

Bearing Witness

A recent show at El Museo del Barrio explored four decades of performance art in the Americas.

BY DANIEL R. QUILES

A video of Papo Colo's *Superman 51* (1977) was installed above the entrance to "Arte + Vida: Actions by Artists from the Americas, 1960-2000," a survey of Latin American action- and performance-based art curated by Deborah Cullen for El Museo del Barrio in New York, where it appeared Jan. 30-June 1. The video documents an action in which the Puerto Rican artist ran down a stretch of the West Side Highway in New York City with 51 pieces of lumber in tow, tied behind him with ropes. He continued running



Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Honey Penny Piano and Paper Bag Destruction Concert, 1967, studio event, New York. (Photo not in show.)

until, exhausted, he collapsed. This "premeditated act of defecal" refers to Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth, rather than as the 51st of America's United States. True to the exhibition's theme, "art" here literally struggles with the weight of the harsh realities of political "life" and can only operate at a metaphorical remove.

Superman 51 might also be seen as an analogue to the task taken on by Cullen as she attempted to provide a balanced account of 40 years of heterogeneous work, little of which had been seen in North American museums. Previously the co curator of the 2003-04 contemporary survey "Don't Call It Performance/No Lo Llamas Performance" (which also appeared at El Museo del Barrio, among other places), Cullen did an admirable job of explicating a body of work that persists principally in documentary fragments, including photographs, typescripts, manifestos, leaflets, booklets, audio recordings, films, videos and other more or less ephemeral forms. This

potential limitation Cullen turned into a positive factor, since the very sparseness of these surviving testaments made it possible to pack a great deal of work, by more than 100 artists, into the museum's modest gallery space.

"Arte + Vida" was divided into various sections that overlapped both spatially and thematically, allowing viewers to draw parallels and construct their own art-historical narrative from the abundance of archival materials. Many works and artists occupied multiple categories, befitting the ongoing international exchange of ideas throughout the region. While thematic display facilitated groupings of artists of different nationalities, Cullen frequently focused on particular locales that crystallized ideas at certain junctures, pointing out the centrality of collaboration for so much of this art. (These matters are further explored in the catalogue, which, published in mid-May, was unavailable when this article was written.)

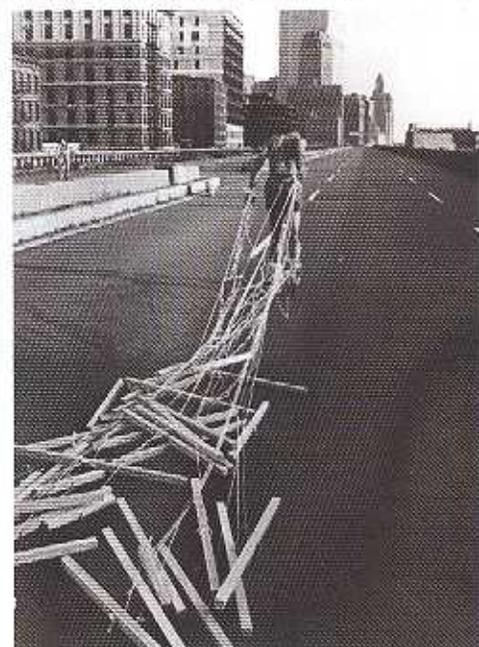
The exhibition began in a narrow entrance hall with three artists grouped under the heading "Precursors." Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky was represented by materials describing a little-known happening staged prior to his filmmaking career. For *Canto al Océano* (Song to the Ocean), 1963, the artist planned to be lowered into a stadium by a helicopter while reading a Lautréamont poem; however, the vehicle crashed during rehearsal and was used as a backdrop for the event. A series of playful actions venerating the vulgar, titled "Homenaje a la cursilería" (Homage to flashiness), 1961, by the Caracas-based Neo-Dada collective El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale), was documented in photos, an artists' book and an original three-page manifesto. A printed schedule listed the events that took place for *A Day in the Street* (1966) by the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), formed in Paris by Argentine Julio Le Parc. These resonated instructively with the rooms that followed, where a variety of contemporaneous practices from the 1960s and '70s were presented. Indeed, the conceptualism developed during this decade by Latin Americans, both at home and abroad, shadowed the work in the rest of the exhibition.

The subsequent section, "Signaling," noted the affinities between the early to mid-'60s street actions of three artists from Argentina. Alberto Greco drew circles in the streets around people and objects for his actions called *Wéo Ditos* (1962-63), a combination of Spanish and Italian that roughly translates as "Living Fingers" [pictured in "Argentina Provokes," this issue]. Edgardo Vigo co-opted traffic lights and other elements of the civil infrastructure à la Situationist International, and David Lamelas used geometric sculptures to mark off public objects, such as trees and street lamps, for *Señalamientos de Tres Objetos* (Signaling Three Objects), 1966-68. The next section, "Destructivism," explored the liberating potential of actions such as that of Argentine Marta

Minujin (one of the key figures in "Arte + Vida," appearing in four sections), who destroyed a set of her own sculptures in 1963 when living in Paris. Nuyorican artist and El Museo's founding director Raphael Montañez Ortiz was represented by large-scale photographs, a mattress that he tore apart, promotional materials for events and film footage of his destructions of pianos. Such variety was frequently employed by Cullen to provide a sense of the missing live performances.

Next was "Neoconcretismo" and the tactile, participatory works of Brazilians Lygia Clark, Helle Oiticica and Lygia Pape—among the best-known of the artists on view. Clark's *Caminhando* (Walking), 1961, which guides the viewer in creating a Möbius strip out of paper, was re-created for the exhibition, rightly privileging the act of participation and not the original object. Cullen complicated the picture of this frequently exhibited group by including the more explicitly political artists associated with Tropicália in the later 1960s—Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles and Antonio Mannel among them [see *A.I.A.*, Apr. '07]. A wide-ranging Brazilian movement that included popular musicians and poets, Tropicália embraced the practice of assimilating any and all influences, both local and foreign—at that moment a political stance in itself. Barrio's "Troupas Ensanguentadas: SITUAÇÃO" (Bloody Bundles: SITUATION), 1968-70, were large hunks of meat that the artist wrapped in cloth and left in public spaces overnight. By sunrise, they were often mistaken for victims of the military dictatorship, which had taken power in 1964.

Papo Colo: *Superman 51*, 1977, West Side Highway, New York, gelatin silver print, 30 by 29 1/2 inches. Collection El Museo del Barrio, New York.





Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Madrid, 1992. Photo Peter Barker, courtesy Coco Fusco.

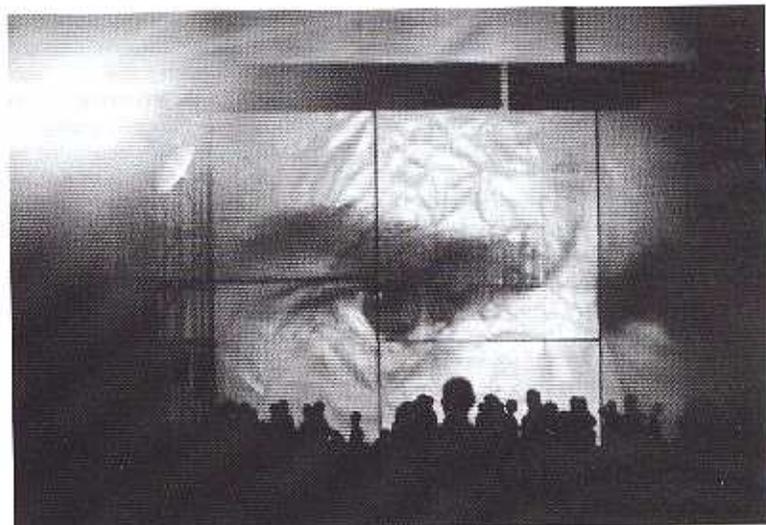


Photo of Jacobo Borges's multimedia event Image of Caracas, Caracas, Venezuela, 1968.



Artur Barrio: "Bloody Bundles: SITUACION," 1968-70, Powerpoint presentation on monitor. Photo Cesar Carneiro, courtesy the artist.



Colectivo Sociedad Civil: Wash the Flag, 2000. Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru, color photo. Courtesy Gustavo Buntinx.



Richard A. Lou: Border Door, 1988, one of four black-and-white photographs, 10% by 14 inches each. Collection El Museo del Barrio. Photo James Elliot.



ASCO: Instant Mural, 1973, photo from original 35mm slide, 16 by 20 inches. Collection El Museo del Barrio. Photo Harry Gamboa Jr.

Between the years 1966 and '68, Argentine conceptual art became increasingly politicized. The Marshall McLuhan-inspired happenings of Minujín, such as *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (Simultaneity in simultaneity), 1966, progressed quite naturally to the "media art" of Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari and many others. For this last trio's 1966 *Happening por un jabalí difunto* (Happening for a Dead Boar [pictured in "Argentina Provokes," this issue]), photos and information describing a fictional action (in the form of a wild artists' gathering) were submitted to newspapers, which then reported on the alleged event. Thus the group bypassed the actual performance in favor of its documentation in the mass media. During the Onganía dictatorship in the late 1960s, societal critique turned overtly political. Agit-prop activities included *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is Burning), 1968, a protest staged by a group of artists in a union headquarters, which El Museo del Barrio presented with photographs and a video.

of water green in European and American cities) and Peruvian Jorge Eielson (who operated out of European centers). Eielson's *Nage* (Swimming), 1964, shows the artist pretending to swim through a flower field, while his *Paracos-Pyramid* (1974) is a grid of photographs of a body concealed by a sheet in various geometric poses, recalling Neconcretismo. Anticipating art about borders and migration by such 1980s artists as Richard A. Lou and the Border Arts Workshop, "Border-Crossers" looked at links between Mexican and Cuban artists at home and in the U.S. during the 1970s. The photographs of a carnivalesque Los Angeles by the Chicano collective ASCO (active in L.A. 1976-87) were matched with contemporaneous work in Mexico by groups such as Proceso Pentágono (active in Mexico City 1973-76), which staged a faked kidnapping in the street in imitation of government repression.

Moving into the 1980s, "Junta No!" focused on Chilean artists who, in the early part of the decade, addressed topics like the bloody dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet—among them Lotty Rosenfeld, Diamela Eltit, Carlos Leppe, Downey, CADA (the Art Actions Collective) and Alfredo Jaar. For his haunting work *Hyus* 1981, Jaar selected an image from Susan Meiselas's photo series of Sandinista soldiers in Nicaragua, which shows two fully armed men near a soldier inexplicably playing a clarinet. In an accompanying video, Jaar created furious, dissonant noise on a clarinet of his own.

The next room sorted a wide range of 1980s performances and collective actions into two themes, "Humor" and "Dreamscape." The nationalities of the artists in this section were as varied as anywhere in the exhibition, ranging from Brazilian Tunga—represented by *Pente* (Comb), 1984-97, a wig that enabled a pair of twin girls to walk around with their hair braided together (a performance restaged at the opening)—to Cuban-born, San Francisco-based Tony Labal, whose *Fight!* (1981) documents his transformation into a professional boxer for one year. Accorded prominent placement were photographs of Minujín's spectacular sculpture-events of the early 1980s. Among these was *Parthenon de los libros/Homenaje a la Democracia* (Parthenon of Books/Homage to Democracy), 1981, a full-scale replica of the Parthenon, which she constructed of books that had been banned under the just-concluded dictatorship (the artist encouraged people to dismantle the piece by taking the texts).

Particular attention was given to the "Cuban Renaissance," an upsurge of collectivist conceptualism during the mid-1980s that offered some genuine critique of Castro's state, as well as of authority in general. *Todos Estrellas* (All Stars) involved a group of artists who split into two baseball teams as a way

In 1983, Marta Minujín constructed a replica of the Parthenon at full scale from books that had been banned under the just-concluded dictatorship in Argentina.

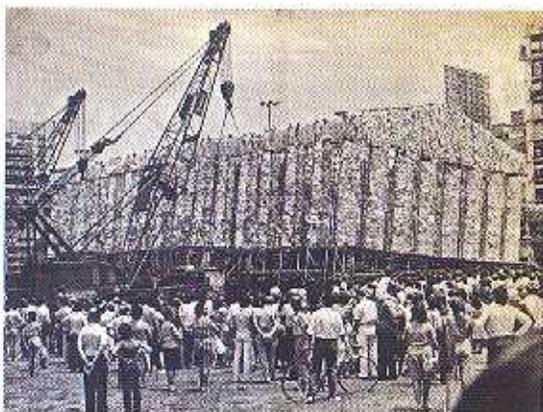
of mocking Communist fitness initiatives. Arle Calle directly parodied revolutionary rhetoric in *No queremos intoxicarnos* (We do not want to be intoxicated), 1988, and Grupo Provisional, in their action *Very Good Rauschenberg* (1988), heckled Robert Rauschenberg during a press conference for his "ROCK-Cuba" exhibition at Havana's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. They interrupted the event to give Rauschenberg a painting of an Indian saying "Very Good, Rauschenberg" and asked insistently for his autograph. At the same time, artist Maldito Menéndez sat on the floor dressed as a Caribbean native, continually smiling and nodding. The work of these artists will surely garner closer examination from scholars in the coming years.

Cullen addressed the 1990s with a single theme, "Discovery Channels"—a reference to the confluence of identity politics and an interest in critiquing the history of colonialism—preoccupations that informed much art in that decade, including that of Carmelita Tropicana (b. Cuba), Adal (b. Puerto Rico), Eugenio Dittborn (b. Chile), Silvano Lora (b. Dominican Republic), Nao Bustamante (Chicana) and Félix González-Torres (b. Puerto Rico), whose wry *Welcome Back Heroes* (1991), a pile of Bazooka chewing gum, was a reference to the first Gulf War. A standout here was the video *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatimouli Odyssey* (1993), showing performances by Coco Fusco (b. Cuba) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (b. Mexico). The artists, clothed in a mix of MTV fashions and "native" dress, toured cities in a cage, dancing and "exhibiting" themselves, while a barker identified them as the last survivors of a fictional still-uncivilized island. Inspired by the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, the work gains power as viewers—whose reactions range from outrage to titillation to laughter—unearth colonialist ideas still encoded in contemporary consciousness. The majority of the projects in "Discovery Channels" emerged from the Caribbean and Latino communities in the U.S.

The show concluded with "The Enduring Body," which offered some examples of recent actions by, among others, Mexican City-based Teresa Margolles, who used human fat to fill pockmarks in buildings in Cuba, and Guatemalan Regina José Galindo, whose performances have condemned human rights abuses in her country. Cullen's goal was not to map contemporary practice, but to provide a look at some of the roots from which it has sprung. In its value for the unwritten present, both in terms of contemporary art practice and postwar Latin American art history, "Arte + Vida" constituted a major statement. □

"Arte + Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas, 1960-2000" was on view at El Museo del Barrio, New York (Jan. 30-June 1).

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Marta Minujín: *The Parthenon of Books/Homage to Democracy*, Buenos Aires, December 1983, one of three gelatin silver prints mounted on board, each 30 by 24 inches.

Positioned at the crux of three sections—"Burning Issues," "The Medium is the Message" and "Happenings"—Venezuelan Jacobo Borges's *Imagen de Caracas* (1968) neatly conflated them all. The original presentation of this colossal multimedia event featured films projected onto moving screens in a specially designed theater. It was commissioned by the state for Venezuela's fourth centennial celebrations but was shut down soon after it opened. In the New York exhibition, some sense of the chaotic sprawl of the original was evoked by a collage consisting of many stills from the films themselves, images of the actual installation and a few architectural models, all spread over the walls of an alcove in the gallery. Three video screens provided images from the films, and there was a folder with descriptions and press clippings.

The categories "Land/Body" and "Border-Crossers" allowed for comparisons of a wide range of artists from different countries and contexts. "Land/Body" was organized around the broad notion of links between natural and man-made settings, but also provided ample evidence of the constant international movement of many artists from Latin American countries, juxtaposing Puerto Rican Rafael Ferrer and Chilean Juan Downey (both of whom were associated with New York conceptualists) alongside Cuban Ana Mendieta (who lived in the U.S. for much of her career), Argentine Nicolás García Urriburu (who dyed bodies

Rafael Ferrer: *Three Leaf Piece*, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, Dec. 1968, gelatin silver print, 8 by 10 inches.

