“Right to Difference”—Museo del Barro, Paraguay

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Occasionally art writers voice a nostalgia for the 1950s, the height of the Modern Era, when artists belonged to discreet art movements, galleries and museums were finite, and art critics were major power brokers who articulated art theory and cleaved good from bad art. Today’s post-modern art world is bewildering in its diversity, accelerated by the global reach of the Internet. Theoretically, at least, artists from all backgrounds, genders, races, ages, and ethnicities can claim a piece of the Post-Modern art world.

So how to make sense of the tens—or hundreds—of thousands of artists active in the world, especially with no powerful art critics to arbitrate, and with the illusion of linear progression shattered? Major art fairs, usually biennials, are experiencing unprecedented growth. Museums and other institution operate as gatekeepers. Curators, art historians, and writers advocate for their chosen artists and art communities.

While artists might try to resist labels, auction houses, appraisers, museums, curators, and others label art to make sense of and to ascribe value to it. Borderlines are drawn. The mainstream art world remains staunchly hierarchical and Eurocentric. Even as anthropology and other human sciences try to overcome their historical Western biases and institutional racism, the mainstream art world lags behind. Non-Western artists are still labeled as “Ethnic.” “Tribal art” or “indigenous art” is seen as being in opposition to “contemporary art,” as if tribes and indigenous peoples live outside of the sphere of time — dwelling in the unchanging ethnographic present instead of participating in the 21st century. Even NMAI, theoretically "our" museum, labels its historic collections as "Ethnographic."

Yet some few institution reject Western art hierarchies and divisions. The Museo del Barro in Asunción, Paraguay is such a place. In fact, in 1989, the United Nations recognized the museum for “as an institution organized around non-Western principles and subjects” (Legrás 188). Chilean art critic and curator, Justo Pastor Mellado wrote about the museum for the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, headquartered in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the ZKM later featured the museum as their "MoCA of the Month" (ZKM).

What’s so special about the Museo del Barro? It crosses those boundaries entrenched in the mainstream art world. In the words of Justo Pastor Mellado, an art critic and curator from Santiago, the Museo del Barro features “a collection where frontiers between indigenous art, popular art and contemporary art had never been

established" (Mellado 310) and this fluid approach to curating reflects an "expanded adaptability, without trauma" (Mellado 312). The Museo del Barro is a conscious effort to expose very different communities to each others' art without comprising or disguising the artists' personal visions or cultural backgrounds.

In truth, the Museo del Barro is several institutions combined in one and housed together in the capital city of Paraguay. Museo del Barro features pre-Columbian, historical, and contemporary indigenous art, alongside contemporary ceramic art, and contemporary conceptual art. The art collections from various communities are represented in sufficiently large numbers as to avoid tokenism.

Paraguay

The Paraguayan government conducted a census of its indigenous population in 2002 and concluded that only 1.7% of its population is indigenous (CIA), which, with high birth rates, is estimated to be 100,000 people today. To qualify as being indigenous in Latin American requires one to have little to no European blood, live in an indigenous community, and/or speak one's tribal language. Criteria are much stricter than in the United States. Meanwhile, a full 95% of the Paraguayan population is mestizo—that is, of mixed Indian and Spanish descent—though they typically don't identify as being indigenous (CIA). Guaraní is the national language along with Spanish.

Paraguay, a landlocked country in the center of South America, was ruled by the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner from 1954 to 1989 (Fraser). Under the dictatorship, opportunities for artists were limited, but Grupo Arte Nuevo, founded by artist Olga Binder in 1953 created modern art exhibits in the streets or shop windows of Asunción (Fraser). Paraguayan modern artists drew upon indigenous art forms, such as petroglyphs, as inspiration for abstract art (Fraser). During the dictatorship, the painter, author, and architect, Carlos Colombino challenged authority through coded messages in his art (Fraser). It was "artists, rather than writers, [who] played a leading role in the democratic consolidation after the Stroessner dictatorship" (Legrás 187). Mellado writes that, "Museums are the ideological cement from which nations are built" (Mellado 209), and in Paraguay's case, this is absolutely true.

Founding the museum

The Museo del Barro came together from various grassroots efforts by artists and writers in the 1970s. In 1972, Olga Blinder and Carlos Colombino created a circulating collection of 2-D art that they exhibited in various schools and public spaces. Their collection expanded to include sculpture and installations and needed a permanent home (ZKM). Meanwhile Colombino also collaborated with Ticio

Escobar, anthropologist, art critic, and dealer, and Ysanne Gayet, a British activist on projects in the city of San Lorenzo.

Construction began in 1979 on a museum building, which was completed and open for exhibits in 1984 (ZKM). Carlos Colombino, Osvaldo Salerno, and Ysanna Gayet founded the Museo del Barro in 1980, with a collection of 800 ceramic works, including prehistoric Guaraní pottery. In 1987 the Centro de Artes Visuales was founded, joining the Museo del Barro. A tornado damaged the building in 1993, and the next two and half years were spent raising funds and rebuilding. In the reconstruction, the separated galleries were connected, and when the museum opened in 1995, new exhibits of indigenous art, curated by Ticio Escobar, were on display (ZKM)

The museum remains active in the international art world. In 2007, Escobar and Mellado submitted "Complejo Museo del Barro/Obra institucional" [The Barro Museum Complex/Institutional Work] to the Bienal de Valencia, Spain. "Our purpose," writes Mellado, "was to demonstrate the existence of ethnical, formal, and political resistance, in a minoritarian curatorial practice" (Mellado 312).

Ticio Escobar

Ticio Escobar, Paraguay's leading art critic (Fraser), has played a major role in the development of the museum. Author of *Una Interpretación de las Artes Visuals en el Paraguay*, Escobar is a curator, art writer, anthropologist, and lawyer, who has advocated for the rights of Paraguayan Indians, many of whom live in dire poverty without rights to their land or access to even clean drinking water, much less electricity, education, or healthcare.

Escobar has definite views about "the confused site of art criticism" (Escobar 2). "The art critic confronts the work of art and ventures a reading that, in the best of cases, does nothing more than incite other readings and suggest other possible points of entry," he writes and then follows with a viable course of action for today's art critic. "Faced with the urgent presence of the work of art the critic erects his own reading: for such a task his point of view is necessary. He does not set out to decipher the work of art, to describe it objectively, or judge it; instead his gaze confronts it, intersects it, and seeks to shake it, frame it, and turn it into the focal point of other gazes" (Escobar 2).

The Ishir

Most interesting is Escobar's 2007 book, *The Curse of Nemur: The Art, Myth, and Ritual of the Ishir*, as well the journey that led to the book.

In 1983, Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno, director of the Museo del Barro, attended the São Paulo Bienale. After seeing the exhibition, "Arte Plúmeria do Brasil" (Feathers Arts of Brazil), the two men were inspired to curate a similar exhibition showcasing indigenous Paraguayan featherwork. For two years they collected the works that would form the indigenous collection of the Museo del Barro. Besides the aesthetic and artistic concerns, the show was politically motivated. In Escobar’s words, they wanted to present “the indigenous peoples not through what they lack (and they lack much, of course), but rather through what they make (which is among the best art produced in Paraguay) as a way to support their right to difference" (Escobar 262).

Over the next two years, the men collected featherwork from all 17, Paraguayan native peoples except the Ishir, also known as the Chamacoco. The Ishir ceremonies for which feather regalia was made had been all but wiped out by missionaries. However, one group of Ishir, the Tomáraho, had risked extinction by evading the missionaries, by living in an abandoned sawmill in remote forests (Escobar 6). They continued to hold the annual Debylyby ceremony, in which social pacts are renewed and the tribe collectively mourns (Mellado 312).

Justo Pastor Mellado cites the Debylyby ceremony as an inspiration for his curatorial theory, and he writes, ““It is almost as if a myth from the Paraguayan jungle anticipated the theory of the appearance of the museum as a key institution in the construction of the Republic” (Mellado 313).

The relationships the curators built with the Tomáraho band of Ishir included assisting them in moving to reserved Ishir territory at Puerto Esperanza (not without its own problems), where the Tomáraho retaught the Debylyby ceremony to members of the Ebytoso, another band of Ishar.

The years working with the Ishir are outlined in Escobar’s *The Curse of Nemur*, a book of art criticism informed by structuralism and post-structuralism (Escobar xvi). Escobar says that the spheres of “art, myth, and ceremony” can each be examined from the perspectives of “religion, shamantic magic, and history” as art is “the object of plurality of gazes” (Escobar 2). He examines corporal art—body painting—and featherwork, in the context of Ishir cosmology and oral history and discusses at great length Ishir color theory.

This is huge. Instead of waiting for the indigenous Paraguayans create art in Western media and exhibit in western institutions, Escobar travels to remote Ishir communities and devotes an entire volume of serious art criticism to traditional Ishir art forms. Where does this happen in the United States? Our indigenous art forms are usually dismissed in art circles as "old" or "ethnographic," as if our featherwork, beadwork, textiles, carvings, ceramics, etc. are made by the anthropologists, not the indigenous artists.

Escobar writes "to underline the value of indigenous culture and to present it not only as a site of dispossession and marginality but also as a place of creativity and ethnic self-affirmation…" This internationally known art critic devotes his energies to traditional Ishir arts because "Indigenous people are not only the most exploited and humiliated inhabitants of this country: they are also great artists and poets, creators of worldviews, inventors of alternative ways of feeling and thinking in this world (Escobar 4).

Ultimately, the museum secured five pieces of Ishir ceremonial regalia from the Debylyby, including feathers masks and textiles (ZKM), but more important were relationships forged.

Museo del Barro Collections and Mission

Currently, the museum has three main divisions, described as the "urban, peasant-popular, and indigenous" (Legrás 188), which are respectively represented by the Contemporary Art Museum (MPAC), the Museo del Barro (Clay Museum), the Indigenous Art Museum (MAI). The current directors are Osvaldo Salerno (MdB), Lia Colombino (MAI), and Carlos Colombino (CAV) (ZKM).

MPAC focuses on contemporary Latin American and specifically Paraguayan visual art, but also includes Spanish art in its collections of over 3000 items (ZKM)

The Museo del Barro has a permanent collection of over 4000 art works, including ceremonial and festival masks, retablos, ceramics, woodcarving, works in gold and silver, and ñandutí, fine colonial silver and cotton lace dating from the 18th century (ZKM). The campesino art is showcased in a downtown Asunción gallery sponsored by a local bank (Legrás 188, 195).

The Museum of Indigenous Art's collection now includes over 2000 artworks by all 17 indigenous Paraguayan tribes (Legrás 195) and includes woodcarving, featherwork, beadwork, textiles, baskets, and masks, with 300 pre-Columbian ceramics (ZKM). According to the Paraguay Travel Guide, the pre-colonial Guaraní pottery is the most population attraction. Ramón Duarte (Guaraní) is an contemporary Native sculptor, whose zoomorphic cedar carvings form part of the collection (ZKM).

"The items were selected with the purpose of enhancing their expressive value and form quality over their ethnographic, historic and technical references, which are normally the only values to be considered by conventional museums and galleries" (ZKM). While much of the collection was gathered by anthropologists, indigenous people have also donated directly to the museum (ZKM) — a positive step towards community self-representation in the absence of tribal museums.

Additional facets of the museum are the Visual Art Center (CAV) and the Center for Research and Documentation (CDI) , devoted to “ the recovery and preservation of indigenous and peasant art in Paraguay” (Legrás 188). These centers’ mission is “the gathering and diffusion of expressions of the rural and native cultures, always with the purpose of emphasizing the pluricultural nature of the country” (ZKM).

Besides producing exhibitions and publications, the museum hosts workshops, award prizes, provides educational events. Mellado says the museum received little financial support from the Paraguayan government, so it is funded by artists and the international community (Mellado 314). A museum shop for rural craftwork was funded by the Government of Canada from 1993 to 1996 (ZKM). Despite the international assistance, “models evolved by First World institutions are not necessarily replicated in places like Paraguay” (Mellado 314). Instead he is “conceiving of the museum as a house of contemporary myth” (314), one of many potential museums that could “serve as points of resistance as well as of collective memory and the recreation of national narratives” (32).

By dissolving boundaries between indigenous, non-indigenous, ancient, historical, and contemporary art, while remaining actively engaged in both rural communities and the international art world, the Museo del Barro exemplifies "institutional flexibility” (Mellado 312). Mellado writes that "in a residual world without frontiers in which indigenous production is protected, a hybrid form escapes the control that any institution of cultural control could exert" (Mellado 312).

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