

From/About Latin America: Local Poetic Imaginaries for the Development of the Argentinian New Media Art Field.

Jazmín Adler

PhD Candidate at CONICET (The National Scientific and Technical Research Council)
Universidad de Buenos Aires / Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero.

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On Shaky Ground

The intersection between art, science and technology around the globe has become an extensive, complex and relatively undefined territory, shaped by certain characteristics in constant struggle. [1] Its practices embody the convergence of multiple disciplines, media and methodologies, which not only eludes fixed categorizations of technological artistic practices, but also challenges the traditional conception of material and objectual artwork, strictly individually or collectively produced. As a matter of fact, these conventional notions still largely dominate the history, theory and aesthetics of contemporary art. In this regard, Domenico Quaranta has defined the new media art field as an independent art world, since its development has taken place quite independently from the growth of the broader world of non-technology based contemporary art. [2] In the same vein, Geert Lovink asserted that new media artworks are forms in search of a form. He claims: “New media, to its credit, has been one of the very few art forms that has taken the programmatic wish to blow up the walls of the white cube seriously. This was done in such a systematic manner that it moved itself outside of the art system altogether.” [3]

At the crossroads of artistic, scientific and technological spheres, technology-based projects are generally conceived as artworks, although they may be also described as inventive devices, machines, apparatus, artifacts or experiments. These classifications derive from their focus on the research phases, the primacy of the creative process over the finished work and the successive instances of trial and error that guide their execution. Due to their inner condition of new media artworks, they often function under the logic of a machine. Its operations don't admit mistakes: if the piece doesn't work, the aesthetic experience cannot be fulfilled. This is one of the main reasons why artists involved with them need to acquire knowledge from other fields, such as robotics, informatics, physics and neuroscience. Furthermore, in several occasions artists team up with engineers, biologists and/or mathematicians, which enable them to go through the multifaceted investigation and production process.

Despite these aspects have determined new media art produced throughout the world, I argue that in the Latin American context, and specially in Argentina, this situation is even more complex given two principles that I recognize as ‘identitarian’ and

‘institutional’. Whereas the first aspect is related to the imaginaries of modernization that have weaved Argentinian new media artistic framework, the second refers to the arduous development of the institutions that aim to promote the exchange between art, science and technology in the country.

Imaginaries of modernization

According to Beatriz Sarlo, Argentinian imaginaries of modernization have been shaped by a dichotomy between European modernity and local traditions [4]. This country has been run through poetic and ambivalent conceptions. Throughout its history, it has faced several attempts to build a local industry by appropriating technologies, adopting European models at the beginning and later on North American ones. The utopia of Argentina as an icon of a modern nation that emerged by the end of the 19th century and persisted during the following one, gave birth to local cultural and technological spheres taken as universal domains, executed by likewise universal men. [5] Imported models have been considered exemplary and neutral paradigms that were uncritically introduced and pursued. In this sense, the mimetic repetition of exogenous codes turned into a common strategy to legitimize Argentinian practice.

Nowadays, the outcome of this process has given place to the creation of a local new media art field that repeatedly highlights technology, for instance by making a strong emphasis on lightning effects and automatized rapid movements of the devices that compose the work. In consequence, the utopian imaginaries of modernization that had built a partnership between technological developments, novelty and material and cultural progress are still active. As a result, the characteristics of our local context are usually ignored, or seen under the perspectives of other realities which avoid the foundation of a personal and independent discourse.

However, both attitudes don't consider the inherent reciprocal tensions between art, science, technology and politics. As Claudia Kozak puts it: “since the technical/technological phenomenon of each era is bounded by a certain society, this implies certain history and social hegemonic construction of the technological meaning. [...] As long as the technological poetics take over their contemporary technical phenomenon, they are also political.” [6] When the author points out that new media art overlaps the artistic and technical phenomena in a particular social fabric that intertwines individuals, tools, institutions and systems of thought, she is suggesting that the encounter of art and technology is not a neutral junction. Therefore, it is possible to overcome the common position that tends to accept passively and uncritically the modern technological project as an undeniable mandate, understanding instead that it has evident political nuances. [7]

Institutional development

The imaginaries of modernization enter institutions, as well as institutions shape specific “Ways of Being-with Technology”. [8] Consequently, institutions embody a particular technological rationality and sensitivity, which is projected on its programs

showing that the meaning of technology goes beyond the instrumental definition of this notion –understood as the practical application of knowledge–. It follows out of it that technology implies a complex map that not only interconnects physical objects, rules and operations, but also the use that particular individuals give to them, as long as they decide institutional actions lines.

If we go over some of the initiatives implemented by Argentinian institutions during the last years, we notice that many of them have not undertaken criteria to promote an analytical perspective regarding the local implications of the relationship between art and technology. [9]

Tracing the history of the Argentinian venues committed to fostering the exchange, production, exhibition and study of new media art, we see they have faced several difficulties that affected the sustainability of their projects. The growth and expansion of institutions haven't been continuous nor linear. Due to political, economical and sociocultural circumstances that have taken place in the past decades, important endeavors came to an end. As an example, this was foreseen by the closure of Instituto Di Tella during Juan Carlos Onganía's dictatorship in 1970 and later on the cessation of the interdisciplinary activities developed at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación by the end of the 70s, two pioneering places for this research. The aforementioned episodes announced a pattern that seemed to be repeated –in those cases generated by appalling political circumstances that cannot be compared to the further democratic regimes–, resulting from institutional strategies that once they are boosted and disseminated, they impact on the cultural scene and at certain point are dissolved. This dynamic could be called “outbreak growth” and remains valid until today. A recent case study is Espacio Fundación Telefónica, whose change management in 2013 shifted its interest from new media art towards other topics related to innovation and the role of technology on contemporaneity. Nowadays, Argentina still lacks of museums, cultural centers or foundations entirely dedicated to new media art.

As a result, the identitarian and institutional factors hampered the investigation and encouragement of Argentinian new media art language. Despite the country has become the scenario for a great number of artists who have been experimenting the many possibilities offered by technologies, there is still not enough critical reflection about the course that the local production is taking.

New directions

To reverse this trend, the institutional platforms must face a different direction through the implementation of programs that could deconstruct the established imaginaries and hence explore local mindsets connected to Argentinian research and creation context. They should bring transformations by stimulating a local new media art that doesn't necessarily stick to the exposition of regional historical and political events, nor the work with low technologies by dismantling and recycling all kinds of devices. It is required to outline a discourse that may assume the local condition without placing technologies as the epicenter of the artworks, but using them instead in a relevant way, in accordance with the concepts that they develop throughout the exploration of

possible relations among their materials, devices and poetics.

In this line of work, some interesting projects have been carried out. *Especjos de cobre* is an installation by Claudia Valente conceived as an iridescent acrylic mirror. Its folds arise from the detailed investigation of growth pattern of copper sulfate crystals, which were grown by the artist. Her observations have shown that the atoms of the crystals present an ordered distribution and that their angles remain fixed during its reproduction. The encoded mathematics in nature has been transferred to a mechatronic object that replicates crystal's morphogenesis, while it reflects the visitor on its faceted structure.

Insert Fig. 1. *Especjos de cobre*, 2015, Claudia Valente, Installation, mechatronic object, light table, copper sulfate crystals and sketches, 50 x 180 x 40 cm. (object); 60 x 80 x 60 cm (light table).

Insert Fig. 2. *Especjos de cobre* (detail), 2015, Claudia Valente, Installation, mechatronic object, light table, copper sulfate crystals and sketches.

On the other hand, Guadalupe Chávez y Gabriela Munguía have been investigating the relationship between art, science and robotics through the development of *Eisenia*, a robotic sculpture that considers contemporary technologies and models of production. The engine is made from mechanic and electronic devices based on the functioning of 3D printers. The sculpture has motors that regulate the dripping of hydro nutrients produced by numerous Californian worms that live inside the machine. Accordingly, the printing mechanism causes the seeding of wheatgrass that grows on a semi-hydroponic substrate.

Insert Fig. 3. *Eisenia, máquina de impresión orgánica*, 2014, Guadalupe Chávez & Gabriela Munguía, robotic-organic installation, 70 x 70 x 180 cm.

Another interesting case is the work of Sebastián Pasquel, who has been working on useless machines integrated by automaton mechanisms that perform simple actions and collect portraits of the artist's family found in photo albums. *f-242* consists of different pictures engraved on gypsum boards, which are gradually grinded by rotary polishing machines that turn gypsum into powder. This constant action gives the installation an ephemeral nature that contrasts with the remaining small mounds of plaster displayed next to the boards. The slow and incessant motion reappears in *120 80 mm/Hg*, where a fine red thread moves from the spool to a lightbox with the portrait of the artist's mother, crossing a cartography of newspaper obituaries. As the thread goes from one point to the other, it seems to sketch the graphic recorded by an electrocardiogram. In fact, *120 80 mm/Hg* makes reference to normal adult blood pressure.

Insert Fig. 4. *f-242*, 2015, Sebastián Pasquel, installation, plaster plaques and motors, 20 x 15 cm (each plaque).

Insert Fig. 5. *120 80 mm/Hg*, 2013, Sebastián Pasquel, installation, lightbox, thread and middles.

Germán Sar's reactive installation entitled *Mecánica de la dialéctica* presents two opposite typewriters disposed on independent bases, split by 3 meters in between. Its keys are locked and don't present any characters on them. A long reel of white paper –with no inscriptions on it– joins both machines. When a presence sensor detects the proximity of the visitor, the typewriters automatically begin to type spaces, generating repetitive mechanic sounds. This action propels the continuous movement of the paper, which creates a sort of analogic loop. By means of the inquiry of opposed ideological positions, Sar metaphors the dialectic game that comes within all kinds of power clashes. Additionally, the title alludes to the dialectic-logical process that defines the intellectual work.

Insert Fig. 6. *Mecánica de la dialéctica*, 2014, Germán Sar, mechanic installation, typewriters, presence sensor, automatization hardware and paper.

An analogous metaphor of machine and human behavior characterizes Juan Rey's works. *Printed Circuit Boards* (PCB) show different images traced by thin cooper lines –such as the artist's brain and paper balls–, connected to photo voltaic panels and LEDs. Once the device is illuminated, the current pulse goes trough the cooper lines, the circuit is completed and so the light turns on. Besides referring to the features of electronic circuits, these pieces suggest metaphors of the circulation of ideas and the possibility of “shedding light” on new ones.

Insert Fig. 7. *Circuito*, 2013, Juan Rey, Printed Circuit Board, photo voltaic panels and LED, 110 x 80 cm.

Insert Fig. 8. *Pliegue (las seis ideas)*, 2013, Juan Rey, Printed Circuit Board, photo voltaic panels and LED, 65 x 65 cm.

Insert Fig. 9. *Despliegue*, 2013, Juan Rey, Printed Circuit Board, photo voltaic panels and LED, 85 x 85 cm.

Due to their autonomous functioning, these works are prime examples to undermine the traditional notion of new media artworks. What is more, they were created with fairly simple and affordable pieces, even though they neither pursue a low tech aesthetic, nor try to address the “Latin Americaness”. Like Valente, Pasquel, Sar, Chávez and Munguía's installations, the technologies involved are always choreographed through the formal, aesthetic and conceptual axes of each artistic proposal, depending on personal investigations that concurrently introduce singular poetics on the local scene.

In short, interesting local technology-based art may often arise when artists do not attempt to speak *about* Latin America as the region is seen from abroad –this ultimately tends to reinforce the confrontation between peripheral and core countries–, rather they forge an own discourse *from* Latin America that might end up outlining a new way of thinking and perceiving the art of the region and the region itself.

References

1. I refer to all kinds of artistic practices that make material, aesthetic and conceptual use of electronic and/or digital technologies in different phases of the creative process. It is a broad scene, constituted by a wide variety of manifestations, such as interactive installations, immersive environments, virtual and augmented reality, artificial life, data visualization, locative media, parametric design, bio art, etcetera. Although certainly video in all its forms –video installation, video performance, video sculpture, etcetera– is part of the new media art field, it is not included in this study because its development has had a different logic than the one examined in this essay.
2. Quaranta, Domenico, *Beyond New Media Art* (Brescia: Link, 2013).
3. Geert Lovink, “New Media: In Search of The Cool Obscure”, 2007. Accessed February 25, 2016, <http://bampfa.berkeley.edu/media/lovink.mp4>
4. Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 2007), 15.
5. Between 1880 and 1910 Argentina was governed by the *Generación del 80* [Generation of `80], whose members held the highest political and economical positions. Among other policies, they intended to turn Argentina into a modern nation by establishing a European-style liberal political regime. Based on the ideas of progress and growth, both deeply rooted in positivist philosophy, they stood for the concept of “civilization” against “barbarism” (indigenous population that inhabited the country back then). Thus, Argentina is commonly known as “Paris of Latin America”; instead of recognizing itself as a *mestizo* country, it has erased its indigenous history chasing the illusion of the “white nation”.
6. ed. Claudia Kozak, *Tecnopoéticas argentinas: archivo blando de arte y tecnología* (Buenos Aires: Caja Negra, 2012), 182-183.
7. Héctor Schmucler, “Apuntes sobre el tecnologismo o la voluntad de no querer”, *Artefacto*, 1, December, 1996. Accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.revista-artefacto.com.ar>
8. Carl Mitcham, “Tres modos de ser-con la tecnología”, *Anthropos*, no. 94/95 (1989): 14.
9. For example, this is the case of *Noviembre Electrónico*, an event held in Centro Cultural San Martín, which depends on the Ministry of Culture of Buenos Aires City. On the government’s website, it is described as a space of convergence for artists, developers, designers and thinkers of digital culture and electronic arts. This definition highlights the encounter of the main actors of the field, but doesn’t focus on the conceptual lines that justify this confluence.

Bio

Jazmín Adler is an Argentine art historian, researcher and curator who lives and works in Buenos Aires. She is pursuing her doctoral studies with a scholarship from The National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET). Her research interests cover the relationship between art, science, technology and politics in Latin America. She is a member of Ludión: Latin American Exploratory of Poetic/Political Technologies (Instituto Germani, Universidad de Buenos Aires) and teaches “Theory and Aesthetics of Electronic Arts”, “Theory and Aesthetics of Interactive Art” and “Development and Production of Electronic Arts Projects” at the Masters in Technology and Aesthetics of Electronic Arts (Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero). Over the past years, she has curated new media art exhibitions, such as *Sincronías en abismo* (Buenos Aires Photo), *VISCERAL* (Panal 361) and *Mecánicas de pensamiento: obras en proceso* (Museo Castangino).

E-mail: jazminadler@gmail.com