of a work should be viewed as a conceptual strategy employed by the artist so as to reiterate and insist on a certain idea rather than just repeating a work without a specific intention in mind. If in its first instance of gestation, the work had sufficient conceptual strength, then the artist would consider repeating or representing the piece in other contexts;¹⁷³ this was the case with *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*. Although the work was rejected within the context of Bogotá, Caro ventured into re-creating the piece within a different environment due to the broad conceptual character of the work that failed to adhere to a specific political view. On this occasion however, the artist chose to employ photocopying to launch a small edition of prints.¹⁷⁴ The photocopied prints included an image of a tiger taken from a book that had been altered through the incorporation of a photocopied drawing. In the Barranquilla version of *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, the artist retained the original concept, yet brought it into being through the utilization of an innovative and precarious medium (i.e. photocopies) that undoubtedly refers us to a critique of the traditional art object that often resists the passing of time. Likewise, the precarious materials employed by the artist speak of Caro’s rejection of traditional notions of art, and the idea of art as a commodity thereby making Caro as stated by Eduardo Serrano “one of the first, within the Colombian art scene, to propose with some consistency, an art that was not

¹⁷² “Yo creo que es valido repetir una obra en different contexto, ante diferente público y después lo he hecho instintivamente, tal vez ese ha sido como la última constante en mi “estilo.”... Mi estilo a partir de entonces fue repetir la obra en diferentes contextos y por primera vez lo hice en Barranquilla.” Caro, quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 115.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ At the time, photocopying had been hardly used in art in Colombia; the first artists to employ photocopying as artistic medium were Antonio Caro, Jorge Posada, and Bernardo Salcedo.

‘artistic.’”¹⁷⁵ As implied by Serrano’s comment, Caro’s non-artistic art turned its back on rigorousness and precision, coupled with a rejection towards the durability of works.

¹⁷⁵ “Fue uno de los primeros en nuestro medio en proponer con alguna consistencia, un arte que no fuera “artístico.” Eduardo Serrano in *Un lustro visual: Ensayos sobre arte contemporáneo colombiano* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1976), 138.

Chapter 4: Conquering *Marlboro* & *Coca-Cola*

Colombia-Marlboro

In 1973, after the presentation of *El Imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, Caro began an artistic phase that drew from advertising and logos, which aimed at criticizing the influence of consumerism on society through the use of advertising's own visual language. During this time, Caro embarked on the production of his well-known project *Colombia—Marlboro*, comprised of several phases and media, all of which displayed a close connection with the field of advertising while also enacting a critique of daily life in Colombia characterized by an “increasing consumerism and the free market forces driving it.”¹⁷⁶ Although the work addressed smokers, it also explored complex issues pertaining to Colombia's reality that the artist could not ignore. As declared by the artist: “Marlboro tried to interweave with its context...at the time, Marlboro flooded Colombia.”¹⁷⁷ When asked how the *Marlboro* series had come about, the artist responded:

I am not a sociologist, nor a historian, nor any of those things, but I am a myopic; this allows me to see many things from reality like for instance, that in that epoch there were a lot of people selling Marlboro on the street. From there came the proposal that consisted in fusing the design of Marlboro and the word Colombia.¹⁷⁸

As per Caro's comment, one can argue that the work in question acts as a vehicle for destabilizing and revealing hegemonic forces at play that are unleashed by a weak and illegitimate government like *El Frente Nacional*. These forces are revealed through

¹⁷⁶ Tarver, “Intrepid Iconoclasts,” 316.

¹⁷⁷ “Marlboro trata de imbricarse con el contexto...el Marlboro inundaba Colombia” Antonio Caro, in discussion with the author, Bogotá, December 23, 2010.

¹⁷⁸ “Yo no soy sociólogo, ni historiador, ni ninguna de esas cosas, pero sí soy miope y eso me permite ver muchas cosas de la realidad, como por ejemplo que en esa época había mucha gente vendiendo Marlboro por la calle. De ahí salió esta propuesta que consistía en fundir en el diseño de Marlboro la palabra Colombia.” Caro, quoted in Iovino, *Todo esta muy Caro*.

Caro's appropriation of a widely popular international brand logo that is visually transformed and conceptually conquered so as to communicate a message to his audience.

For the purpose of understanding the emergence of *Colombia—Marlboro* and its historical context, it is useful to turn to a recent exhibition titled *Múltiples y originales, arte y cultura visual en Colombia; años 70* [Multiples and Originals, Art and Visual Culture in Colombia, The Seventies] presented at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño in Bogotá in December 2010. The curatorial team comprised of María Sol Barón, Camilo Ordóñez Robayo and Carlos García proposed a reading of visual culture and artistic production of the seventies within a context where visual repertoires became more ample and diverse due to the introduction of media, techniques and circulation processes within the field of art that enabled the inclusion of new visual referents that consequently expanded Colombians' way of looking and understanding art.¹⁷⁹ Their proposal also took into account the political context within which this change in the field of art took place. In doing so, they highlighted the fact that during the period of *El Frente Nacional*, the Colombian state had to create a clear and solid institutional image for their government so as to compensate for the feeble governing that was taking place; the urgent need to strengthen the State gave way to the implementation of international agreements such as the Alliance for Progress that were perceived by certain sectors of society as symptomatic of the fragility of the State and of foreign interventions.¹⁸⁰ These international cooperative agreements had an impact on different areas of society like commercial and cultural fields, thereby increasing consumerism as a response to the beginnings of globalization, and stimulating different areas of visual production like the arts; artists like Caro and Salcedo were interested in revealing the tensions between these

¹⁷⁹ *Múltiples y originales: Arte y cultura visual en Colombia; años 70*. Curated by Grupo Trans-Historia (María Sol Barón – Camilo Ordóñez Robayo) and Carlos García. Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, Calle 10 No. 3-16, Bogotá, December 2010-January 2011.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

new forces at play within the field of art.¹⁸¹ Barón, Ordoñez-Robayo, and García's reflection on Colombian art and visual culture of the seventies and its historical context is helpful as it provides a useful background for studying Caro's *Colombia—Marlboro* and his subsequent iconic piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola*.

Caro created the first of the *Marlboro* pieces in 1973. The artist elaborated a work that, as he stated, was “ambitious and pretentious in terms of the formal aspect of the majority of its elements; a work based on the relationship between Marlboro cigarettes and Colombia,”¹⁸² which Caro submitted to the XXIV Salón Nacional de Artistas but that was rejected by the jury. The jury's verdict shocked Caro because he had grown accustomed to the idea of being the child prodigy of the Colombian art scene. The rejection of the jury however, only affected Caro temporarily as Rita de Agudelo, the director of the Galería San Diego in Bogotá, offered him the opportunity to show the rejected piece in an individual show at her gallery. What seemed to be an instance of depression and failure in Caro's career, in fact, turned out to be a moment of great joy and triumph, as he was given the chance to do his first solo exhibition that lasted three days (November 8, 9, 10).

The piece presented by Caro at Agudelo's gallery was an installation or *espacio ambiental* of *Colombia—Marlboro* made out of white cardstock, red tissue paper, and plastic that took over the exhibition space (Fig. 4.1 & 4.2). The fact that the artist was purposefully creating an *espacio ambiental* points to the enormous impact that the exhibition *Espacios ambientales* had on him. A series of five flags on a string displaying the red and white Marlboro colors were hung on the façade of the building. Underneath the string of flags was a larger Marlboro red and white poster that supplanted the “Marlboro” lettering with the word “Caro” written in black cursive letters. A series of smaller red and white posters were situated beneath the large “Caro” banner and along the bottom of the façade. As a whole, the red and white decoration of the façade

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² “una obra ambiciosa y pretenciosa en cuanto al nivel formal de muchos elementos, una obra basada en una relación entre el cigarillo Marlboro y Colombia” Antonio Caro in Alvaro Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 116-117.

attempted to attract the attention of the passer-by inviting him or her to consume or absorb Caro, hence his art. The interior of the gallery featured different sized banners, like the ones displayed on the façade, only these displayed the word “Colombia” in place of the word “Marlboro.”¹⁸³

The second stage of the *Colombia—Marlboro* project, which took place in 1974, was also presented at Rita de Agudelo’s Galeria San Diego. On this occasion however, Caro presented an audio-visual work featuring a slide show with an audio component that included rock and salsa music. The images making up the slide show were documentations of interventions made by the artist by placing empty Marlboro boxes in random places around the city such as movie theaters and parks so as to make the viewer gain awareness of the proliferation of Marlboro cigarettes around the city. This excessive presence of Marlboro, as noted by Caro, was a result of seeing many people selling Marlboro cigarettes on the street which further pointed to the United States’ incursion into Colombia and to the complex issue of contraband. This North American penetration not only brought with it negative repercussions like the multiplication of *gamines* or street children selling American consumer products on the streets in the worst conditions, it also contributed to the distortion of Colombia’s national identity.

Caro’s second to last stage of his *Colombia—Marlboro* project was presented at the I Salón Atenas in Bogotá that took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1975 (Fig. 4.3 & 4.4). Like the 1974 version, the 1975 *Colombia—Marlboro* also featured a slide show of images; the images showed Marlboro cartons placed in different spots of Bogotá’s Parque de la Independencia. A crucial aspect of this particular work was the fact that Caro presented his slide show at the closing of the exhibition. As stated by critic Miguel González:

¹⁸³ Caro’s exhibition at Galeria San Diego opened on the same evening as the Salón Nacional de Artistas. Besides inaugurating a solo show, Caro also staged an artistic action that involved slapping one of the jury members on the face. As in previous occasions, Caro took advantage of the media’s presence and all the talking provoked by his action to create a new work of art titled *Defienda su talento* presented in 1974 at Galeria Belarca in Bogotá. For more information on this act and exhibition see Tarver’s “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions,” 1-4.

When the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá (I Salón Atenas) opened, Caro was listed among the exhibitors, yet there was no work displayed. The work was going to be done using the time of the exhibition; time as space for elaboration, the contrary of “Lleras,” where the hours signaled destruction.¹⁸⁴

González’s declaration is significant as it points out a crucial aspect and signature element of Caro’s production: the inclusion of what the artists calls an “experiential attitude”¹⁸⁵ that was first manifested in *Cabeza de Lleras*, then in *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, and continued in the *Colombia—Marlboro* version of the I Salón Atenas. Although the artist employs time differently, it nevertheless performs a crucial role in these three works.

Another significant component of the I Salon Atenas piece was the presentation of a small give-away series or “allusive posters,”¹⁸⁶ *Colombia—Marlboro* cards that served to self-promote the artist and insist on an idea. In *Antes de Cuiabá* Caro states: “Since the first Salón Atenas I decided that repetition was the intention of my work.”¹⁸⁷ Caro gave spectators the cards as a sort of memento or souvenir of the exhibition. The cards featured the word Colombia on the front with the usual red and white Marlboro colors, while on the reverse side they displayed three key pieces of information about the exhibition: the artist’s last name, the venue where the show was taking place and the geographic location and year.

Besides pointing to the tactics of repetition and self-promotion, Caro’s cards also speak of the notion of advertising that is central to the understanding of the *Colombia—Marlboro* project and the subsequent piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola*. As we have seen, Caro’s *Colombia—Marlboro* project relates art and society in many different ways. However, this relation is articulated in Caro’s work as a result of the artist’s experience in

¹⁸⁴ “Cuando se abrió la exposición del Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (I Salón Atenas), Caro figuraba entre los expositores, pero ninguna obra figuraba para ser apreciada. El trabajo iba a ser realizado utilizando el tiempo de la exhibición; un tiempo como espacio para elaborar, al contrario de “Lleras,” donde las horas señalan la destrucción. Miguel González, quoted in Iovino, *Todo esta muy Caro*.

¹⁸⁵ “actitud vivencial” Caro, quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 114.

¹⁸⁶ “afiche alusivo,” Caro quoted in *I Salon Atenas, Octubre/Noviembre 1975*, Barrera, Caro, Giraldo, Gomez, Hernandez, Rojas, Silva, Varela (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1975).

¹⁸⁷ Caro, *Antes de Cuiabá*, 28.

a publicity agency where he acquired endless significant elements that helped structure his work. As Caro explained:

I worked in a publicity agency, a fact that is very important to my work. There, I acquired many work elements that can be seen in Colombia—Coca-Cola...I want to mention that working in a publicity agency meant that I was familiar with elements of material communication. This kept me informed, it gave me a formal education that filled an academic hole. Chance and intuition introduced me to important topics.¹⁸⁸

As per Caro's comment, one can deduce and see the impact this experience had on his life and work. *Colombia—Marlboro* is an example of the articulation of a clear message intended to be noticed by the public for the purpose of encouraging reflection on a particular matter that was affecting Colombian society on different levels. A paramount aspect of advertising and publicity is salesmanship.¹⁸⁹ Although Caro did not intend for his public to literally purchase his work—as he rejected the commodification of art—he did seek to stimulate in his audience an awareness of hegemonic forces in society through the use of a clear message involving the use of a popular logo.

The last version of Caro's Marlboro project was the piece *500 Paquetes* [500 Packages] (Fig. 4.5) exhibited at the Biblioteca Nacional in Bogotá in 1975. As suggested by the title, the work consisted of hundreds of Marlboro cigarette packs that Caro collected with the help of the public after sending out a petition through the press to get people to donate empty Marlboro boxes in exchange for a drawing by the artist. These empty Marlboro packs were covered by flyers and given away during the exhibition. The flyers covering the packs described the work's creation process both in English and Spanish, while also featuring a picture of the Cuban salsa star Celia Cruz placed in the middle of what seemed to be rows of corn plants. The image of Cruz represents of a powerful Cuban music legend who, by the 1970s, had already achieved great success around Latin America and the United States. Likewise, the drawn corn plants allude to the importance of corn, a grown crop that has been widely cultivated for centuries by

¹⁸⁸ Caro, quoted in Victor Manuel Rodriguez, "Antonio Caro," 22.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Chandor, *Advertising and Publicity* (London: The English Universities Press Ltd., 1950), 4.

indigenous civilizations in North, South and Central America and that continues to be a crucial aspect of the culture of the Americas. The inclusion of the image of the Salsa Queen and the presence of the corn plants, seemed to be symbolically counteracting the overpowering presence of the North American Marlboro logo by covering the cigarette boxes. With this bold conceptual gesture, Caro seems to be encouraging his public to gain awareness of the fact that Latin America, like the United States is able to produce iconic and ever-present cultural symbols that, unlike Marlboro, positively impacted society.

Caro's *Colombia—Marlboro* project was the first occasion in which he worked with a brand known worldwide to tackle issues of North American imperialism and its negative repercussions: he also insistently re-worked and intentionally repeated a particular piece or a certain component of a work so as to multiply its reach to an audience for the purpose of disseminating a message of awareness against hegemonic forces. In doing so, he engaged audiences in novel and dynamic ways through the work itself and through gestures like giving away exhibition mementos. Through the utilization of a widely recognizable brand logo, the artist strategically addressed social, political, and economic issues related to smuggling, mafia, poverty and class differences, thereby revealing the new tensions at play within a field of art that existed against the backdrop of international agreements implemented by the State so as to compensate for the weak functioning of the governing class. Besides articulating new conceptual strategies developed from the impact of Caro's experience in advertising and his keen awareness of social problems, *Colombia—Marlboro* acted as a crucial antecedent to Caro's iconic piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola*.

Colombia—Coca-Cola: A Powerful Replica

Upon the realization that the brands *Marlboro* and *Coca-Cola*—both embodiments of imperialism, consumerism and popular culture—shared an intrinsic connection, Caro decided to explore the conceptual and formal potentials of the Coca-Cola logo in order to continue his focus on the negative impacts of imperialism and

capitalism on the construction of a Colombian national identity. His exploration began with the presentation of the *Colombia—Coca-Cola* graphite drawing at the exhibition *Lápiz y papel* (Pencil and Paper) organized by the artist Jonier Marín at the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá in 1976; it culminated with the creation of his now-iconic version of *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, painted in enamel on metal resembling a two-dimensional Coca-Cola or an advertising sign, presented at the XXVI Salón Nacional de Artistas on the same year, for which he received a medal (Fig.4.6). However, the most recent presentation of a commercial edition of the work at Casas Riegner Gallery on October 2010—more than thirty years after its initial gestation—points to the fact that this conceptually powerful work continues to enact institutional critique on various fronts while acquiring new dimensions and posing new questions, due to the current contextual conditions that are shaping it. Furthermore, the piece continues to elicit strong responses from the public as its circulation has extended beyond the artistic field.

The idea of merging the Coca-Cola logo and the word “Colombia” to create what many consider to be his most visually powerful work (the “most beautiful image of his visual inventory,” according to Maria Iovino ¹⁹⁰) came about thanks to Caro’s socio-economic, political, cultural and artistic context of the mid-1970s. On the one hand there were important artistic sources feeding his practice; according to the artist, these included Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Rubens Gerschman, Carlos Ginzburg, Luis Camnitzer, and Bernardo Salcedo.¹⁹¹ Likewise, the field of advertising had supplied him with effective communication and design techniques that allowed him to transmit a strong and provocative message to his audience. On the other hand, the artist incorporated into his discourse elements that as he explained are:

valid, real, and concrete in society, specifically in Colombian society...*Colombia—Coca-Cola* counts because of a good design and the coincidence of eight letters and because everyone drinks Coca-Cola. My work counts because the discourse that I use to disguise it as art is still valid without art. I believe that the artistic value of my art comes from outside of art.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ “una de las imágenes más bellas de su inventario visual.” Iovino, “Después del límite,” 175.

¹⁹¹ Caro, correspondence with the author, April 24, 2011.

¹⁹² Caro quoted in Victor Manuel Rodríguez, “Antonio Caro,” 21.

As observed in the corpus of works discussed thus far, Caro's references to contemporary actuality have been a constant and crucial strategy articulating his artistic practice. *Colombia—Coca-Cola* however, resulted from a continued reactive reflection on imperialism embodied in the image of Coca-Cola that according to Maria del Carmen Suescun was "the symbol of U.S imperialism across Latin America, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s."¹⁹³ Suescun's comment is further supported by the fact that other Latin American artists, in addition to Caro, were also producing works based on Coca-Cola and its symbolism so as to denounce aspects of imperialism and capitalism. Examples include Brazilian Cildo Meireles' iconic piece *Insertions into Ideological Circuits I: Coca-Cola Project* (1970); Uruguayan Luis Camnitzer's *Coca-Cola Bottle Crushed and Bottled in Another Coca-Cola Bottle* (1973); and Argentinian Jorge Silberman with his distorted image of a Coke bottle featured at a CAYC exhibition in 1974. For many, including Caro, Coca-Cola, in Suescun's words "is the overt denial of difference; Coca-Cola is perceived as an instrument for the 'Americanization,' that is, homogenization of the continent. This uniformizing impulse has long been identified by Latin Americans as being of the imperial kind."¹⁹⁴ The premeditated fusion of Coca-Cola typography and "Colombia" is a conceptual strategy that further complicates the relationship between the U.S symbol of imperialism and Colombia as it reveals an interconnectedness and dependency that heightens and acquires other dimensions as history progresses.

In an article by Frederico Morais titled "Colombia, un país Redondo" (Colombia, a Round Country), the Brazilian critic wrote:

A symbol of penetration, Coca-Cola was chosen by artist Antonio Caro to create one of his most provocative works. A simple gesture, he got the letter C in Coca-Cola and placed it on the letter C of Colombia, all on a red background as if wanting to merge two words into one: CocaColombia. In a country of artisan painters that value the finished work made to last and be sold, Caro is an

¹⁹³ María del Carmen Suescun Pozas, "From Reading to Seeing, Doing and Undoing Imperialism in the Visual Arts," in *Close Encounters of Empire Writing the Cultural History of U.S. Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph et al (Durham:Duke University Press, 1998), 543.

¹⁹⁴ Suescun, "From Reading to Seeing," 539.

exception. He is one of the rare conceptualists always willing to question the art circuit...He is an artist that positions himself against all forms of dogmatism.¹⁹⁵

Morais' declaration acts as a useful entry point for which to analyze the various aspects of institutional critique articulated by Caro's *Colombia—Coca-Cola*. In the first place, the critic refers to the provocative nature of this two dimensional work that results from its perfectly simple design and clear concise message. Caro arrived at this iconic white and red composition after creating the "Colombia" drawing presented at Jonier Marin's exhibition. After slightly altering and modifying the letters of the initial drawing, Caro claimed that he took it to "a man that does popular signs painted with enamel on tin"¹⁹⁶ to produce the design according to the artist's specifications. The fact that the artist hired someone to carry out the final design points to a critique of a Colombian artistic tradition that valued manual craft. Likewise, this disregard towards the finished work made to last and be sold points to Caro's irreverence, his rejection of art as a commodity, and his insistence on finding alternate and experimental ways of communicating powerful messages.

Caro's anti-dogmatism and defiant attitude towards traditional forms of art led him to redefine the notion of painting in Colombia. Maria Iovino has elucidated the rupturing process that led to this redefinition of the medium that consequently contributed to the development of Colombian contemporary art in her text "Después del límite." In the text she explains that the predominance of craft during the sixties and seventies, but especially of drawing during the seventies, was crucial in framing artistic practices. The advancement of painting in Colombia, which accelerated in the sixties thanks to the contributions of artists like Beatriz González, "acquired the necessary conceptual elements required for its development thanks to its interaction with the work of Bernardo Salcedo and Antonio Caro."¹⁹⁷ The conceptual elements noted by Iovino included the

¹⁹⁵ Frederico Morais, "Colombia, un país redondo," *Revista de Arte y Arquitectura* (Medellin) no.1 (1978):21.

¹⁹⁶ "a un señor de esos que hacen avisos populares pintados con esmalte sobre lata." Caro, quoted in Barrios, *Orígenes del arte conceptual*, 122.

¹⁹⁷ "los elementos más decididamente conceptuales los tomó la pintura en Colombia...de la interacción que tuvo con el trabajo de Bernardo Salcedo y Antonio Caro." *Ibid.*,175.

particular use of text that she defines as the “open and exclusive use of words with image”¹⁹⁸ which is best expressed in works like Caro’s *Colombia—Coca-Cola*. Iovino also noted that Caro and Salcedo, two of the most transgressive artists of the seventies who lacked a formal artistic training, paradoxically managed to reformulate painting and drawing.

Besides the revolutionary aspect of Caro’s *Colombia—Coca-Cola* in terms of medium, it is also important to discuss the increased reproduction and wide circulation of the piece in relation to the strategy of repetition, that as already noted became a crucial aspect of Caro’s practice. In Walter Benjamin’s seminal work “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction,” the author claims that the technological reproduction of artworks profoundly modified their effect because in the process of reproduction, “the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place”¹⁹⁹ is lacking; the here and the now of the original work grants it authenticity. According to Benjamin, the aura is precisely the originality, authenticity, and authority of the object that is lost when it is reproduced, thereby complicating our perception. When the work loses its aura through reproduction, it gains other capacities like the possibility of placing the original “in situations which the original itself cannot attain.”²⁰⁰ Likewise, the reproduced work gains a political potential, or rather, the politization of art is enabled. In other words, an artwork that before could only be appreciated by the wealthy class in a museum, could now be reproduced and made accessible to the masses; thanks to reproduction, the masses could gain access to culture and politics. Like Benjamin, Caro also seems to be advocating the death of the work’s aura, or the demystification of the work through its replication, reproduction and circulation. As a result of this process, Caro’s piece has acquired the status of international icon that continues to impact audiences around the world, thereby becoming an “unavoidable point of reference for

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction,” in *Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 103.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

many.”²⁰¹ This is further supported by the fact that *Colombia—Coca-Cola* has been included in international exhibitions such as *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin: 1950s—1980s*; it has been widely reproduced and cited in academic texts like Luis Camnitzer’s *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* and in magazines like *Revista del arte y la arquitectura en Colombia* and *Poliester*; and finally, some of its recent replicas are now part of recognized public and private international collections like Daros Latinamerica in Zurich, among others.

The latest example of Caro’s critique of the authenticity of the work of art can be appreciated best in the *Réplikas* exhibition. The exhibition, featuring a commercial edition of Caro’s *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, pays tribute to the artist’s most famous piece while also highlighting the importance of Caro as Colombia’s foremost conceptual artist through the publication of a book on the evolution of the artist’s practice during the seventies.

Caro’s solo exhibition at one of Bogotá’s preeminent contemporary art galleries probably came as a surprise to many members of the art circuit because as stated before, the artist had kept a distance from commercial art galleries for more than twenty years. Colombian artists during the early seventies maintained a mutually beneficial relationship with art institutions as the latter sought to promote artists whose practices maintained resemblances with the art of the centers as a strategy of *desarrollismo*.²⁰² Artists like Caro took advantage of art institutions, as these were willing to showcase his conceptually oriented and provocative art. With this historical precedent in mind, I would argue that the alliance between Casas Riegner Gallery and Caro is also mutually beneficial as it is responding both to the gallery’s interest in conceptually oriented practices and its mission of promoting and disseminating contemporary Colombian artistic production on a national and international level, and to Caro’s desire of bringing

²⁰¹ Camnitzer, “Antonio Caro Visual Guerrilla,” 44.

²⁰² For a detailed explanation of the relationship between artists and art institutions see Tarver “Intrepid Iconoclasts and Ambitious Institutions.”

his art to more and more people.²⁰³ Moreover, the exhibition of Caro's iconic piece within the context of the commercial gallery immediately articulates a paradoxical dynamic that further complicates his relation with institutions because once the piece enters the context of the gallery it acquires an auratic quality, in other words, it becomes a fetishized art object intended to be collected and purchased by institutions that will eventually contribute to producing the "value of the work of art."²⁰⁴

Solely producing replicas in three different sizes of his iconic piece *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, and presenting a book that focuses on his early production, speaks of Caro's nostalgic desire to disseminate his best-known works representing the beginning of his career as an artist, while also revealing a paradoxical desire for his work to become fetishized. The year 2010 symbolizes a significant stage for Caro, as it celebrates an artistic career spanning forty years while inaugurating a new stage in his life marked by special recognitions and acknowledgements. A solo exhibition at a prominent gallery, the donation of his personal archive, the long due publication of his book, his recent participation in international art fairs like the Armory Show, and his presence in international collections like Daros Latinamerica and MIT are indicative of his work's relevance and of the field of production's acknowledgement of its value.

²⁰³ The gallery's mission statement can be viewed at <http://www.casasriegner.com/about-us/>

²⁰⁴ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 229.

Conclusion

A reevaluation of Antonio Caro's work in light of recent events related to Caro's life and work responds to my personal desire to shed light upon the early decade of the seventies, a highly dynamic period in Colombian art history that is crucial for truly comprehending the development of contemporary Colombian art yet remains under relative obscurity. For instance, during the seventies the artworld saw an increase in the country's graphic production that is evidenced by the proliferation of graphic workshops and the emergence of events like the Bienal de Artes Gráficas in Cali that attracted both national and international artists; even Caro began his production of prints at this time. In addition, the disclosure and circulation of art increased thanks to the emergence of innovative art publications like Bernardo Slacedo's broadside *Art-pia* and the magazines *Re-vista* and *Arte en Colombia*. The increase in art events like the Medellín and Cali biennials stimulated people's curiosity and creativity while introducing new ways of seeing and making art to local audiences; exhibitions featuring renowned international artists were showcased by the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá which also gave audiences a chance to react to and learn from alternate art forms. Moreover, city life became more exciting as new movie theaters and art galleries emerged.

During the seventies, the field of art underwent crucial changes that contributed to its dynamism. As seen through the analysis of Caro's work, it was a time when the political tension was deeply felt due to the politics underlying *El Frente Nacional's* bipartisan intercalated governments that weakened the state while revealing its lack of legitimacy and democracy. Although *El Frente* ended during the seventies, it nevertheless awakened harsh criticisms and sentiments of change and reform particularly from the low sectors of society that the government often neglected. These changes reflect a push toward development in the economic and political fields, which were also coincidental to political struggles exacerbated by the policies of developmentalism.

Equally important is the emergence of conceptual approaches that were spurred, at least in part, by a need to deal with political tensions.

The emergence of Colombian conceptually oriented practices during the seventies, as stated by Ivonne Pini and Maria Teresa Guerrero, “initiates a dialogue with the ruptures and well-known propositions of the late sixties.”²⁰⁵ Caro, as we have seen, participates in this continuing process of rupture and furthermore produces a type of art that radically departed from those experimental propositions in Colombia of the sixties that were still permeated by aesthetic approaches. The formal and conceptual radicalness of Caro’s production stems from his critical reflection of his socio-political and cultural context, his rejection of traditional notions of art, and his lack of rigorous artistic training that is constantly calling our attention to a demystified art of far reach. Through the frequent use of ephemeral, precarious yet historically charged materials he is also questioning and rejecting the permanence of a traditional artwork while frequently activating a critique of the commercial aspect of art. Furthermore, Caro’s implementation of the strategy of repetition from as early as 1973 is also a highly radical gesture that defied the traditional idea of the uniqueness of the work of art. Repetition of artworks, themes and tactics, as examined throughout this thesis, is a crucial aspect of Caro’s practice that is both advantageous and unfavorable. On the one hand, when a work is repeated through time, the original context that informed the piece gets lost. Through time, the meaning and relevance of the work change, as precise referents and subtleties that were essential often get forgotten. Moreover, as the meaning of the work changes, its position within art history also alters; this is a major reason why I have ventured into revising works from this period, so as to recuperate the meaning that has been lost as the works have been repeated through time. On the other hand, repetition, reproduction and circulation through time contributed to the iconic quality of the piece. Likewise, the

²⁰⁵ “inicia un diálogo con los rompimientos y propuestas conocidas desde finales de los años sesenta.” Maria Teresa Guerrero and Ivonne Pini, “La experimentación en el arte colombiano del siglo XX. Decada de los años sesenta y setenta,” in *Texto y Contexto* no.22 (October—December 1993), 27.

insistence on certain tactics and a continuous reference to affirmative discourses produced by institutional structures enhance and contribute to the work.

The uniqueness of Caro's formative period (1970—1976) and the ideas underlying key works like *Cabeza de Lleras*, *Aquí no cabe el arte*, *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual*, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, *Marlboro—Colombia*, and *Colombia—Coca-Cola* took a different direction after the eighties. Although all have persisted through time and hold a major place within the artist's portfolio partly due to the strategy of repetition and to agents and institutions (the productive field) that have recognized their social value, their meaning nowadays has somewhat altered. For instance, *Cabeza de Lleras* continues to be a highly significant referent within the artist's entire body of work despite the fact that it has never been repeated. The fact that it continues to be cited and referenced speaks of its enormous relevance even after forty years of its creation. After being re-made and re-exhibited in recent years, the meaning of *Aquí no cabe el arte* has changed as its precise referents and subtleties have been forgotten; its relevance is more general than specific. The different variations based on the historical figure of *Manuel Quintín Lame* that have been exhibited after *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual* (1972), have acquired greater importance as the years have progressed due to the relevance of this historical figure both within and outside the field of art. In contrast, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel* although re-made only once and still holding a major place in Caro's portfolio, nowadays lacks the prominence and relevance that other pieces have acquired. Unlike *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, *Colombia—Marlboro* and *Colombia—Coca-Cola* are works that defy the passing of time as they have been re-exhibited on numerous occasions due to their continuous pertinence. While still engaging viewers, they continue to occupy a major place within Colombian art history.

Caro's journey to Cuiabá, Brazil in 1980, marks an important shift in Caro's practice as it takes on a more communitary and performative tone yet continues to reflect Caro's essence and his commitment to society. During the eighties and nineties, although continuing with his exploration of symbols, the artist began to experiment with poetry

and carry out his “didactic actions”²⁰⁶ involving the participation and intervention of communities. Key works from this period include: *Proyecto Quinientos* (1987-1992) (Fig. 4.7), an ambitious series developed over time which sought to stimulate audiences from different cities like Medellín, Lima, Cuenca, Guayaquil and Quito, to reflect on the true meaning of the discovery of the Americas; and *Dulce Zipacón* (Fig. 4.8), an artistic action presented at the exhibition *Ante-América* (1992) that featured the artista as a cook who then distributed *dulce de papayuela* to his audience.²⁰⁷ Likewise, the project *Killkawawa* literally meaning “letter-child” in the Inga dialect—was developed in region of Putumayo in 1994 and then presented at the Luis Angel Arango Library in Bogotá.²⁰⁸ The project was above all an educational project that aimed at preparing didactic material for indigenous children from different municipalities within Putumayo located in the south west of Colombia. In his efforts to interact with different communities in order to educate and lead others consequently generating followers and a public, one could claim that Caro became a sort of *intellectual* in a Gramscian sense.²⁰⁹ Moreover, even though there is an evident divergence between Caro’s early works and his production of the eighties and nineties, there is also a strong correspondence and cohesiveness in all his artistic production that demonstrates a true commitment to his social context thereby reminding us that *Caro es de todos*, that he belongs to all.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ “acciones didacticas” Miguel González, *Todo esta muy caro*, 6.

²⁰⁷ Dulce de papayuela is a typical Colombian dessert made with papyuela (fruit).

²⁰⁸ “El lenguaje por Intuición,” *El Espectador* (June 16, 1994).

²⁰⁹ Eric Hobsbawm explains that Gramsci redefined the term intellectual to refer to “anyone whose function in society is primarily that of organizing, administering, directing, educating or leading others.” *The Antonio Gramsci Reader Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 300.

²¹⁰ *Caro es de todos* (Caro Belongs to All) is one of Caro’s works and the title of his solo exhibition presented at the Alianza Colombo Francesa in Bucaramanga, Colombia in 2009.



Fig.1.1. Antonio Caro, Exhibition View of *Réplicas*, Casas Riegner Gallery, 2010, Bogotá



Fig.1.2. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, 2010, enamel on metal sheet, Casas Riegner Gallery, Bogotá



Fig. 1.3. Antonio Caro, *Antes de Cuiabá*, detail of book display at Casas Riegner Gallery, 2010, Bogotá



Fig. 1.4. View of book display at Casas Riegner Gallery, 2010, Bogotá



Fig.1.5. Exterior view, façade of Casas Riegner Gallery, 2010, Bogotá



‘No quiero que mi archivo se pudra en mi casa’

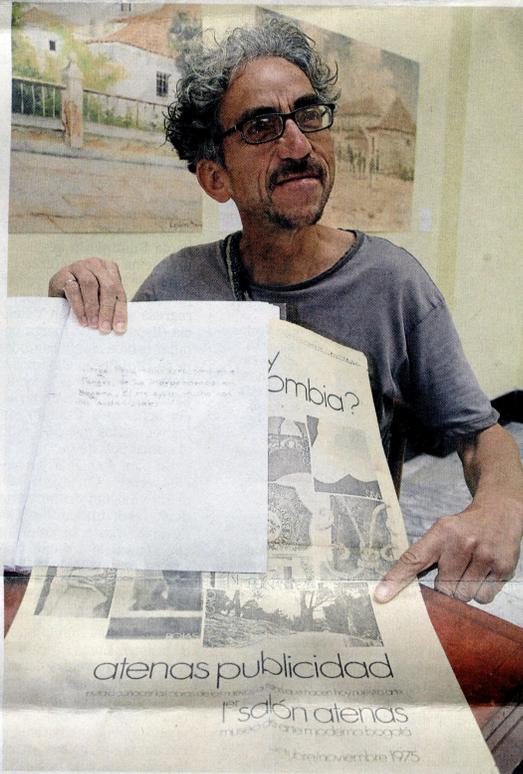
El artista **Antonio Caro** donó a la **Biblioteca Nacional** su archivo particular de los años 70.

Paola Villamarín
Subeditora de Cultura

Antes de saber en qué sección estará el tomo con los documentos y las obras que le donó a la Biblioteca Nacional, Antonio Caro —considerado el artista conceptual más importante de Colombia— se aventuró a decir que debían ubicarlo en la colección de “libros raros”.

Y no lo dice del todo en broma. El tomo, titulado *...antes le Cuiabá*, contiene documentos y piezas artísticas de los 70, de sus inicios, que intentan explicar cómo surgió qué pasaba por la cabeza de este artista, que escandalizó por su rebeldía y su rechazo al *glamour*, pero sobre todo por su forma de hacer y pensar el arte.

Son textos de su puño y letra, recortes de artículos periodísticos y especializados, páginas de ilustraciones que hizo para revistas culturales. La primera edición de las únicas obras *Colombia-Co-*



“En esta época posterior a las utopías hay que ser modesto. Uno, en realidad, hace cositas”.

Antonio Caro, artista bogotano SOBRE SUS OBRAS CONCEPTUALES

Antonio Caro donó, entre otras, obras como ‘Todo está muy caro’ y ‘Colombia-Marlboro’.
Fotos: Milton Díaz/EL TIEMPO

Fig. 1.6. Antonio Caro, *No quiero que mi archivo se pudra en mi casa*, El Tiempo, December 11, 2010, Bogotá

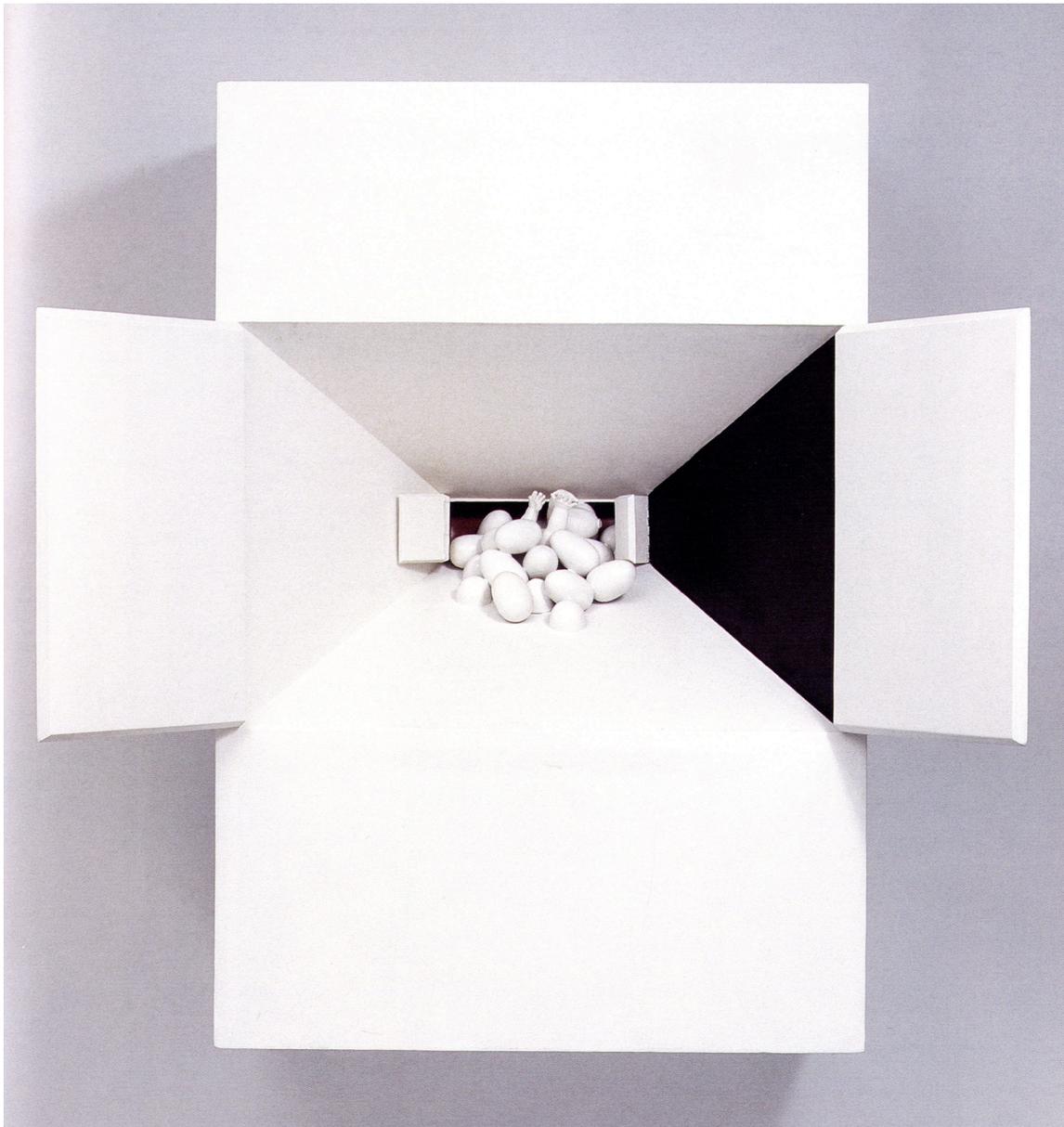


Fig. 1.7. Bernardo Salcedo, *Lo que dante nunca supo: Beatriz amaba el control de la natalidad*, 1966, assemblage



Fig. 1.8. Bernardo Salcedo, *Hectárea de heno*, hay and polyethylene sacks, as installed in the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango in 2000; originally shown at the II Bienal Internacional de Arte Coltejer, [Medellin], 1970

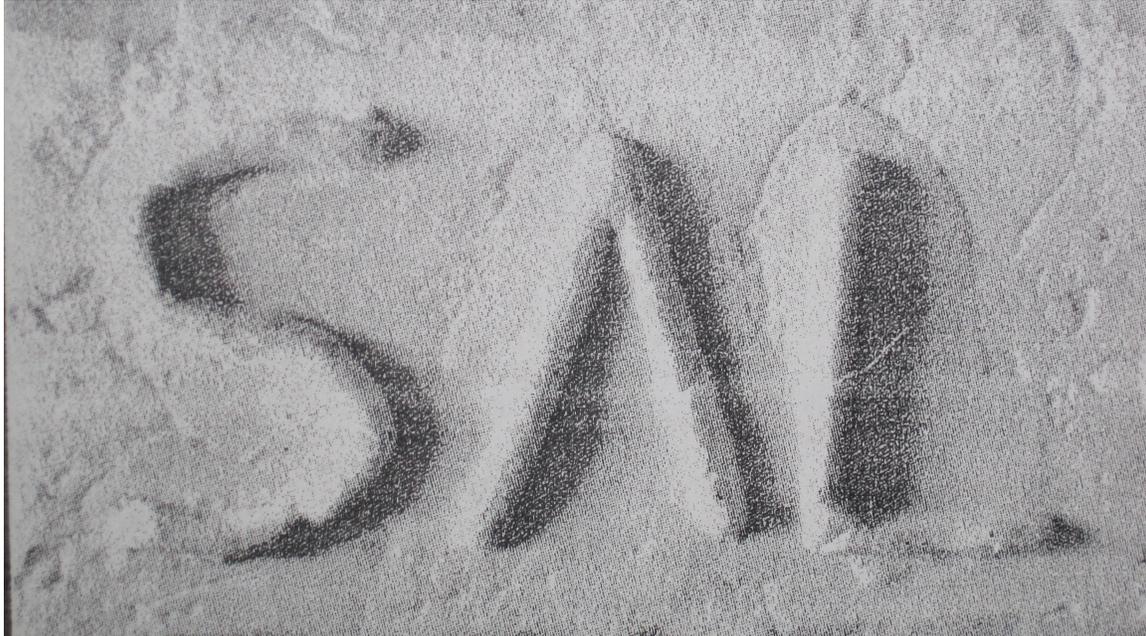


Fig. 1.9. Antonio Caro, *SAL (Salt)*, 1971, Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas, Cali



Fig. 1.10. Bernardo Salcedo, *Plana (No debo pasar la noche en blanco)*, 1970, pencil on paper

**Un repollo.
(No hay más)**

**En una mesa hay una piña,
dos cebollas.
Y se ven dos vasijas.**

**Dos naranjas.
(Solas)**

Fig. 1.11. Bernardo Salcedo, *Bodegones*, 1972, triptych, three metal boards with inscriptions

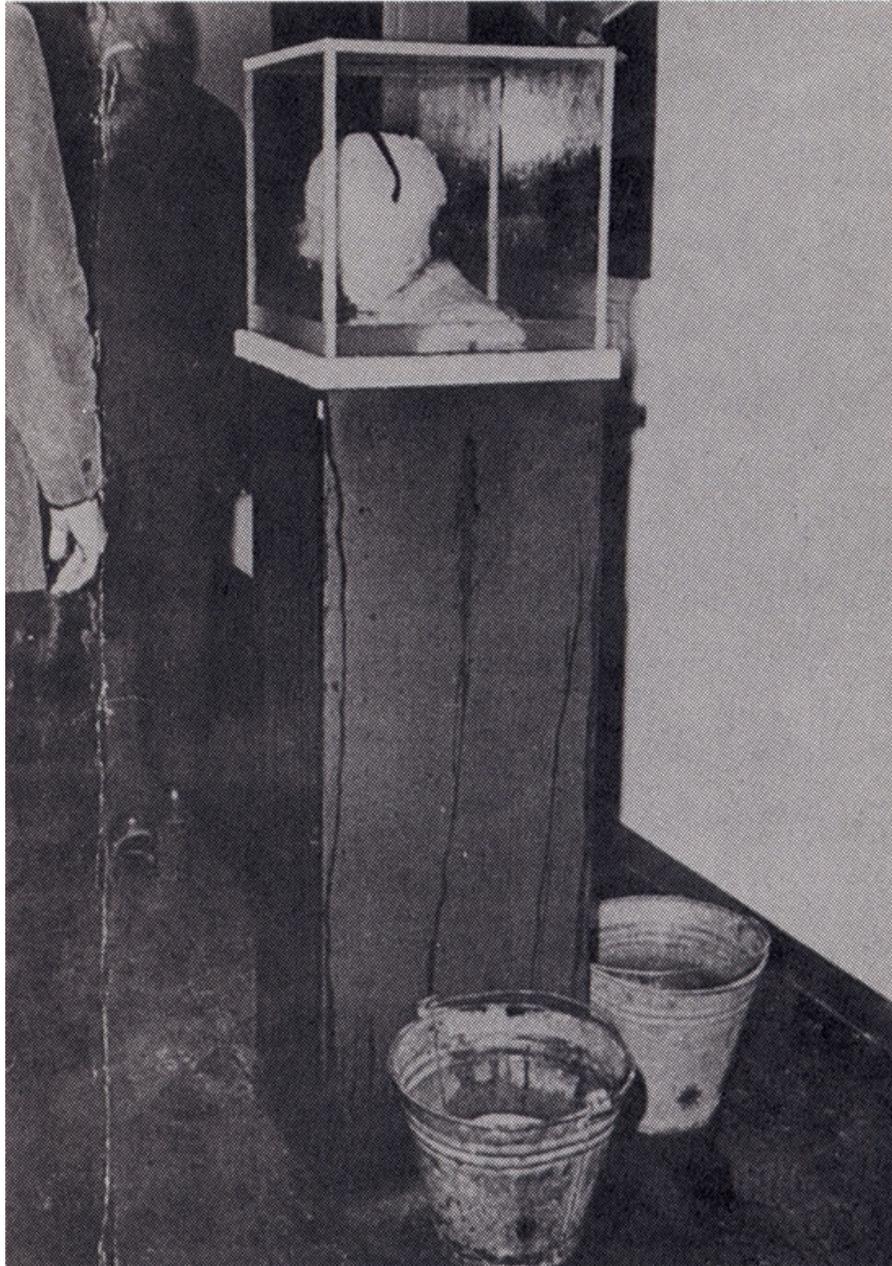


Fig.1.12. Antonio Caro, *Homenaje tardío de sus amigos y amigas de Zipaquirá, Manaure y Galerazamba / Cabeza de Lleras*, 1970, XXI Salón Nacional de Artistas, Bogotá



Fig.2.1. Antonio Caro, *Aquí no cabe el arte*, as installed at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá in 1999; originally shown at the XXIII Salón Nacional de Artistas, Bogotá, in 1972. Courtesy of the artist



Fig.2.2. Antonio Caro, *Aquí no cabe el arte*, 2002. Marca Registrada: Salon Nacional de Artistas: Tradición y vanguardia en el arte colombiano



Fig. 2.3. Clemencia Lucena, 1971 *Marca las marchas campesinas*, 1971, XXIII Salón de Artistas Nacionales, Bogotá



Fig. 2.4. Maria Victoria Benito-Revollo, *Invación*, 1972, XIII Salón de Artistas Nacionales, Bogotá

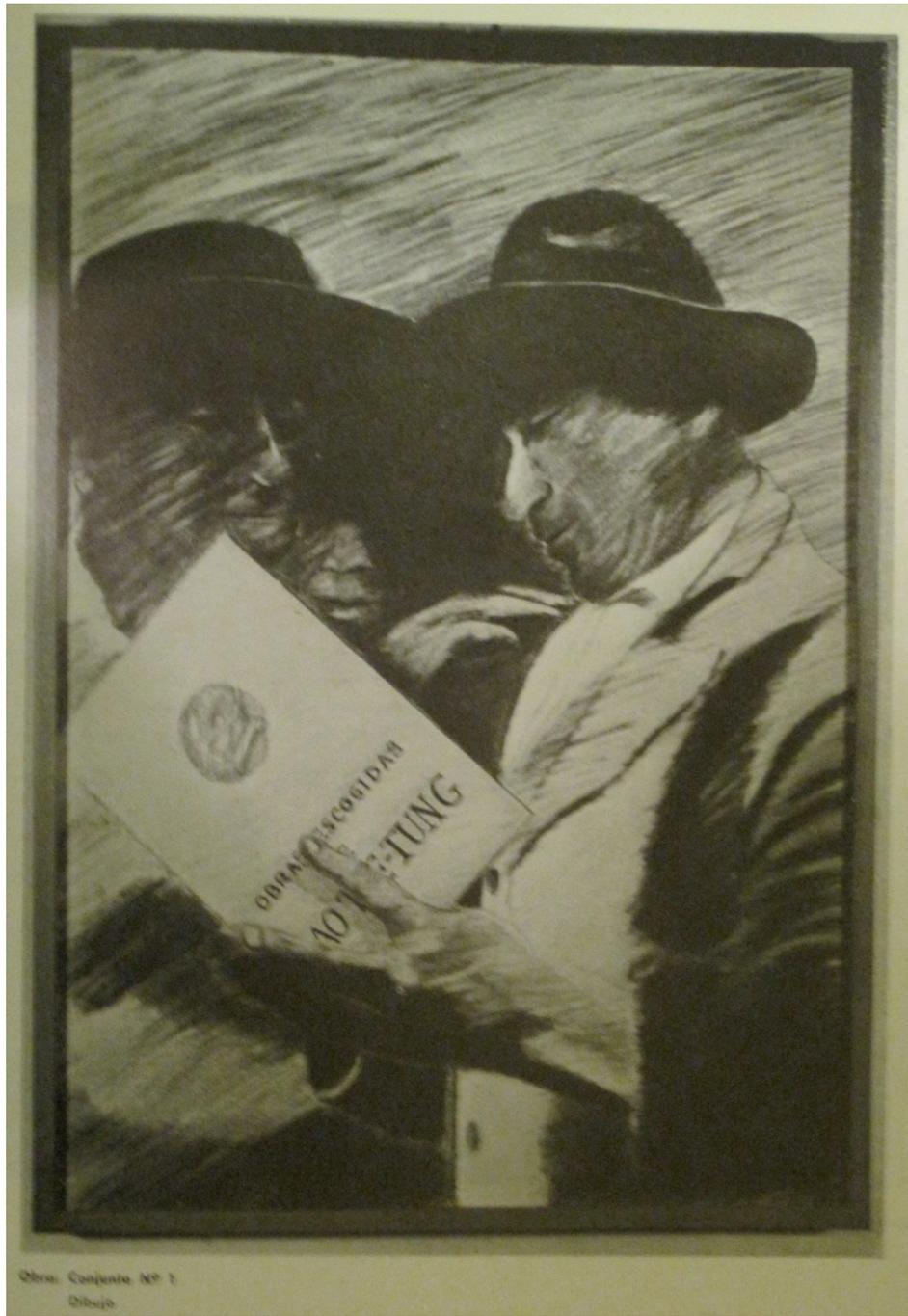


Fig. 2.5. Maria Teresa-Nieto, *Conjunto No. 1*, 1972, XIII Sal3n de Artistas Nacionales, Bogot3

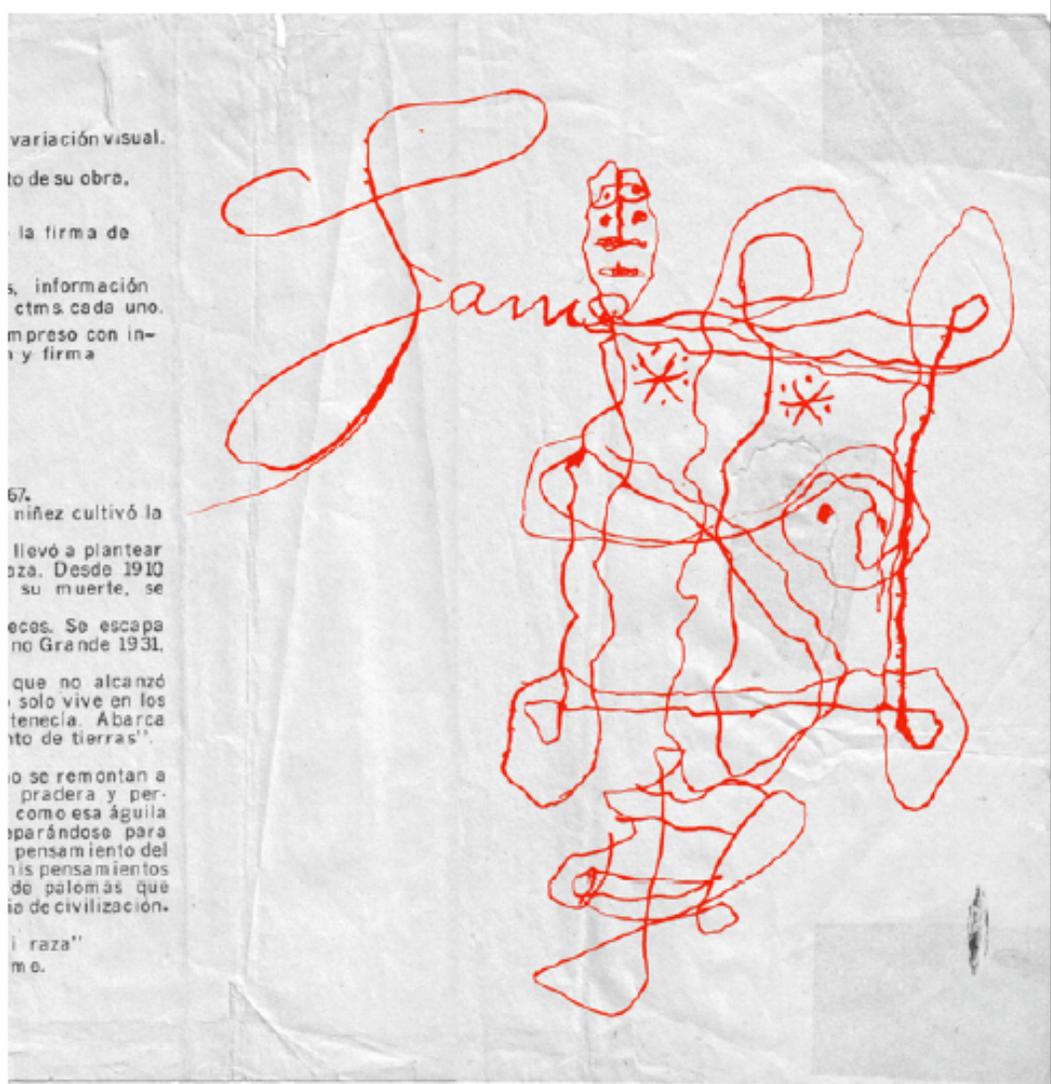


Fig.2.6. Antonio Caro, *Manuel Quintín Lame información y variación visual*, 1972, Salón Independiente, Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogotá. Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 3.1. Antonio Caro, *El imperialismo es un tigre de papel*, 1973, Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá. Photo by Robayo for *La República*



Fig.3.2. Antonio Caro, *El Imperialismo es un tigre de papel* (detail), 1973. Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4.1. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Marlboro*, 1973, Galeria San Diego, Bogotá, Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4.2. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Marlboro* (detail), 1973, Galeria San Diego, Bogotá, Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4.3. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Marlboro*, small card, 1975, I Salón Atenas, Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá



Fig. 4.4. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Marlboro*, 1975, image of the slide show presented at the I Salón Atenas, Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, Courtesy of the artist

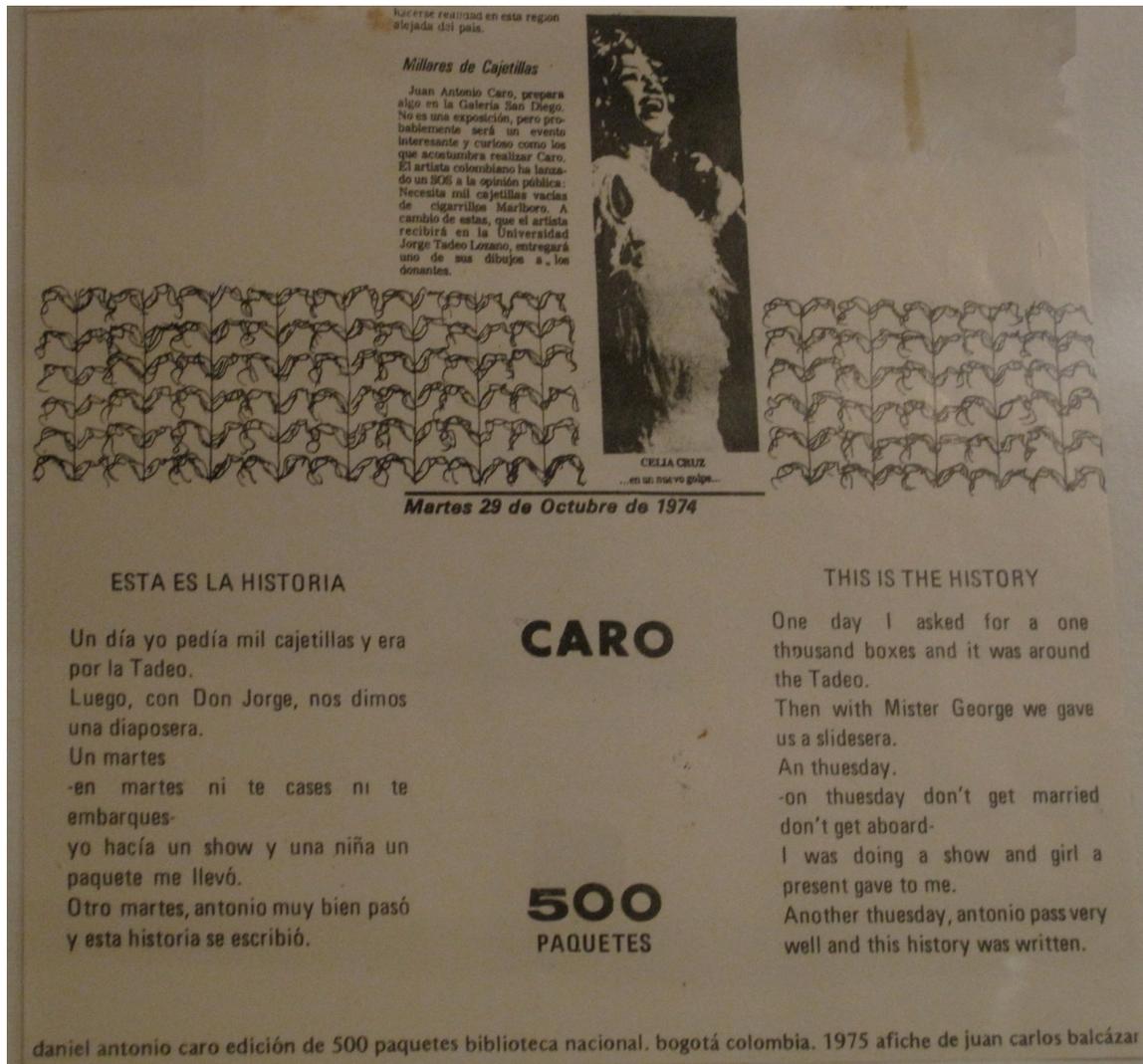


Fig. 4.5. Antonio Caro, *500 Paquetes*, 1975, poster, Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá



Fig.4.6. Antonio Caro, *Colombia—Coca-Cola*, 1976, enamel on metal sheet, XXVI Salón Nacional de Artistas, Bogotá



Fig.4.7. Antonio Caro, *Proyecto 500*, 1987-1992



Fig. 4.8. Antonio Caro, *Dulce Zipacón*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist

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