

# Incorporated Vision: Artistic Critiques of the Development Discourse in Latin America

Ana María Reyes (Boston University)

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza tres trabajos claves del arte latinoamericano en los años sesentas y setentas : *La Destrucción* (1963) de la artista argentina Marta Minujín, *La Muerte del Justo y La Muerte del Pecador* (1973) de la artista colombiana Beatriz González y *Mandala* (1969) de la artista brasilera Lygia Clark. Estas obras desdibujan las líneas entre el cuerpo del artista, el espectador o participante y la obra de arte, haciendo perceptible la constitución somática, histórica, social e ideológica de la visión. De tal modo, estas obras perforan el mito de la contemplación desinteresada u objetiva del racionalismo científico que sostuvo el discurso desarrollista y por lo tanto las relaciones de poder durante la Guerra Fría.

**Palabras clave:** América Latina, artes visuales, cuerpo, visión, desarrollismo

## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes three key works of Latin American art in the 1960s and 1970s: *La Destrucción* (1963) by Argentine artist Marta Minujín, *La Muerte del Justo y la Muerte del Pecador* (1973) by the Colombian artist Beatriz González, and *Mandala* (1969) by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. These works blur the lines between body of the artist, the spectator or participant and the work of art, making intelligible the somatic, historical, social, and ideological constitution of vision. In doing so, these works puncture the myth of the disinterested or objective gaze of scientific rationalism that buttressed development discourse and thus Cold War power relations

**Keywords:** Latin American, art, body, vision, development discourse

## Incorporated Vision: Artistic Critiques of the Development Discourse in Latin America

**Ana María Reyes (Boston University)**

The subject of this essay emerged out of an invitation to consider “feminism” in Latin American art history<sup>1</sup>. This question is complicated when many leading women artists in Latin America disavow the term and dismiss feminist theory as a “mirada gringa.” This characterization of feminism as a foreign gaze reveals a distrust of Western forms of knowledge-production about (neo) colonized subjects. Chandra Mohanty’s seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes,” shows that the conception of Third World women as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, and victimized serves as a foil to constructing an image of First World women in antithetical terms: as educated, modern, and in control of their own bodies and sexuality (Mohanty, 1991). Likewise in Latin America, many women intellectuals criticize feminist theory as both a theoretical import not applicable to their context (La Duke, 1985), as well as a form of defining and controlling the so-called Third World by the First<sup>2</sup>. However, a critical model for Latin America must acknowledge that in the context of neocolonialism, oppression of both men and women comes from a deeply patriarchic hierarchical and authoritative structure. I propose that artistic practices that render visible and challenge the paternalistic structure of geopolitical power relations – the infantilization of so-called “underdeveloped” subjects – can benefit from the instruments of feminist theory in estranging or decoding normative gender discourses that buttress power relations.

Central to this essay is the conceptualization of vision, perpetuated through the development discourse during the post-World War II era, as a disembodied mental activity or a distanced and disinterested gaze. Bodies are present in development theory only in so far as they are objects of study with no acknowledgement of the bodies of those who are doing the studying and exerting power. Visualizing nations as First and Third Worlds, according to Arturo Escobar, was a way of redefining power relations in a post-colonial era. It was also a way to redress the European

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<sup>1</sup> Association for Latin American Art History, “Questioning feminism in Latin American art histories” at the College Art Association in New York (2013) organized by Harper Montgomery and Aleca LeBlanc.

<sup>2</sup> The first public mention of this distinction between the developed and underdeveloped nations as well as the responsibility of the former to develop the latter was given during Truman’s inaugural address in 1949 (Sachs, 1992).

civilizing mission with a U.S. centered technological and scientific guise (Escobar, 1995). The type of economic and political dominance that the West sustained through colonial governance was now reconfigured into a system of tutelage under the rubric of developing the “underdeveloped world.” Vision was implicated in the sense of envisioning nations and subjects as underdeveloped and in visualizing or engineering a more modern, updated future, in the mirror *image* of the West. Around mid-twentieth century, so called “experts,” armed with scientific legitimacy, *observed*, identified problems, and formulated corrective measures. These included interventions into all aspects of post-colonial societies from their economies to their subjects’ private lives, often with devastating consequences. In the visual arts, this tutored form of vision was embodied by art critics imported to identify the “most advanced” forms of visual expression at international art competitions, including the Esso Salons, the São Paulo, Córdoba, and Medellín biennials, among many others.

This connection led me to study women artists who problematize the “foreign gaze” as a discursive construct. That is not to say that only women have inserted the body into their practices as a way to probe the historical contingency of vision. After all, Hélio Oiticica’s participatory *Parangóles* are the most renowned examples of artistic socio-visual embodiments. Nevertheless, since “woman” as category has been historically constituted through the male gaze, I argue that women artists add a poignant charge when they instrumentalize and thus estrange this “gaze” in political terms<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, we must interrogate the use-value of a term like feminism in the expanded field, predicated on dismantling systems of power and oppression that are not limited to either sex or gender, but instead intervening as an activist force to critique social ills that impose inequality. It serves as an effective entry point into understanding that, in the context of neocolonialism, oppression comes from a deeply patriarchic social structure.

I depart from the concept the foreign gaze and argue that artists, whose work interrogated a disembodied scientific notion of vision or an external watchful gaze, uncovered deeply patriarchic hierarchies, even if they did not conceive of their work as feminist. To access this critique, I discuss three works by Marta Minujín, Beatriz González, and Lygia Clark, to demonstrate that Latin American women artists have indeed exacted important artistic critiques of development discourse, uncovering structures of oppression by turning its “penetrating gaze,” in the Foucauldian sense,

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<sup>3</sup> It has been the unfortunate trend in art historical literature to equate women’s artistic practices with their body or biography in sharp contrast to the separation of the intellectual or political objectives of male artists from their private lives. Perhaps the most salient case in Latin America would be the historiographic equation of Frida Kahlo’s art with her own personal biography tied to her corporeal and emotional pain whereas her partner Diego Rivera’s art has been studied in relation to the public, political and disembodied ideals of the Mexican Revolution, despite the fact that Kahlo was deeply invested in the political debates of her time (Lindauer, 1999). My study places the agency in the artist’s hand and does not equate the work of art to the body of the artist. Instead the works discussed here complicate vision as an autonomous field and implicate the social body in the act of seeing.

back upon itself. They were, in fact, challenging the “top-down” surveillance of development ideology and the infantilization of the so-called Third World implicit in neo-colonial global relations supported by local military and the governing elite.

#### LIBERATION



Marta Minujín, *La Destrucción*  
Impasse Ronson, June 8, 1963

Photo:  
Shunk-Kender © J.Paul Getty Trust.  
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. (2014.R.20)

The Argentine artist Marta Minujín spent part of 1962 and 1963 in Paris, during which time she became close to the *Nouveau Réaliste* circle surrounding art critic Pierre Restany. Restany, who remained a life-long friend and supporter of Minujín, defined the movement’s strategy as one that interrogated the corporeal reality of found objects rather than their pictorial or sculptural representations. During this time Minujín worked on assemblages using found and altered boxes and mattresses, drawing attention to the corporeal, tactile, and private sphere (Noorthoorn, 2010).

As the closing event to Minujín’s 1963 joint exhibition in her Paris studio with the Venezuelan Alejandro Otero and Portuguese Lourdes Castro, she staged the manipulation and destruction of her work as one of her

many happening-events<sup>4</sup>. What would have been a small semi-private exhibition of emerging artists, Minujín turned into a spectacular splash in the vacant lot of the Impasse Ronson<sup>5</sup>. Well known and discussed as *La Destrucción*, the event consisted of a two-part performance. In Act I: Minujín directed several artists to transform her assemblages according to their individual styles, whether made “Pop” by Erik Beynom or “Abstract Expressionist” by Manolo Hernández. In the case of Lourdes Castro, she covered Minujín’s work with her signature silver paint. Minujín instructed poet Élie-Charles Flammand to intervene using surgical gloves and scissors. In Act II: Minujín instructed performance artist Paul Gette to ax the works while hooded as an executioner. She then released five hundred birds and one hundred rabbits. At the close, Minujín set on fire all the works she had produced during her Parisian sojourn (Noorthoorn: p. 51). In this grand finale – her works in full blaze – the smoke would have irritated spectator’s eyes and obstructed all forms of vision, a poignant reminder of the somatic and contingent experience of sight.



Marta Minujín, *La Destrucción*  
Impasse Ronson, June 8, 1963

Photo:  
Shunk-Kender © J.Paul Getty Trust.  
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. (2014.R.20)

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<sup>4</sup> Minujín’s studio was located at 22 Rue Delambre (the joint exhibition took place from May 30 to June 6, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> She widely publicized through museums and galleries in Paris “Le jour de la fermeture à 19 h. Marta Minujín détruira ses oeuvres” photographed by Harry Shunk. Minujín, Lourdes Castro, Alejandro Otero, Erik Beynom, Christo, Élie-Charles Flammand, Paul Gette, Manolo Hernandez, Jean-Jacques Lebel and Daniel Pommereauille moved works to the vacant lot of the Impasse Rossin. (Noorthoorn, 2010: 51).

This orchestrated intervention upon her works challenged notions of authorship and blurred the lines between body of work and human body. The latter boundary disappeared altogether when Christo physically wrapped her body onto one of her assemblages. Minujín orchestrated Christo's signature wrappings to make this connection literal, but in this case she became the *objet trouvé*<sup>6</sup>. When Minujín released her body from Christo's bondage, she was metaphorically liberating the female body from the pictorial plane and hence the object (whether found or represented) of the male gaze.

In my view *La Destrucción* is orchestral rather than collaborative because Minujín used others in her own symphonic score: she activated artists and their styles like instruments in a grand *concerto*, all performed to the ritualistic beat of the bongo drum. Art historian Andrea Giunta made a similar observation in describing Minujín's activation of other artists' like strokes of the paintbrush. Giunta describes how Minujín was concerned with the photographic representation of the event, thus conceiving of the composition pictorially, as a grand gesture that turned her Parisian output, everything she had "digested" in Paris, into an astutely transportable medium: sensational news (Giunta, 2001: 150-151). Whether an orchestral or spectacular arrangement Minujín made her work an action upon action. By doing so, she disclosed relations of power not to be found in the search for a universal truth but rather in the mechanism by which subjects control the actions of others, as defined by Foucault (1982). In destroying all of her Parisian oeuvre she liberated herself from the Euro-centric and paternalistic hold on the Latin American imagination<sup>7</sup>. In this framework, Minujín's *La Destrucción* could be seen as both a violent liberation from the Western standard and a challenge to disinterested and contemplative vision. *La Destrucción*, therefore, conjoined historically constituted *gendered* and *colonized* subjects. Like a father who wants his child to grow up in his likeness, "developed" nations implemented corrective measures so that nations in "lesser stages of development" could do the same. When Minujín destroys the outcome of her European apprenticeship she metaphorically challenged the paternalistic structure of one-way tutelage implicit in *desarrollista* prescriptive social, political, and economic measures.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Christo's online webpage lists the work "wrapped woman" in 1963, denying the individual her identity (perhaps, but not clearly, Minujín) as had the term Christo concealed until 1995 that it referenced both a male (Christo) and female (Jeanne Claude) creative partnership. It is not clear whether the wrapped woman is indeed Minujín, but he did wrap her around the same time and either titled it anonymously as her work, omitted the event altogether, or acknowledged that it was not his authorship (although Minujín was clearly questioning the very premise of authorship in and of itself). <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/> (accessed December 2012).

<sup>7</sup> After her Parisian sojourn Minujín became more interested in a hemispheric American youth culture and turned to New York and Buenos Aires rather than Paris as her intellectual centers.

## CRITICAL AWARENESS



Beatriz González, *La Muerte del Justo*, 1973  
Enamel paint on metal plate, assembled on metal bed  
120 x 180 x 90 cm

Courtesy of Beatriz González  
Photo: Diego García Moreno

Since the 1960s intellectuals have realized that political decolonization alone would not bring about social equality or emancipation. Paulo Freire articulated a strategy to “decolonize the mind” through dialogical pedagogy (Freire, 1968). The process of decolonizing the mind required making *visible* deceptive certainties, such as the superiority of the “First World” model, one that has since been debunked by the present ecological predicament: the global unsustainability of industrialization. However, during the fifties up to the seventies this underlying principle of development seemed to be the irrefutable course of progress.



Beatriz González, *La Muerte del Pecador*, 1973  
Enamel paint on metal plate, assembled on metal bed  
120 x 180 x 90 cm

Courtesy of Beatriz González  
Photo: Diego García Moreno

References to faulty vision and visual deception permeate Colombian artist Beatriz González's works during the seventies. The mirrors in her famous vanities are in fact deceptive: they do not reflect the spectator's image but are rather paintings of women associated with an ideal femininity constructed over centuries of Catholic cultural dominance (Rodríguez, 1996; Reyes, 2011). González recalled her interest in deceptive viewing since her youth in Bucaramanga, when she admired the *tromp l'oeil* marble interior of the *Sagrada Familia* Cathedral, so astutely executed by the Venezuelan artist Agelbiz that it fooled the discerning eye of Group Captain Peter Townsend (fiancée to the British Princess Margaret) while traveling in Colombia. In fact, González purchased several metal furniture pieces for her now famous *mobiliario* assemblages precisely because of the artisans' remarkable ability to make metal surfaces look like wood through deftly applied varnished paint.

Such is the case in her bed assemblages *Death of the Just* and *Death of the Sinner* (1973) where she assembled her enamel on metal paintings onto beds she had purchased from this furniture factory. González inserted into these *faux* wood beds paintings of a Christian moralistic trope that elaborate on the theme of faulty vision – the spiritual dangers of visual deception or temptation. This theological genre based on the *Ars Moriendi*, or the *Art of Dying Well*, describes a series of demonic temptations at the time of death that can distract the agonizing person from their correct spiritual focus. In a fifteenth century copy, perhaps the original pictorial matrix, Master E.S. engraves seven images of the journey undertaken by the agonizing soul<sup>8</sup>. The visions or temptations are deeply connected to the notion of sight— sinful or spiritual blindness<sup>9</sup>. González's source prints, based on the *Ars Moriendi*, reference Christian conceptions of virtuous and vicious forms of viewing. On the lower right hand side of the painting in *Death of a Sinner*, is a night table with an oval portrait of a woman, called to the spectator's attention by the sinner's extended arm and fixed gaze. A demonic shadow holds up the image emulating González's own vanity-assemblages. González creates a tension between the sinner and framed image held by the demon. The sinner neglects proper sight (as in *acedia* or spiritual neglect) and instead gazes toward the earthly picture in the oval frame. The sin under consideration here is false or illegitimate viewing, neglecting to look in the direction of the priest, giving in to the seductive pull of the demon via an image. It is unclear whether he is tempted by the painting itself (as in owning a commodity

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<sup>8</sup> Considered by Sister Mary Catherine O'Connor to be the original publication of the *Ars Moriendi* handbook (O'Connor, 1942).

<sup>9</sup> The sins include *luxuria* (lust), *avaricia* (avarice), *acedia* (neglect), *invidia* (envy), *superbia* (pride) and *vanagloria* (vanity). In *Temptation of Lack of Faith* by Master E.S. demons distract the agonizing man's vision away from the divine threesome standing behind the headboard and guide him toward a crowned sculpture on a pedestal, alluding to false worship or neglect of the true vision.

thus *envy* or *avarice*), the person represented (as in *lust*), or to a mirror image (as in *vanity* or *pride*)<sup>10</sup>. The composition cleverly implicates the exhibition spectators as admirers – perhaps even worshipers of pictures—since there is no clear divide between physical desire and the pleasure of viewing. Note the phallic placement of the two medallions penetrating the red lined box.



Beatriz González, *La Muerte del Pecador*, detail, 1973  
Enamel paint on metal plate, assembled on metal bed  
120 x 180 x 90 cm

Courtesy of Beatriz González  
Photo: Ana María Reyes



*La Muerte del Justo* and *La Muerte del Pecador*, popular prints.

In her bed assemblages González inserts the painted picture horizontally into the space usually occupied by a mattress on a bed frame. She thus disrupts the “proper” line of visual contemplation in traditional arts where spectators can stand upright while beholding a freestanding sculp-

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<sup>10</sup> During the conquest of the Americas idolatry was everywhere. Christian missionaries had the impossible task of teaching native Americans the difference between idolatry and image veneration. (See for instance McCormack, 1991).

ture or a picture mounted on a wall. González prompts spectators to bend their bodies and cast their gazes downward. A 1973 press photograph by the photographer Robayo, published in the newspaper *La República*, captured a group of women looking and pointing at González's bed assemblages<sup>11</sup>. The position of the elderly woman echoes the angel whose body slightly tilts over the agonizing man in *Death of the Just* but her gesture mirrors the reach of the agonizing sinner. In other words, the spectator reaches for the work of art as does the sinner the oval portrait. González's bed rendered spectators critically aware own corporeal positioning, their circumambulation of the bed, and connected this embodied vision to the theological, social, historical, and gendered environment they inhabit.

#### PARTICIPATION



Lygia Clark, Mandala,  
from *Estructuras Vivas* (Living structures), 1969

rcf. Ne 20444i; Photographer Unknown;  
Courtesy of - "The World of Lygia Clark" Cultural Association.

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<sup>11</sup> Robayo, "*lo Cursí y lo Erótico*". Illustration accompanying a review of the Luis Caballero and Beatriz González's exhibition at the *Museo de Arte Moderno*, Bogotá. *La República*, 26 Febrero, 1973.

Furthermore, the priest guides the agonizing subject away from the traditional figurative portrait towards the cross, which is both a reference to the martyrdom of Christ and a abstract geometric form. The painting alludes to the heated aesthetic debates concerning figuration and abstraction during the Cold War era, by setting into creating tension the *tromp l'oeil* of traditional portraiture and optical effects of Op and Kinetic art, which regularly won competition prizes at the biennials where she was exhibiting. In the context of the international art competitions or Modern Art museums, these bed assemblages not only confronted the evolutionary narrative of “advanced” art by pointing towards other forms of perceptual erudition (i.e. theological), but they also parodically echoed the “expert” jurors, who, like the clergy, tried to guide viewers in the “proper” direction. González emphasized the constructed nature of viewing in the culturally contextual realm of vision, whether according to Catholic dogma or the increasingly over-theorized art world.

In Brazil the late sixties and early seventies coincided with the most repressive period of the military dictatorship. As the military “top-down” social engineering became the pathogenic expression of *desarrollismo*, vision was transformed into surveillance and corrective measures were implemented through murderous means. Disappearances and censorship plagued any type of visibility. In fact, when many artists, critics, and curators of the international art community boycotted the Tenth São Paulo Bienal of 1969, most spectators of the Biennial had no idea these dramatic events unfolded in protest of the regime (Dunn, 2001; Calirman, 2012).

One of the first Brazilian artists to refuse participation in the Biennial was Lygia Clark. Though living in Paris she was aware of the objections against the military’s harsh interference in cultural matters through stories leaked to the French press and through the dossier “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” which was read aloud at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art. French and Brazilian artists in Paris mobilized to raise awareness about the harsh realities of cultural producers under the military regime: the closing of exhibitions, the imprisonment and exile of artists and intellectuals, as well as interventions into cultural considerations by the military (Calirman, 2012).

That same year Clark produced her work *Mandala* (1969). In it Clark linked a group of participants with an elastic web so that each person’s movements were dependent on those of the others. Each individual gesture affected the whole group making tangible the sense of behavioral responsibility in both physical and political terms. Clark’s works rendered passive contemplation impossible. Non-participants, or “voyeurs” according to Clark, were not allowed access (Bois, 1994 p. 88). Clark’s work had progressively eroded the concept of authorship by engaging spectator participation and challenging the supremacy of sight through multi-sensorial experiences. By 1969 Clark had rejected the concept of art altogether and redirected her efforts towards participatory experiences she called “rites without myths,” as Yve-Alain Bois described, “she conceived of the work as a mere vehicle for experience” (Bois p. 86).

With the suspension of civil rights (AI-5) accompanied by terrorist tactics and death squads in Brazil, the concept of participation as well as visibility took on a renewed urgency. The authoritative right to reveal or conceal, in other words, to determine what should be visible or permissible versus what should be forbidden or removed, is the direct result of a neo-colonial infantilizing of the citizenry.

In contrast, Clark's *Mandala* implicated human bodies and behaviors in a complex web of interconnections, which allowed participants to embody a non-hierarchical alternative, albeit a micro-community, where each individual had bearing on all others. Clark's *Mandala*, as its title suggests, formed a mystical space configured by bonded participants who could achieve a heightened awareness of the interconnection between their corporeality and other individuals, community, and thus political responsibility. It served as a metaphor for the collective resistance against military oversight and the implication of art institutions in the Brazilian power structure.

Minujín, González, and Clark questioned the supremacy of disembodied and disinterested vision not only as a gendered one but also as a continuation of a colonial project where bodies of "Third World" subjects were objects of study and management. Feminist critics, Margarit Schildrick and Janet Price characterize the incorporeal abstraction of Western rationalism as part of a masculinist Eurocentric worldview (Schildrick and Price, 1999). In Latin America, this neo-colonial ideology is further complicated when wedded to patriarchic social structures and military surveillance. By incorporating vision back into historically constituted bodies these works went beyond the sexed or gendered limits of individuals to betray the paternalistic system of *desarrollista* neo-colonial tutelage. I do not want to suggest that this critique is specific to Latin America or to women's artistic practices, but rather that these artists used the strategies I discussed to contribute to a worldwide questioning of paternalistic forms of social control. In no small part feminist, queer, and performativity theories have helped to render visible the ideological implications of so-called disembodied knowledge-production. Questioning whether these artists or practices are "feminist," I consider ineffective. In these examples, the categories "feminist," "Latin American," and even "art" do not hold to the pressure of scrutiny. I ask, instead, what tools do feminist and gender theories give us to study works such as these that in turn help us understand the deeply patriarchic structure of development ideology? It is worthwhile to probe questions concerning gendered power relations, so long as they are conditioned by an understanding that in neo-colonial contexts, patriarchic structures are set up not exclusively as dichotomies of male / female or men / women but also colonizer / colonized, exploiter / exploited, and "experts" / objects of study.

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