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Summer 2018

Art and Resistance in Central America

As a doctoral student in the History of Art department, much of my work has focused on the historical and contemporary conditions of Central American art. A region defined by its doubtful and indeterminate position, the narrow stretches of Central America have been marginalized from the artistic panorama of Latin America. Through narratives of essentialism and exoticism, the contemporary artistic production of this region has been reduced to typologies of a *primitivismo* style or simulacrum of a Western modernism.¹ Prompted by the political instabilities generated by the Central American crisis, a range of artistic practices from this period have been silenced, censored, or erased. These practices have historically been undercut by repressive dictatorships and disjointed political ideologies, resulting in the erasure and displacement of many crucial narratives of national identity and resistance. Lacking the infrastructure and resources to cultivate what is left of its political histories, this region has faced deteriorating cultural conditions that have impacted the artistic practices developing out of Central America. Moreover, while this continues to be the case, unraveling political tensions and repressive dictatorships, exemplified by the recent insurgency taking place in Nicaragua, continue to oppress, silence and disappear critical perspectives and voices. It is through these critical perspectives and current conditions that I approached my research. With the help of a Tinker Grant, I was able to travel to Mexico, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

During my time in Mexico, I spent a couple of days in Mexico City, where I was able to visit a spread of museums and cultural institutions that allowed me to become acquainted with the political visual culture of Mexican art. Through the canonical works of artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo, I questioned how history, heritage, and memory – in response to trauma- are interwoven with one another to give us remnants to the self and a collective people. In addition to the art I was able to view, I was also struck by the development and regal infrastructure around fine art in Mexico City- not only reserved for private collections, but also for public collections made accessible to the general public free of charge.² The issue of infrastructure and access to art figures prominently into my work as I continue to think about artistic strongholds across Latin America- and the vexed politics surrounding these physical coordinates.

As I prepared to leave Mexico City, the urgency of Nicaragua's political and social crisis- which recently erupted in April- placed pressure on my research project. For a moment, it was uncertain if Nicaragua would remain on my itinerary, given the increasing violence instigated by the paramilitary groups of Ortega-Murillo's repressive regime. Despite the severity of the situation, I ultimately decided that it was vital for me to go. Though I had initially planned to conduct interviews with revolutionary figures, some of whom were artists practicing at the time of the

¹ Pérez-Ratton, Virginia, "Mesótica II. Centroamérica/ Re-generación" *Del Estrecho Dudoso a Un Caribe Invisible: Apuntes Sobre Arte Centroamericano*, Universitat De València. 2012, p. 66.

² Gratuitous museum admission is offered to the public on certain days of the week

Sandinista Revolution, I decided to adjust the parameters of my research questions and intentions to accommodate the current situation.



"Wanted: Assassin," Stencil graffiti of Daniel Ortega. This stencil graffiti and others like it can be found on light posts and walls across the city - Granada, Nicaragua

The sheer violence plaguing the country forced me pause and re-evaluate my understanding of Sandinismo and the Nicaraguan Revolution as the countries' attitude towards its ideologies was shifting. From an art historical perspective, the issue of Sandinismo- its historical and artistic legacy, the collective memory surrounding it and the trauma that it has bred- has led me to problematize the temporal fragility of events in history. Through this lens, I am interested in interrogating the discrepancies between the social and political climate surrounding the Nicaraguan Revolution as it compares to the present- and the unfolding impact that these differences have on art practices in the region.

During my time in Nicaragua, I was able to interview the contemporary artist and activist, Patricia Belli. A central figure in my research, Belli works in a range of media to explore and problematize issues surrounding gender, sexuality, memory, trauma and the body- among other themes. In our interview, we spoke of her artistic practice, tracing the trajectory of her career and pausing to meditate on the evolving, ad-hoc infrastructure of art organizations in Nicaragua. One such example is Belli's organization, Espira/Espora- a non-profit art school that seeks to create spaces to critically engage with and produce art. Without a brick and mortar, Belli's organization is exemplary of the amorphous and resilient nature of art production in the country.



Lesdi Goussen with Patricia Belli at Casa del Café in Metrocentro- Managua, Nicaragua

As an artist with an international platform, Belli continues to utilize art to speak out about social and political injustices. At the time that we spoke, Belli was preparing to leave for Berlin where she was invited to exhibit her work in the 10th Berlin Biennale. With an entire gallery dedicated to her art, Belli planned on exhibiting several works that spanned her career. Included in the exhibition is her latest work *Desquibradas* (2018), a piece that explores the relationship between chaos and equilibrium within natural systems. Given the relevance and conceptual nature of this work, Belli explained to me that she had recently decided to alter the piece in order include audio from news reports and YouTube videos addressing the crisis taking place in Nicaragua. As an artist who has increasingly incorporated audiovisuals into her work, she explained the critical role that social

media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have played during the insurgency, as outlets for free speech and community organization.

In the days following my interview with Patricia Belli, I traveled to Rivas to visit Rancho Santana—a privately owned resort and residence along Nicaragua’s Pacific Coast. Nestled within the walls of this compound is Galeria Rancho Santana, a small-scale gallery managed by Ford Fine Art in Miami, Florida. I visited Galeria Rancho Santana with the intention to learn more about their collection and collecting practices. As stated on their website the gallery claims that it "intends to build the most important collection of Central American Masters anywhere on the planet."³ Paired with the resort’s exclusive presence in the country, the gallery's claim to global prominence naturally led to questions surrounding equity and access— particularly in Nicaragua, where infrastructure for art is already scarce and amorphous.

In speaking to the curator on site, I learned that the gallery is open the public; however, there is no publicity making that fact explicitly known to the community (and an appointment is required ahead of time so that visitors can be cleared at the front gate by security). Lacking a transparent model for access, Galeria Rancho Santana risks becoming complicit in the exclusionary politics of the elite art world. Though galleries are typically for-profit organizations and are not expected to serve the same functions as a museum, it is important that we continue to interrogate and place pressure on the positionality of spaces such as Galeria Rancho Santana, especially within the context of Central America.



Lesdi Goussen reading through material pertaining to *Temas Centrales I* (2000)

Following my time in Nicaragua, I had the privilege to conduct research at TEOR/ÉTica - a private organization that is committed to the development and dissemination of Central American art. As part of its efforts, TEOR/ÉTica continues to expand its developing archive on Central American and Caribbean art, and also produces critical scholarship on the conditions of art in the region, written from Central American and Caribbean perspectives.

During my short time in San Jose, Costa Rica I spent the majority of my time in TEOR/ÉTica's archive, where I was able to view almost all of the material documenting Belli's work. In

addition to Belli's archive, I also spent a lot of time with material pertaining to *Temas Centrales I*- a regional symposium co-organized by TERO/ÉTica's founder Virginia Pérez-Ratton in 2000 that surveyed the artistic conditions and curatorial practices taking place across the isthmus in the late 1990s.

³ Rancho Santana. "The Gallery at Rancho Santana ." *Rancho Santana*, ranchosantana.com/the-gallery-at-rancho-santana/.

Guided by my conversation with TEOR/ética's Chief Curator, Miguel Lopez, I was able to approach the archive with a better idea of what I could find. It is through our conversation that Miguel pointed me in a range of directions outside of my intended research for this trip. Thanks to his profound knowledge and command of Central American art and history, I was able to grow my understanding and awareness of the scholarship surrounding Nicaraguan art from the 1970s through the 1990s. Frankly, I had no idea much of this material even existed. I am infinitely grateful to Miguel for sharing his knowledge with me and pointing me in directions that proved interesting and lucrative for my research interests.



Lesdi Goussen in conversation with TEOR/ética's Chief Curator, Miguel López