The Permanence of the Transient Precariousness in Art

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CHAPTER SIX
AGAINST (PORNOPRECARITY
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On Pornomiseria

In the late 1970s the Colombian filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo produced the text “¿Qué es la porno-miseria?” (“What is pornomiseria?”). In it, the authors launched a critique of certain films made in Latin America that, in their opinion, exploited poverty and misery for commercial gains. The short text is worth quoting in its entirety:

WHAT IS PORNOMISERY?

Independent filmmaking in Colombia had two origins. One that tried to interpret or analyse reality, and another that discovered within that reality cultural and anthropological elements in order to transform it. At the beginning of the 70s, with the creation of the law to support filmmaking, appeared a certain type of documentary that superficially appropriated the achievements and methodologies of independent cinema to the point of deformation. In this way, poverty became a shocking theme and a product easily sold, especially abroad, where it served as the counterpart to the opulence of consumption. If misery had served independent filmmaking as an element for analysis and denunciation, the merchandise rush converted it into an escape valve of the same system that created it. This lust for profit did not allow for the existence of a method that discovered new premises for the analysis of poverty but, on the contrary, created didactic schemes becoming a genre that we could call miserabilist or porno-miseria.

These deformations were leading Colombian film-making down a dangerous road insofar as misery was being presented as just another spectacle where the spectator could wash away his bad conscience, be moved and calm down. We made Agarrando Pueblo as a kind of antidote or Maiakovskian bath to open people’s eyes to the exploitation behind misembilista filmmaking that converts the human being into an object, into an instrument of discourse that does not belong to its own condition.

Mayolo and Ospina’s text demanded a kind of filmmaking that rejected the economical exploitation of social problems and the superficial representation of socioeconomic realities. More importantly, Mayolo and Ospina were reacting against a miserabilist industry which, as critic and curator Michèle Faguet argues, thrived in “the spectacular, fetishistic and, above all, consumable character of the images that passively attested to the degree of estrangement that existed among divided social classes in Colombia (and throughout Latin America)”.

It is important to say that Mayolo and Ospina were referring to a particular trend within Colombian filmmaking of the time. Whereas in the rest of Latin America the model of Third Cinema (such as Tomás Gutiérrez’s Memorias del Subdesarrollo [1968] or Glauber Rocha’s Maranhão 66 [1966]) dictated the content and structure of a militant filmmaking practice, in Colombia (and perhaps due to the lack of an established film industry) emerged what was called “cine de sobreprecio” (“surcharge film”), which was geared towards the production of commercial gains. This kind of filmmaking was sponsored by the Colombian state and supported by officially sanctioned laws, such as the increase of prices (sobreprecio) for movie tickets. These measures hoped to finance the production of Colombian films and therefore contribute to the consolidation of a national industry. However, as Faguet argues,

Given the still very precarious nature of anything that resembled an infrastructure (film schools, laboratories, etc.) necessary for such an industry to develop, this dramatic increase in numbers suggests flagrant opportunism more than sincere enthusiasm, because for the first time in Colombian history it was possible not only to recuperate the money invested in a film, but to actually turn a profit. As one critic commented, “In the light of these economic circumstances, many sets of indifferent eyes opened, hands that had never so much as touched a film canister

1 Unpublished. Originally written in Spanish. Available at: http://asalvisual.blogs.pot.co.uk/2013/04/que-es-la-pornomiseria-por-luis-ospina.html. All translations from Spanish are by the author unless otherwise noted.
suddenly went to work ... from every corner there emerged new faces who/ knew how to make films”.4

Within this miserabilist trend, the critic Alberto Aguirre described two main tendencies that pervaded many productions of the time. According to
Faguet’s interpretation, one of these produced “picturesque films that/ resembled moving postcards and which pandered to excruciatingly trite/ nationalism”.5 The other, termed by Mayolo and Osipina as “pseudo-denunciation”,6 as described by Faguet, used

(often) previously recorded footage of subjects—ranging from poor/ families to street children, prostitutes, drug addicts or the mentally ill—/ hastily put together with an authoritative voice-over informing the/ Colombian movie-going public (anxious for the short to end so that the/ feature film could begin) about the social mechanisms that had precipitated/ such grave social ills. In the absence of an in-depth analysis or attempt to/ explain these situations in other than formulaic terms, “surcharge film” was/ guilty of the worst kind of exploitation, one that justified its ambiguous/ intentions in a distorted and vulgar version of the call for cinematic realism/ famously articulated by Glauber Rocha in his 1965 text “Ezétylya da/ fome” (“Aesthetic of Hunger”).7

This kind of quasi-documentary practice, according to Aguirre,/ morbidly discussed and displayed “poverty in order to provoke/ commiseration in a gesture similar to that which moves the bourgeoisie to/ pursue charitable acts.”8 Suggesting a perverse jouissance in the/ consumption of images of poverty, Mayolo and Osipina even argued that/ miserabilismo, or porno-miseria, relied on the viewer’s sadomasochistic/ pleasure for images of pain and poverty that they sought to fulfill./ Consciously representing social illnesses with and for the gaze of an/ outsider, voyeuristic, perspective, porno-miseria exploited the tension/ between documentary and fiction by providing self-exoticised, reductive/ representations that matched certain geopolitical expectations. As Mayolo/ argued:

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Faguet, “Pornomiseria”.
Enter Precarity

Precarity, as a word, does not exist. It is a neologism associated with a particular Marxist account of post-Fordism. As the Sydney based cultural critics Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter note, in its most general understanding it comprises a theoretical corpus that seeks to address the “prevalence of contingent, flexible or precarious employment in contemporary societies”. According to them, precarity as a concept “was an attempt to identify or imagine precarious, contingent or flexible workers as a new kind of political subject, replete with their own forms of collective organisation and modes of expression”. In other words, precarity sought to theorise the conditions of many workers characterised by non-fixed contracts; unstable jobs and wages, free-lancers, adjuncts, hackers, immigrants, creative workers, multitudes, janitors, domestic and factory workers. Conflating several distinct and decidedly geopolitically specific contexts, struggles and resistances, precarity—in the last 10 years—has become an empty sign that can refer to multiple, albeit contradictory and irreconcilable, realities. Precarity, as Neilson and Rossiter note, can mean:

the creative worker or activist in Europe, the migrant’s experience of labour and life, the CEO undergoing an existential crisis over repayments on a third holiday home, the policymaker’s or academic’s affiliation with a discursive meme, the finance market whose fluctuation are shaped by undulating forces, etcetera. Played out over diverse and at times overlapping institutional fields, the sign and experience of precarity is multiplied across competing regimes of value: surplus value of intellectual property rights, cultural and social values of individual and group identities, legal and governmental values of border control, and so forth.\[6\]

Precarity has become a term that has been applied over bodies, objects, economic situations and social realities, that can be described as contingent, volatile, threatened, fragile, ephemeral, temporary. Highlighting a commonality, that such referents have a precarious quality, precarity can often obscure, if not blatantly disregard, the intricacies and specificities of the elements that it seeks to describe. Clearly, and as Neilson and Rossiter dramatically point out, the precarity of a CEO who cannot afford a third house is not the same precarity as that of a free-lance journalist who cannot make ends meet. In turn, this precarity is also different than the condition of an undocumented migrant being paid “under the table”. As much as these situations have certain affinities, to assign the word precarity to them erases the internal differences that characterise and determine such conditions. Perhaps similar to a psychiatric case of displacement, the category of precarity seems to be a projection of the socioeconomic and ontological instability of certain groups of intellectuals and social commentators to socioeconomic conditions that resemble their unstable position. It seems to me that more often than not, commentators equate the condition of intellectual/creative labour with the condition of the displaced migrant or the unstable economic subject of the global south. Levelling both experiences, precarity as a concept does more as a mechanism to cleanse the conscience of the economically unstable intellectual/creative labourer by creating a sense of solidarity, of being in the same boat—so to speak—, with the global precariat. This reductive (mis)identification, while striving to create a collective political subject, erases the individuality, the specific histories, of its varied subjectivities.


\[15\] Ibid.

\[16\] Neilson and Rossiter, “Precarity as a Political Concept”, 58.
Chapter Six

(Porno)Precarity

At this stage, the reader might be asking what does precarity have to do with the Mexican generation of the nineties and, moreover, with the third edition of Pinta London, the Latin American Art Fair, held in London in 2012. The first point of connection was a lecture given by art historian Robin Adéle Greeley at the University of Essex in November 2011. Entitled “The Logic of Disorder: the Sculptural Materialism of Abraham Cruzvillegas”, Greeley’s talk examined the work of the contemporary Mexican artist by focusing on the relationship between his sculptural practice and the “self-building” architecture of the squatter settlements on the edge of Mexico City where he grew up. Making a simile between the spontaneous and improvised architecture of economically marginalised sites and the fragility and contingency of Cruzvillegas’ sculptures, Greeley’s talk emphasised the formal and material instability of both slums in Mexico City and Cruzvillegas’ assemblages. Importantly, she underscored the precarity of the sculptural objects: how each structure was carefully dependent on the arrangement of its constituent parts, how the distribution of the weight of the objects determined the shape and solidity of the construction, how the works were not glued but propped and assembled, how they were fragile, contingent, ephemeral, on the verge of collapse. Precarity, for Greeley, was definitively sited on the artistic object, on the sculptures. Contrary to what Medina theorised as inclemency, Greeley’s precarity was not located in the conditions of possibility that pervaded the making of both houses and objects (Medina’s overall sense of inclemency), but on the sculptures themselves. Perhaps more problematically, Greeley’s talk suggested a perverse interpretation of the generation of the nineties that valued the ephemerality of their artistic products over the radical questioning of Medina’s “what, where and when of art.” Greeley’s interpretation, I argue, reduced the “Generation of Inclemency” to a “School of Precarity” based on formal, medium-specific concerns rather than socioeconomic, historical, and political conditions. If Medina brought to light the hesitancy, ephemerality and event-driven nature of the generation of the nineties, Greeley’s position effectively returned their artistic practices to the museum, disavowing the socio-political frictions implied by such a move.

The second point of connection was the Project Rooms section curated by Pablo León de la Barra for the third version of Pinta London. For the 2012 edition, the fair, originally created to “showcase the best modern and contemporary art from Latin America”, included for the first time galleries and artists from Spain and Portugal. In the fair’s catalogue, the Board of Directors justified such a move as “the natural consequence of a gaze that has consistently endorsed the rereading of the history of Latin American art, and broadened its perspective on the basis of the geopolitical and cultural relationship between the Old and the New World”. Focusing its attention in the “unique moment of encounter between both continents”, the fair encouraged a trans-Atlantic and trans-Historic understanding of Latin America vis-à-vis Portugal and Spain and vice versa. As the Board noted, the fair hoped to “focus the gaze on the dialogue between art that emerged on both shores” and “update the perception of contemporary creation in this vast territory, thus promoting the reunification of a market that has common roots.” By presenting artists from both “Latin America” and “Portugal and Spain”, Pinta London implied that a discussion about Latin America that excludes considering its relationship with the “Old World” is incomplete. Although in the catalogue there was no mention of the socioeconomic and political histories of any of the Latin American countries included or of the Iberian Peninsula, the Project Rooms section of the fair suggested certain affinities between those contexts. In what follows, I will discuss how in the Project Rooms at Pinta London, the exhibition reduced and conflated Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula under the umbrella of precarity as a formal and aesthetic category, literally putting their poverty for sale.

The fair followed the standard of many other contemporary art fairs as it presented a vast sequence of booths of different size one after the other. There was no discernible geographic or thematic arrangement that determined the location of the galleries. At the end of one of the corridors, and strategically located right next to the VIP area (a series of couches cordoned off from the general public), started the more intentionally curated Project Rooms section of the fair. During the opening guided tour of the event, de la Barra led a group of patrons through several booths. Upon our arrival to the Project Rooms section, he focused on Nuno Sousa Viera’s work. The Portuguese artist, according to both curator and artist himself, created Two Together (2011) for example, out of objects that he had found in his studio and that he re-used, re-shaped and re-cycled in order to create a sculptural object with multiple forms. For another piece, dating from 2009 and displayed as well at the fair, the artist had refurbished and re-deployed several window frames, also found objects in his studio, that were delicately hung from the gallery wall. These contraptions were not only precarious in their materials—perished, recovered, rusted window-frames—but were also structurally fragile.

18 Íbid.
As the tour progressed, de la Barra stopped at another booth to highlight Johanna Unzueta’s work. The Chilean artist presented a series of carefully constructed industrial objects made out of coloured felt and thread. Imitating industrial appliances and home fixtures, such as sinks, faucets or pipes, the works conveyed a sense of realism through un-realistic materials. Delicate, fragile, contingent yet, paradoxically, solid and functional (the gauges in the sculptures could actually be moved) for de la Barra, Unzueta’s installations, along with Sousa Viera’s sculptures participated in an aesthetics of precarity insofar as they thrived on material fragility and contingency.

During one of the most striking points of the tour, de la Barra told patrons that, because of the recent raising indexes of poverty in both Spain and Portugal, one could further justify the inclusion of Iberian artists into the fair. Precarity, economic scarcity, poverty, in this way, became the common thread that united such different geopolitical contexts. Moreover, he affirmed that precarity was also manifest in the very materials of the works themselves. In the case of Sousa Viera’s work, both curator and artist intentionally highlighted that the materials used in his works had been objects he had previously discarded and were laying around his studio. Arguing that the economic conditions of Portugal not forced but strongly pushed him to use “poor”, “inexpensive” materials, both de la Barra and Sousa Viera made a formal and aesthetic analogy between the “poor” situation in Portugal and the “poor” materials used by the artist. Precarity, just like in Greeley’s model, rested on the objects themselves—their materiality, duplicity, contingency and mobility—not in the process that created them. Similarly, and in terms of Unzueta’s installation, de la Barra argued that it posited an aesthetics of precarity based on the use of fragile processes of construction that defy gravity—albeit temporarily—along with “poor”, “perishable” materials (such as felt and thread). Precarity, again, displaced from a state of being to a quality of things.

**The Redistribution of the Exotic**

As a formal characteristic of artistic objects, the discourse of precarity pervaded the art fair. During one of the guided visits given by the curator to a select group of patrons and supporters of Tate, (i.e., possible buyers) de la Barra spoke of the re-emergence of the group of European countries undergoing dramatic economic downturns (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain), which became known in public discourse by the acronym PIGS. Branded as such during the nineties and re-popularised after the 2009 financial crisis, this denomination grouped together the geographic and economic periphery of continental Europe. De la Barra argued that given the new economic conditions of the PIGS the notion of precarity—as usually used to describe Latin America—could readily be applied to the current context creating new bridges between the Old and New continents. This, in my opinion, prompted a redistribution of the exotic—Ranciérian pun intended—where the poverty, inequity misery and a generic economic downturn of Latin America were used to legitimate Pinta’s geographic expansion and, at the same time, introduce a select group of European artists to patrons interested in art from Latin America. As such, the *Project Rooms* extended the logic of pornomiserie, or pornoprecarity, to the PIGS obscuring the contextual nuances that clearly differentiate the Latin American and PIGS scenarios, and ignoring the complex colonial past that binds the regions. In other words, the *Project Rooms* at *Pinta London* 2012 extended the market umbrella of Latin American art to select, economically marginalised areas of Europe.