

Gestures, Practices, and Projects: [Latin] American Re-visions of Visual Culture and Performance Studies

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Abstract:

This essay traces the development of scholarly research and artistic initiatives in Latin America in fields analogous to performance studies and visual studies, showing the deep and lasting involvement of scholars and artists in Latin America in these theoretical approaches and practices. This essay aims to correct the perception of visual studies as emerging only when it is named as such (in English), and instead works as a conversation about these emerging fields across the American continent, south to north. The particular intellectual genealogies of *los estudios culturales latinoamericanos*—a program of research and study that made claims of interdisciplinary, political engagement, and new objects and methods of study similar to those of visual and performance studies—contribute not only a means of framing the question of the geopolitics of knowledge in the emergence of these new fields, but also chart a distinctive structure of interdisciplinary research and practice at the intersection between the humanities, social sciences, and art. I show how these early voices concerned with images and bodies lay the groundwork for discussions about aesthetics and politics in visual and performance studies, and reflect on the prospects of thinking through gesture as a contemporary manifestation of this genealogy of visual and performance studies.

In this essay, I trace the development of scholarly research and artistic initiatives in Latin America in fields analogous to performance studies and visual studies. This strange formulation, “analogous to,” is pragmatic as much as formative of the questions that structure my inquiry. Visual studies and visual culture are appearing rapidly on department letterhead across the United States, including one of my “home” departments at Duke University. The Mexican journal *Sincronias* frankly writes of the emergence of the visual studies: “Desde mediados de los años noventa ha irrumpido en el pluralista, poroso y movedizo paisaje académico y editorial *usamericano* una corriente multidisciplinar” (From the mid-1990s a multidisciplinary current has irrupted in the pluralist, porous, and mobile academic and publishing landscape of the United States) (Gil Martín and González García 2004). Here visual studies is by definition limited to the U.S., and indeed, currently there are only a handful of visual culture programs in Latin American universities.¹ Similarly, if not as firmly installed in the architecture of academic institutions, and performance studies already has a visible scholarly and pedagogical presence in the U.S., represented by flagship programs at New York University and Northwestern, anthologies defining the field, and the dispersion of specialists in departments throughout the country. In contrast, Antonio Prieto describes “la relativamente reciente incursión de los

estudios del performance dentro de la academia latinoamericana” (the relatively recent incursion of performance studies in the Latin American academy) (Prieto 2005: 52).

Setting aside for the moment pressing questions of funding for new centers and departments, as well as issues of naming and translation, I will show the deep and lasting involvement of scholars and artists in Latin America in related theoretical approaches and practices. This essay aims to correct the perception of visual studies as emerging only when it is named as such (in English) and instead works as a conversation about these emerging fields across the American continent, south to north. In this conversation, privilege is granted not to highly funded centers but rather to creative interventions in the character of knowledge produced by and governing the meaning of bodies, images, and archives.

This essay does not pretend to provide a comprehensive survey of visual studies, visual culture, and performance studies. Instead, I trace the interventions into the structures of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge that these three monikers—once renamed with actions, studies, and objects made in Latin America—make possible, and I listen for the warnings that those of us working in the U.S. academy ought to heed as we contribute to these formulations of knowledge.² In what follows, I identify the early formation of such scholarship and artistic practices during the surge in cultural studies across the hemisphere in the 1990s. While they did not name themselves as “visual studies” or “performance studies,” these interventions offer important insights into the relationship between these interdisciplinary fields and the promise they hold for political work in the humanities. The particular intellectual genealogies of *los estudios culturales latinoamericanos*—a program of research and study that made claims of interdisciplinary, political engagement and new objects and methods of study similar to those of visual and performance studies—contribute not only a means for framing the question of the geopolitics of knowledge in the emergence of these new fields, but also chart a distinctive structure of interdisciplinary research and practice at the intersection between the humanities, social sciences, and art. I show how these early voices concerned with images and bodies lay the groundwork for discussions about aesthetics and politics in visual and performance studies. They explore the potential for visual and sensory epistemologies, seek opportunities for cross-class community formation and communication in contexts of state and local violence, and devise a relationship between artistic avant-gardes and popular cultures as well as the shape of the archives that contain them. In conclusion, I reflect on the prospects of thinking through gesture as a contemporary manifestation of this genealogy of visual and performance studies, as much for the many disciplines that inform the very concept of gesture as for its unique constellation of semiosis and corporeality.

While examining the formulations of these (inter)disciplines in Latin America, I do not assert either a purity or authenticity of knowledge about or from the region. The boundaries between these sites are porous, with scholars and artists traveling, researching, and living on both sides of the north/south divide; this can be a matter of choice, political necessity, professional opportunity, or personal obligation. Yet, by tracing the specific genealogies that inform the

scholarly and artistic practices that participate in these fields of knowledge, we can take note of the gains and losses to their stated intellectual, aesthetic, and political goals as well as their capacity for complementing one another. In an edited collection dedicated to the concept of “lugares del saber” (places of knowledge) Ricardo Salvatore paints a picture of “las formas complejas en que, en las empresas del conocimiento, se entrelazan estas dos pulsiones, aparentemente antagónicas, hacia el localismo y hacia lo transnacional” (the complex forms in which, in the labor of knowledge, two apparently antagonistic impulses weave together, toward localism and toward the transnational) (Salvatore 2007: 13). This sort of scholarship pays close attention to what might be called—riffing on Miwon Kwan’s discursive site specificity—the site specificity of knowledge (See Kwon 2002). It makes it possible to ask:

¿Qué hace que un proyecto de conocimiento o una disciplina adquiera el carácter de local o nacional? ¿Cuándo y por qué un cuerpo de conocimientos se torna transnacional y, por tanto, aparentemente ‘de ningún lugar’ en particular? ¿De qué manera limitan los centros hegemónicos y los imperios los desarrollos de emprendimientos de saber en las periferias?”

(What makes a knowledge project or a discipline acquire the character of the local or the national? When and why does a body of knowledge become transnational, and therefore, apparently ‘from no place’ in particular? In what manner do hegemonic and imperial centers limit the development of knowledge initiatives on the peripheries?) (Salvatore 2005: 17)

Focusing on the site of production of visual culture and performance studies does not limit the scope of their knowledge projects; instead, it can ultimately acknowledge and amplify their impact on the sites of production of hegemonic discourses.

Estudios Culturales/Estudios de Cultura Visual

The development of cultural studies in Latin America had strong connections to communications, sociology, and anthropology; its crossovers between the humanities and social sciences grounded Latin American visual and performance studies in a critical analysis of the relationship between modernity, visibility, and knowledge.³ While some theorists, such as Nelly Richard, criticized such work for being “sociology of culture,” which did not sufficiently interrogate the structures and values of disciplinary knowledge,⁴ Salvatore argues that it played an important role in the reformulation of knowledge at the heart of modernization projects. He reminds us that, “la propia antropología puso en duda categorías clave ligadas a esta disciplina y su trabajo (‘comunidad étnica’, ‘trabajo de campo’ y la idea de una

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‘cultura’ atada al espacio geográfico)” (anthropology itself cast doubt on key categories linked to this discipline and its work [‘ethnic community,’ ‘field work,’ and the idea of a ‘culture’ tied to geographic space]) (Salvatore 2005: 10). Latin American cultural studies in this vein articulates a critique of the status of knowledge in Western modernity by suggesting a way of thinking knowledge “*en y desde un lugar particular*” (Salvatore 2005: 17). Early forms of visual studies in Latin America grew out of this gesture, frequently often intervening precisely in the operations by which Western modernity linked vision and knowledge. In them, the “visual” of visual studies operates as a driving metaphor for the kind of located work that Salvatore imagines. When Beatriz Sarlo sought to articulate a project of cultural studies that would avoid the traps of market hybridity—those glossy images of diversity captured in Benetton advertisements—she asked: “¿Cómo armar una perspectiva para ver ‘desde Argentina’?” (‘How to assemble a perspective to see’ from Argentina?) (seen Castro-Klarén 2000: 396, emphasis added).⁵ Sarlo’s knowledge as “seeing from” stands in stark opposition to Western modernity’s insistence upon knowledge gained by “looking at.”

By grounding this exploration of visual and performance studies in *los estudios culturales latinoamericanos*, I hope to help to avoid the repetition of misunderstandings and mistakes that characterized many exchanges between north and south regarding this earlier interdisciplinary field. One criticism, made by Néstor García Canclini and Jesús Martín Barbero and repeated by Daniel Mato, was that cultural studies already existed in Latin America before it was imported from the US and Europe (Mato 2003: 73-74). That is, Latin American cultural studies perversely obscured the process of “seeing from” Latin America: the content of the cultural studies scholarship produced and the intervention into the structure of knowledge within modernity, which the very “seeing from” constituted. Two key publications—*Estudios culturales latinoamericanos: Retos desde y sobre la región andina* (Latin American Cultural Studies: Challenges from and about the Andean Region, 2003), edited by Catherine E. Walsh and published in Ecuador, and *Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina: El desafío de los estudios culturales* (New Perspectives from/about Latin America: The Challenge of Cultural Studies, 2000), edited by Mabel Moraña and published in Chile—provide a look into the central discussions. Initially, these cultural studies projects seem to have little to do with visual culture. They do not define their field as the “visual,” perhaps because the visual has been considered suspect for its contributions to figurative representation and the fine arts, or perhaps due to its flow through capitalist mass media in popular culture. Nevertheless, this healthy suspicion of the visual was matched with an enthusiasm for its promised way out of the trap of literacy and literariness in the region.

In Moraña’s volume, literary scholar Hugo Achugar remarks on the lesser attention paid to the contributions of visual representations to the construct of “America” and “Latin America” in literary and cultural studies. He argues that from the colonial period to the twentieth century, painting as much as cartography contributed to the capacity to imagine culture and place in the Americas. Deploying a heteroclitite approach to images more typical of visual culture than art

history, Achugar studies Peter Paul Rubens' "Four Parts of the Earth" or "Four Rivers" (circa 1615)—in which the Río de la Plata appears as one of the four rivers of classical antiquity in the figure of a black woman (321)—and Joaquín Torres-García's inverted map of South America, "El norte es el sur" (1943). Despite the three hundred years that separate the two images, he argues that Torres García's map makes visible the ideological work of spatialized knowledge in visual culture. Specifically, the map performs a reversal of the colonial power represented by Rubens' painting, a reversal that Achugar compares to Guaman Poma de Ayala's representation of the world, in which the sun, mountains, and Cuzco appear on the top of the pictorial space and Spain is relegated to the bottom. In the process of arguing for the importance of visual studies in cultural studies, Achugar formulates the key operation of this field seen above in Sarlo: the understanding of position as not just geography, but also culture, ideology, and knowledge.

Communications scholar Jesús Martín Barbero's opening essay in Moraña's collection similarly insists upon the visual as a key component in cultural studies' interventions in epistemology. He places "la visualidad cultural" (the visibility of culture) of contemporary televisual and digital society and "el pensamiento visual" (the visual thought) that it produces at the heart of the intellectual project of cultural studies. Martín Barbero explains that *el pensamiento visual* is necessary:

ante el surgimiento de 'otra figura de la razón' que exige pensar la imagen, por una parte, desde su nueva configuración sociotécnica: el computador (sic) no es un *instrumento* con el que se producen objetos, sino un nuevo tipo de *tecnicidad* que posibilita el procesamiento de informaciones [...] y por otra, desde la emergencia de un nuevo paradigma del pensamiento que rehace las relaciones entre el orden de lo discursivo (la lógica) y de lo visible (la forma), de la intelegibilidad y la sensibilidad.

(in the face of the appearance of 'another figure of reason' that requires thinking the image, on the one hand, from its new socio-technical configuration: the computer is not an *instrument* with which objects are produced, but rather a new type of *technicality* that makes possible the processing of information [...] and on the other hand, from the emergence of a new paradigm of thought that remakes the relations between the order of the discursive (logic) and the visible (form), of intelligibility and sensibility.) (Martín Barbero 2000: 25, original emphasis)

Something analogous to visual studies was clearly present in the challenge that cultural studies offered to hegemonic epistemology. Martín Barbero suggests that "Una nueva *episteme cualitativa* abre la investigación a la intervención constituyente de la imagen en el proceso de saber: arrancándola a la *sospecha* racionalista, la imagen es percibida por la nueva episteme como posibilidad de experimentación/simulación" (A new qualitative episteme opens research to the constitutive intervention of the image in the process of knowing: tearing it away from

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rationalist *suspicion*, the image is perceived by the new episteme as the possibility of experimentation/simulation) (Martín Barbero 2000: 26). Martín Barbero goes on to treat this kind of thought, this other reason of the visual, as part of a “nuevo *sensorium*” (new *sensorium*) that includes the senses and perception more broadly. His essay—which focuses on the body and the senses as vital sources for a contemporary epistemology—represents an early manifestation of how Latin American visual studies established an inherent relationship with performance studies.

As much as these critique of modernity and knowledge made political claims, in Walsh’s important collection Daniel Mato concurs with a widespread concern that “el proyecto de los *Cultural Studies*, esos que se hacen en inglés, ha venido academizándose a la vez que despolitizándose” (the project of Cultural Studies, those that are done in English, has depoliticized itself as it becomes academicized). His criticism is that cultural studies (in English) forget about or erase the agent and become a “mero asunto de análisis de textos y discurso” (a mere question of analysis of texts and discourse) (Mato 2003: 84). They produce only studies. We must note, however, that what Mato terms “escriturocentrismo” (literally “writing-centrism,” with a aural pun on Eurocentrism) is not limited only to U.S. and British cultural studies (Mato 75-6). Martín Barbero, despite his interest in the power of visual thinking and sensorial knowledge, ultimately finds just other “modos de leer” (ways of reading). His pensamiento visual is only ever engaged via a structure of reading (Martín Barbero 2000: 27). In contrast to these word-centered, academic projects, Mato’s definition of the politics of cultural studies in Latin America is broad, multivalent, and lays the groundwork for a form of intellectual practice quite close to that associated with both visual and performance studies. He asks: “¿Qué sucede con otras formas de práctica intelectual? ¿dónde quedan las prácticas no escritas en el seno de movimientos sociales, las prácticas en artes visuales, o en cine, etc.?” (What happens with other forms of intellectual practice? Where do non-written practices remain in the heart of social movements, visual arts practices, or the cinema, etc?) (Mato 2003: 80) Mato’s proposed field of “prácticas intelectuales en cultura y poder” (intellectual practices in culture and power) mixes scholarship of diverse cultures, forms of knowledge, art, and socio-political action, and it closely resembles what we now call visual culture and performance. Indeed, in his list of people active in these practices of cultural studies in Latin America, Mato includes a range of activists and artists from an avant-garde group to graphic comics, film directors and the intercultural meetings of the Pueblos Indígenas, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

As Mato insists, there were other thinkers involved in these early forms of visual culture studies in Latin America. These practicing intellectuals defined politics as central to their interventions—in much the same way that Nicolas Mirzoeff claims for visual culture—and engaged in an interdisciplinary form of inquiry that relied upon a “mode of comparison [that] is not a lofty gaze from the ivory tower but a place in the midst of conflict” (Mirzoeff 2009: 1-2). They were concerned with more than discourses and produced more than just texts and other readings. They combined a grounding in social sciences with experiments with art, photography,

performance, and media.

Elizabeth Jelin, who has worked since the early 1980s in sociology and communications departments, used photography as a tool for social exchange and organization. In *Podría ser yo* (*It could be me*, 1987), she collaborated with the residents of poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires as well as with sociologist Pablo Vila and photographer Alicia d'Amico. Together they decided on the photographs that appropriately represented life in their urban barrios and villas and reflected on how to interpret the images. In the process, they developed theories of how societies emerge from dictatorship. In their co-authored introduction, they explain:

Decimos que este libro es producto de un diálogo: están las voces de la gente de los barrios; la mirada de la fotógrafa; los textos académicos de los sociólogos; nuestra propia subjetividad durante las entrevistas y después, en la selección de textos y fotos y en los comentarios que agregamos; la opinión de los barrios ante el libro semiterminado; la respuesta de la gente de barrios y villas fotografiados a aquellos entrevistados que hicieron comentarios prejuiciosos a partir de mirar aquellas fotos que los retrataban[...] La intención es que siga siendo un libro abierto a la continuación del diálogo: que a partir de la discusión de este primer producto en nuevos barrios y villas se pueden agregar páginas de textos y fotos, cambiar y/o incorporar visiones y interpretaciones[...] participamos tanto actores como investigadores.

(We state that this book is the product of a dialogue: there are the voices of the people of the barrios; the photographic gaze; the academic texts of the sociologists; our own subjectivity during the interviews and after, in the selection of texts and photos and in the commentaries that we added; the opinion of the barrios in the face of the almost finished book; the answer of the people of the photographed barrios and the villas to those interviewed that made prejudiced comments upon seeing the photographs that represented them [...] The intention is that it keep being a book open to the continuation of the dialogue: that from the discussion of this first product in new barrios and villas pages of texts and photos can be added, to change and/or incorporate visions and interpretations [...] We participated as much as actors as researchers.) (Jelin et al 1987: 8)

Podría ser yo includes photographs of interviews in which the bodies of both interviewer and interviewed are captured on camera, in which the role of the interviewer/ethnographer is shared between those living in the barrios and villas and the photographer/academic. The dialogue produced seeks to heal the wounds not only of a city split by extreme divisions of poverty and wealth but also of a society still suffering from the suspicion between neighbors, which the dictatorship instilled in order to maintain control. Jelin and her collaborators set forth—in pictures, words, and conversation—the political necessity and aesthetic possibilities of intervening in contemporary visual regimes.

In the same year, Armando Silva published his study of graffiti in Bogotá, which devises a new approach to visuality and urbanism. From its very title, *Punto de vista ciudadano*:

Focalización visual y puesta en escena del graffiti (*Citizen Point of View: Visual Focalization and the Mise-en-Scène of Graffiti*, 1987) designates its site of inquiry at the intersection of the visual and the performative.⁶ For Silva, graffiti became not just an object of study but rather an entire mode of thinking about lived urban spaces. In order to analyze how graffiti was lived and seen by citydwellers, he combined psychoanalytic and phenomenological understandings of the gaze with sociological methods of recording information (Silva 1987: 19). The political and social power of this intellectual intervention is evident even before the book proper begins: the publisher inserted a note that explains that while the norms of the Real Academia Española and the Academia Colombiana de la Lengua recommend the use of the word *grafito*, the editor respected the wishes of the author to use *graffiti*. The study of written language out of place successfully speaks in disobedient words, substituting the academic with the colloquial, much like Richard Schechner imagines for performance studies. In what follows, Silva states that “nos desplazamos al supuesto observador pragmático, para diseñar un simulacro de lo que podría ser la lectura y observación de estos mensajes por parte de los habitantes urbanos” (we displace the supposed pragmatic observer, to design a simulacrum of what the reading and observation of those messages by urban inhabitants could be). To do so, he begins with the way in which, “al situarse del lado de la prohibición social, [graffiti] realiza, de manera peculiar, la acción que la ejecuta” (by situating itself on the side of social prohibition, [graffiti] enhances, in a peculiar fashion, the action that it executes) (Silva 1987: 15). The performative element of graffiti is inseparable from its political and social intervention. Silva’s early work reveals that visual culture must allow performative, visual, and spoken languages to insert themselves in the mouths and bodies of the researcher and his or her readers.⁷

As much as these early visual studies projects sought to change the methods, epistemologies, and interpretations that shape social sciences, other such projects changed only their objects of study. Nelly Richard has been a leading figure in theorizing and establishing the relationship between visual studies and performance studies, and, as mentioned above, her work maintained a strong critique of sociology. Richard argued that sociology produces only summary generalizations and cannot account for the kind of varied and changing meanings of art and culture and their promise for political intervention (see Richard 2004). From the early 1980s, Richard wrote about artists’ use of trash, found objects, and recycled materials, and their treatment of the “street as ‘the true Museum’” (see Beasley-Murray 2005: 127). She worked with the artists in CADA and the Escena de Avanzada, which shaped the Chilean avant-garde of the late 1970s, collaborating especially closely with performance artists such as Lotty Rosenfeld. In a conference organized by Richard, the closing remarks were made by Martín Hopenhayn, a philosopher currently working for the Comisión Económica Para América Latina y el Caribe as director of the division of social development. Back in 1987, Hopenhayn’s essay titled “¿Qué tienen contra los sociólogos?” respectfully summarizes the main protestations of the Avanzada group against sociology, contrasting its unity to sociologists’ fragmentation, its totalization to their genealogy, its value of clarity in scientific discourse to their value of an equivocal message. Yet he also suggests that “quizás por efecto de su propia práctica a la

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márgen de un sistema político, moral y cultural que excluye/reprime/domestica lo diferente, hay una tendencia a homologar lo constituido con lo estigmatizado, y a identificar lo conceptualizador con lo reificante” (perhaps as an effect of their own practice on the margins of a political, moral, and cultural system that excludes/represses/domesticates the different, there is a tendency to equate the constituted with the stigmatized, and to identify the conceptualizing with the reifying) (Hopenhayn 1987: 93). Perhaps, Hopenhayn offers, the fragmentary may constitute and the marginal can theorize. What is more, he warns against avant-garde “delusions” that, with their proclamations of novelty, can reproduce the very matrix of modernity that the Avanzada sought to critique. Overall, Hopenhayn’s words on sociology, and Richard’s inclusion of them in the volume, reveal a vibrant exchange between the social sciences and the early proponents of something analogous to visual culture and performance studies.

Early visual studies, however, does not grant the kind of interventions Mato desires only to activities based in the social sciences. In Moraña’s volume José Teixeira Coelho argues for the political and social function of public art in urban spaces. He thus adds another crucial component of visual studies: the possibility of a “cultura política” created through art, which alters the assumed relationship between public and private spaces. Teixeira Coelho, professor of communications and arts and former director of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo at the Universidade de São Paulo, defines public space as “aquele onde se dá a invenção do *nós comum*, em contrapunto ao espaço privado, espaço de construção do eu individual, espaço da autonomia interior, da elaboração de si mesmo” (that place where an invention of a *common we* is given, in counterpoint to the private space, a space of construction of the individual, a space of interior autonomy, of the elaboration of the self) (Teixeira Coelho 2000: 360). Public art can create urban spaces of “convivência”—the happy coexistence of diverse peoples—“de alguma coisa que se aproxima do nós coletivo” (of something that approximates a collective we) (Teixeira Coelho 2000: 368). Brazil’s contemporary lack of urban public spaces reveals “uma fraqueza não apenas dos laços éticos que permitem a construção do nós comum; mostra ao mesmo tempo a debilidade do papel da arte no país” (a weakness not only of ethical links that permit the construction of a common we; it shows at the same time the weakness of the role of art in the country) (Teixeira Coelho 2000: 369). This form of visual studies, emerging out of cultural studies, operates as a critique of the presumed value of art, as a critique of the middle class, and as a critique of the university in Brazil, for none of them builds a relationship between art and citizenship. Teixeira Coelho’s essay offers a critique of art when it functions only as an appendage to the social body and a vocabulary of visual studies that makes possible critical approaches to art as well as visual culture.

Two points have been central to my exploration of genealogies of visual and performance studies in Latin America thus far. First, despite the lack of a clear denomination as visual or performance studies, the broad range of cultural studies in Latin America contained a theory and practice of a critique of modern epistemologies structured as “looking at” rather than “seeing from,” which we can consider the basis for this field. Second, that the grounding of this

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work in the social sciences rather than the humanities did not result only in positivist philosophies nor limit its (inter)disciplinary experiments. Cultural studies' relationship with the social sciences, particularly anthropology, in Latin America has much to offer these new fields of study internationally. It provides an extensive theoretical genealogy for ideas glossed in the literature on visual and performance studies in the U.S. Schechner has traced the relationship between performance studies and anthropology in the U.S., and he describes the "performance studies field-worker" as a scholar who adapts the methods of anthropology but leaves behind the discipline's early illusions of neutrality (Schechner 2002: xii). Nicholas Mirzoeff makes claims for visual culture as a field of acts, in which "questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturality" (Mirzoeff 2009: xi). The decades of theorizing mestizaje, creolization, transculturation, and sincretism within the Latin American academy could (and ought to) form part of the basic syllabus for visual studies and performance studies defined in this way. Those tracks of visual studies in the U.S. that stress new visual technologies and the digital humanities suffer from their lack of awareness about the critical examinations of visibility and modernity that have flourished in Latin America since the 1990s.⁸

The political action and critique of modernity articulated by artists and visual producers in and from Latin America continue today, including artist-researchers who have crossed over not only to the social sciences but also to the "hard" sciences. Eduardo Kac, the artist best known for "GFP Bunny" (2000)—a transgenic artwork that resulted in Alba, a rabbit who glowed fluorescent under a special light—began his career doing performance art and creating visual poetry in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1980s.⁹ Kac cites Flávio de Carvalho's performative, cross-dressing interventions of the 1930s and 1940s, concrete poetry, and neo-concretism as his key artistic references.¹⁰ His early investigations into the relationship between body, language, and code grew into inquiries and interventions into scientific fields of holography, telecommunications, genetics, and bioart more broadly. From his performances through visual poetry and telecommunications to the transgenic art he is known for now, Kac's work explores how semiotic systems (be they language or DNA sequences) take shape in the body and begin to circulate in social, culture, political, and mediatic circuits. [Kac](#) makes it clear that "GFP Bunny" exists not only in the body of Alba, the rabbit, but also in "the public dialogue generated by the project, and the social integration of the rabbit". He goes on to eloquently articulate the disciplines and social networks that he involved in the artwork, not as secondary to the work but as the work itself. Ultimately, the combination of research, creation, and circulation that forms Kac's practice is, for him, also a politics. In an interview with Simone Oesthoff in 1994, Kac responds, in a sense, to Mato's concern about the academicization of certain forms of cultural studies:

I guess the 26 years I lived in Brazil [many of them under dictatorship] taught me not to believe in organized politics. My group believed that we could perhaps change people's lives in a smaller way, opening up their

eyes to other forms of existence, forms of behavior, forms of sexuality, and forms of thinking, that perhaps they were not even aware of. (<http://www.ekac.org/intervcomp94.html>)

Avant-garde art, popular culture, politics

Kac's claim for a form of political intervention through art that polemically rejects all organized politics, and Richard's strong advocacy for the role of the avant-garde in founding other forms of democratic politics brings us to a key concern in visual culture and performance studies—that is, their relationship to avant-garde art. If a full discussion of the politics of avant-garde art, debated throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, is beyond the scope of this essay, we must nonetheless take into account the specific histories of the Latin American *vanguardias*. In the past decade, scholars and artists have reconsidered the shape given to these movements in the context of a surge of critical work on modernity and modernism outside their hegemonic centers. Achugar began to ask these questions at the end of his early essay on the spatialization of knowledge, noting that although avant-garde artist Torres-García's map did not appear to make a major intervention at the time of its initial circulation, today it is massively reproduced, not unlike the image of Che Guevara seen on t-shirts and posters globally. He ponders the contradictions of the mass circulation of artistic and political avant-gardes: “si esto significa una estrepitosa degradación o una mera instalación en el imaginario popular y en consecuencia la diseminación de una reflexión elitista, no lo sé” (if this signifies a spectacular degradation or a mere installation in the popular imaginary and consequently the dissemination of an elitist reflection, I don't know) (Achugar 2000: 333).

Visual culture and performance studies, both in their U.S. and Latin American formations, seek to address this question about the political possibilities of vanguardism and its relationship to popular culture, even motivating the confusion at its core as part of their method. Schechner argues for the importance of avant-gardism in shaping performance studies, as he poses and answers the question that haunts many such interdisciplinary projects:

If everything in performance studies is up for grabs, how can performance studies be itself and nothing else? The answer is in how performance studies regards actions, behavior, and practice. Performance studies takes these very seriously at two levels: Performance studies both examines actions and is itself infused with actions. Artistic practice of a particular kind is a necessary part of the performance studies curriculum. This practice *privileges a living avant-garde*—performance art, performance composition, performative writing, and the like. (Schechner 2002: xi, emphasis added)

James Elkins recognizes that, “in addition to mass media, visual culture also has another interest, not always well fitted to the first: avant-garde art” (Elkins 2003: 44), but views its presence as a contradiction still to be resolved by scholars in the field.¹¹ I have argued

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elsewhere that, when seen through the relationship between photography and literature, the history of the avant-garde in Latin America is not one of rigid separation of the popular from the elite, but rather of active involvement in both the mass cultural and ethnographic or folkloric popular cultures. This “errant modernism,” which wanders out of the protected sphere of elite cultural production and makes intentional “errors” in aesthetics, means that the fit of the avant-garde in the field of visual culture is not so uncomfortable in that region as in mainstream, U.S. and European movements.¹² Argentine art historian Andrea Giunta makes a related argument in her book, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (2007).¹³ While Giunta’s objects of study are the materials of avant-garde artists, she investigates the institutions and circuits through which power circulated to institute the forms of avant-garde art and internationalism in Argentina. Ultimately, Giunta summarizes her project as a consideration of “the relations between economic development, society, and the artistic milieu” (Giunta 2007: 5). In what I view as a clear outline for a visual studies methodology, she investigates the circuits connecting the avant-garde and popular culture, the spaces in which images appear, the transformations in artistic production, and their relationship to technical and industrial change.¹⁴

Curators Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina affirm this relationship between visual culture and avant-garde in their major intervention into museographic practice, *La era de la discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México, 1968-1997* (*The Era of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968-1997*). This exhibition garnered attention in part for its important recovery of work by the “grupos”—influential collectives long neglected by mainstream museums, which experimented with art, politics, and collaborative practices. Even more important was their treatment of the show as “a project about the production of knowledge” and “a history of the methods of production and distribution initiated by the artists themselves, sometimes in allegiance with critics and curators, who projected their ‘discrepancies’ as a promise for cultural and political changes” (Debroise and Medina 2007: 27-28). In *La era de la discrepancia*, the artists’ attitudes constitute an expanded field of production from art to art and visual culture, and the exhibition catalogue includes a mixture of images from a wide variety of sources. While focusing generally on the visual production of recognized artists, the curators make an argument for a broad “visuality” of the period that began in 1968 with the student movement, when, in many media, “images became increasingly relevant, to the point of becoming a central part of the argument.” (Debroise and Medina 2007: 68) From film stills to murals to illustrated newspapers, the exhibition and catalogue detailed the exchanges between formalized, if avant-garde, art practices and other daily uses of images.

The political aims of visual studies and the avant-garde, however, still face significant challenges. Debroise and Medina end the exhibition in 1997, three years after the start of the Zapatista *guerrilla* uprising in Chiapas on 1 January 1994. While they credit Zapatismo with “a creative form of ethnic resistance to global capitalism” and include photographs by Antonio Turok and Omar Meneses as well as press coverage of the rebellion, they state that it “was not accompanied by an *artistic culture* that arose immediately

parallel to these events. One had to wait a few months, if not a couple of years, before the collateral-cultural effects of this crisis exploded within the *art world*.” The curators cite the artist-run gallery in Mexico City, La Panadería (1994-2002), as a site where this social crisis did register, in the form of artists addressing the “apparent ‘loss of a future’” (Debroise and Medina 2007: 29-30, emphasis added). Given the aims and title of the exhibition, though, and the immediate, widespread, and creative use of literature, photography, performance, the internet, video, and other visual media by the Zapatistas, the limited representation of this artistic production, and its separation from that exhibited in La Panadería suggests that more needs to be done in the field of visual culture. While one certainly must recognize the hierarchies that privilege the “art world” of Mexico City—that small and rarified group of galleries and museums in the midst of 22 million residents—the Zapatistas certainly contributed to an “artistic culture” not only domestically but also internationally.¹⁵ Their powerful resignification of the simple, black *pasamontaña* (ski mask) as the icon that makes visible the demands of the invisible and disempowered, even as it refuses the state’s demand for visibility, could be considered one of the strongest political interventions into visual and performance studies of the end of the past century.¹⁶ As much as the uprising and popular movement faced incredible odds, in those early years the activities it generated—military, political, and cultural—were quite distant from the sort of middle class angst about the “loss of a future” the curators describe.¹⁷

Looking at more recent work by the Zapatistas, Cristina Híjar González sets what they call “la otra comunicación, el otro arte y la otra cultura” (the other communication, the other art, and the other culture) at the heart of visual culture studies in Mexico.¹⁸ She argues that this “other art” formulates alternatives to reason as knowledge, including also sensibility and sentimentality; it is constituted by an exchange of knowledges “desde el periódico mural, el Internet, la ‘cámara filmadora’ como instrumento para la memoria, el testimonio y la denuncia, hasta las radios comunitarias e incluso, y literalmente como medios de comunicación, al sistema de transporte zapatista” (from the mural newspaper, the internet, the ‘filmic camera’ as instrument for memory, testimony and denunciation, even community radio, to the Zapatista system of transport, literally as modes of communication). More than just compose a future, Híjar González argues that these diverse artistic practices conceive of “la utopía como generadora desde el futuro de prácticas políticas transformadoras en el presente” (utopia as generative from a future of transformative political practices in the present) (Híjar González 2007). As I will suggest below, inclusion of Zapatista visual culture among the diverse political and aesthetic avant-gardes that shape visual and performance studies is more than just an aggregation of politics to the museum exhibition or the historical archive. It requires that we rethink the archive itself, such that it is formed not only of objects from a (colonial) past but rather utopian elements produced from a future that is created by radical action today.

Archive Politics

The nature of the archive and the value of the knowledge it contains is a central methodological debate, which emerged out of the cultural studies discussions and continues to shape the development of analogous forms of performance and visual studies in Latin America. Rebecca Schneider proposes that performance—despite its ephemerality, and even as it challenges Western ocularcentrism—offers a new access to history. Presenting the archive as act rather than structure, she argues that it enacts the disappearance of the performative in order to authorize history. Ultimately, Schneider concludes that “works in which the political manipulations of ‘disappearance’ demand a material criticism [...] thus create a productive tension within performance studies orientations to (and sometime celebrations of) ephemerality.” (Schneider 2001: 106)¹⁹ Indeed, significant debates continue to take place among scholars and artists in Latin America about how to address the lack of archives of avant-garde art and popular visual culture, as much as archives of performance. If one of the key goals of performance studies is the revaluation of bodily knowledge, in Latin America it faces the additional challenge of a dearth of what we might call contemporary archives. What is more, the composition of the field alongside a form of visual studies already grounded in a critique of Western ocularcentrism as modern knowledge, means that both fields contain proposals—practical and theoretical—for the forms that such archives may take.

“Pinto mi raya,” the long collaboration between Mexico City artists Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma, provides a fascinating example of what other forms and functions an archive can take, and in a recent conversation, Mayer insisted on the vital and persistent need for archives of contemporary art in Mexico. The two artists began the project in 1989 as an alternative space to exhibit work that was not being shown in galleries and museums. In 1991 it was transformed into a homemade *hemeroteca* (newspaper library), composed of publications on contemporary Mexican art. In the early years of the project, Mayer wrote that: “La documentación, en un país que con las uñas tiene que defender su patrimonio cultural es un acto no sólo patriota sino heroico” (Documentation, in a country that has to defend its cultural patrimony with its fingernails, is an act that is not only patriotic but heroic) (Mayer 1992: 4). “Pinto mi raya” has been a daily labor of cutting and storing, in part as a pragmatic attempt to compensate for the lack of books about contemporary art in Mexico. Mayer and Lerma collect and organize the publications and provide them to libraries, students, and artists. Nevertheless, Mayer is painfully aware of the contradictions inherent in their project. In an essay titled “Archivos de arte y arte sobre archivos,” (Archives of Art, and Art About Archives) she explains:

Por un lado me di cuenta que lo paradójico y contradictorio que es que dos artistas que nos hemos dedicado a realizar trabajo no-objetual, efímero, conceptual, hayamos tomado como eje central de nuestra propuesta el archivo, la historia, esa necesidad de perdurabilidad que nuestra obra niega.

(On the one hand I realized the paradox and contradiction of two artists who have dedicated ourselves to make non-objectual, ephemeral, conceptual work but have taken as the central

nexus of our proposal the archive, history, that necessity of durability that our work denies.) (Mayer 2003)

One answer Mayer offers to this contradiction is that “la idea del archivo nos interesa más por lo que puede hacer en el presente, que en el futuro” (the idea of the archive interests us more for what it can do in the present than in the future). She explains: “Planteamos el archivo como obra y como acto de defensa personal” (We propose the archive as a work, and as an act of personal defense) (<http://www.pintomiraya.com>). Their archive is both daily work and a work of art, bridging the habitual—a bodily routine of twenty years of cutting and pasting—with the form of a library. It is an archive that registers and shapes the *oeuvre* of its makers, even as it offers a space of collective being, that “*nós comum*” that Coelho called for above. Mayer is also aware of the paradox of a performance artist steeped in feminist epistemologies of the body who dedicates such a long time to shaping an archive. However, it is a paradox that has become her practice.

In contrast to Mayer’s reflections on the archive, Brazilian art critic and psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik takes a strong stand against what she terms the “*furor de archivo*” (the rage of the archive)—dominant in U.S. and European movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond—and against what she considers a bureaucratic aesthetics of contemporary art in a conceptualist vein. Rolnik argues that political art in Latin America does not take the form of institutional critique characterized by an aesthetic of the archive due to the colonial history of the archive and the recent history of dictatorships in the region. Instead, she proposes:

Las intervenciones artísticas que afirman la fuerza política que les es inherente serían aquellas que se llevan a cabo partiendo del modo en que las fuerzas del presente afectan al cuerpo del artista. Es esta calidad de relación con el presente lo que tales acciones eventualmente pueden incitar en aquellos que se disponen a vivirlas... En otras palabras, lo que define el tenor político de este tipo de práctica es aquello que puede suscitar en las personas que por él son afectadas en su recepción: no se trata de la conciencia de la dominación y de la explotación (su cara extensiva, representativa, macropolítica), sino de la experiencia de este estado de cosas en el propio cuerpo (su cara intensiva, inconsciente, micropolítica).

(Artistic interventions that affirm the political force that is inherent to them would be those that are carried out such that the present forces affect the body of the artist. It is this quality of relation with the present that such actions eventually can incite in those that are disposed to live them... In other words, what defines the political tenor of this kind of practice is that which it can incite in the people that are affected by it in its reception: it does not have to do with the consciousness of domination and exploitation [its extensive face, representative, macropolitical], but rather the experience of this state of things in the very body [its intensive face, unconscious, micropolitical].) (Rolnik 2010)

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Rolnik's solution is a poetics of experience, a sensorium not unlike Martín Barbero's above, which is inscribed in the "performative plane." In her work with Félix Guattari, she argues that micropolitical change is communicated like a virus, from body to body without the unnecessary intervention of discourse. According to Rolnik, understanding and defending *against* the attack of the "furor de archivo" can help to prepare for this other imagined future by preparing a series of micropolitical responses at the level of the corporeal.

Yet Guillermo Gómez Peña calls attention to the contemporary challenges faced by today's artists working with the body, those avant-garde artists whom Schechner and Richard welcomed as co-producers of performance theory and whose work Rolnik promotes in contrast to the archival furor she identifies in mainstream contemporary art.²⁰ Gómez Peña warns that the situation has changed dramatically since Lygia Clark made her sensorial works in the 1970s: "In a culture that glorifies acritically the stylized bizarre, the human body is understandably at the center of it all, for all the wrong reasons. The body is 'hot' again, but the spectacle of the altered or wounded body is much hotter." (Gómez Peña 2007: 352) Compared to presentations of the body in yellow journalism and on globally distributed television shows such as "CSI," once radical performances of the 1970s and 80s seem almost mainstream; even La Congelada de Uva, known for sewing her labia together on stage, cannot seem to compete with the spectacularized body now available for mass consumption. For Gómez Peña, then, "Our formidable challenge in this respect is how to rehumanize, repoliticize, and decolonize our own bodies wounded by the media, and intervened by the invisible surgery of pop culture." (Gómez Peña 2007: 353) Even visual culture and performance studies' repeated goals of greater representation of peoples excluded from the canon—of a diversity of aesthetic traditions and intellectual genealogies—receive words of warning from Gómez Peña, since he finds that the international art world is handily benefitting from its own version of corporate multiculturalism. Carolina Ponce de León makes the operation clear: "The global art world is a colonizer captivated by the strategies of decolonization." (see Gómez Peña 2007: 353) We must also be aware that new programs of visual and performance studies in today's entrepreneurial research universities in the United States are equally at risk of falling prey to this captivation.

Leading figures in art, visual culture, and performance thus offer fair warning that both the body and the archive are tainted entities. Rather than an irresolvable contradiction, the debate becomes the productive tension upon which the fields of performance studies and visual studies can encounter new epistemological formations and alternative research methods. Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2007) sets out a clear and convincing argument for the paired relationship between two forms of historical memory: the archival, that which is selected and protected for its relative permanence and often serves the interests of the state and its colonial reservoir of historical knowledge; and the repertoire, the embodied, living, more ephemeral, and yet persevering cache of knowledge generally erased by Western definitions of knowledge and value. These productive tensions evidently are shaping recent curatorial practice in Mexico, as Medina and

Debroise credit Mayer and Maris Bustamante, another long-term collaborator, as well as Martha Hellion and Patricia Sloane, with preceding them in their work on a contemporary archive.²¹The questions that structure the exhibition reveal the shared aims of visual studies' archival projects and performance. They ask: "How does one write the history of what was kept on the margins of history?" Like Mirzoeff's vision for visual culture, Debroise and Medina "wanted to design an exhibition that could operate as a force to activate and publicize memory" (Debroise and Medina 2007: 27). Their solution was creative and provocative: they made fictional recreations of lost or destroyed works, replicas that they call "a (new) historical reality" (Debroise and Medina 2007: 28). These recreations raise fascinating questions for the fields of performance and visual studies. Is there a scholarly equivalent of the creation of fictionalized substitutes for the materials lost from the archive? How would we name such an archive? Who could consult it, and what conclusions derived from it?

According to María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, Zapatismo offers potential answers to these questions through its creation of a unique archive grounded in a sophisticated performative aesthetic philosophy. She argues that Zapatismo has produced two substantial archives. First, she offers the record of their negotiations with the Mexican government, including the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, in which they "have repeatedly expanded the scope of the negotiations to include the rest of the nation...through the strategic public *performance* of democratic practice..." (Saldaña-Portillo 2003: 223, emphasis added). The marches from Chiapas to Mexico City, frequent public discussions and meetings, and, perhaps most importantly, the legal system put in place in Chiapas communities—which made justice visible and transparent—were performances of democracy that made possible the constitution of a new archive that holds the discourse of rights for indigenous peoples. The second archive named by Saldaña-Portillo are the comunicués issued by EZLN's Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI), which she describes as a "counterpunctual discourse emerging from silence" (Saldaña-Portillo 2003: 223). Her reading of silence could be included in the performative with a gentle push:

Silence is the clearing that makes speech possible, not because it stands in a dichotomous relation to speech, as contentless space, but precisely because it is in the fullness of silence where differences take shape: 'In silence, we were speaking.' Silence is the noise of democracy. (Saldaña-Portillo 2003: 235)

Here, as in Mayer and Lerma's archive, the practices of the bodies shape the content and form of the archive and fill it with knowledge heretofore invisible and inaudible.

Gesture: Signs of the body

How, then, might scholars responsibly invent archival materials and work in this paradox of

inscription and erasure, silence and demand? One possible answer is to create research projects that inhabit precisely that space where the discursive sign (more commonly the content of the archive) and the motile body meet. I find one such site of intersection in the concept of gesture.²² Named repeatedly in analyses of avant-garde art (and performance) and theater as well as in linguistics, sociology, and anthropology, a study of gesture requires the kind of interdisciplinary work between humanities and social sciences that cultural studies in Latin America instigated. Gesture is produced when language, image, and social norms intersect with the individual uses and habitations of the body; it is culturally informed but does not have a strict semantic order; it can be intentional but, unlike the pose, is not by definition put on or faked. Art history and literature have a long theorized gesture, from Quintillian's instructions, to rhetoricians, to Leonardo da Vinci's writings on painting. The paradox of gesture even fills the long history of its political employment: the Franciscans conquering Mexico in the 16th century sought to use gestures as a "universal language" with which to convert the indigenous peoples, even as they sought to suppress the culturally specific gestures and dances that embedded native religious beliefs and meaning into everyday life. Gesture spans the political action, avant-garde art, and everyday habits that form the material of visual and performance studies, and its repeated, iconic character forms a strangely shaped archive.

Studies of gesture tend to focus on this internal paradox: it is natural and codified, innate and conventional, culturally specific and universal. However, few directly ask what this paradox makes possible aesthetically or politically. In other words, what does an operation at the limit of code and instinct, body and language, image and word, make possible for cultural and artistic intervention? As much as the precedents for research in gesture are varied, those that begin to answer this question do so by crossing between humanistic, artistic, and social scientific methods of inquiry. They combine theory with practice, and they dwell in the unique communicative space that gesture creates.

Curiously, one of the foundational texts in what linguist Adam Kendon proposes as a new field of "Gesture Studies" is a 1941 study by Argentine David Efron, who received one PhD from the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and another in Sociology from Columbia University under the direction of Franz Boas.²³ *Gesture and Environment* is based in ethnographic research and interviews among Eastern European Jewish and Southern Italian communities in New York City. Efron clearly locates his study at the crux of the founding paradox of gesture; he studies the gestural habits of these immigrant groups "(a) with regard to their *spatio-temporal* aspects, i.e., gesture simply considered as 'movement,' (b) from the standpoint of their *referential* aspects, i.e., gesture envisaged as 'language'" (Efron 1941: 42-43, emphasis added). It is at this crux that the political operation of the study emerges: as a denunciation of racist publications from Nazi Germany, which characterized gesture as an inherited characteristic and coupled exaggerated gestures with genetically inferior races. Efron's fascinating study can be considered an early text in (Latin) American visual and performance studies: the aims of this early examination of the body's language and habits are

statedly political, and Efron's frequent references to observations made by Stuyvesant Van Veen, the artist responsible for the drawings of gestures, reveal that image and text as much as anthropologist and artist worked in a vibrant intellectual collaboration.²⁴

Gesture's operation at the limits of body and code also makes possible more subtle political and aesthetic interventions into forms of communication. Once again, these interventions emerge from gesture's paradoxical nature, in this case its reliance on both novelty and repetition. Recent work by linguistic anthropologist Keith Murphy shows that analyzing gesture helps to explain how visibility operates in collaborative creative settings. Examining the use of gestures by architects collaborating on a design, he argues that "imagining can be seen as a social and embodied activity that is supported by material objects, mediated by gestures, initiated by conversation, and maintained through the external force of all of these things as they are simultaneously employed in some social setting" (Murphy 2005: 118). Murphy's study of gesture helps us to redefine imagination as a creative practice no longer granted to the individual, genius artist but rather considered a communal activity, much like Coelho's "common" and Jelin's collective image production.

As much as gesture abets creative collaboration and inspires invention, repetition is central to the gestural formation of communities. Repetition makes gestures recognizable, legible, meaningful, not only in their performative manifestation, but also when they are most discursive and most "archival."²⁵ Linguistic studies of gesture emphasize its iconicity, its operation as a sign. Adam Kendon describes, in particular, the range of "quotable gestures," "emblems," and "conventionalized signs," such as forming thumb and finger into "OK." These repeated diagrammatic gestures culminate in sign language itself (McNeill 2005: 5). Similarly, Pedro Ovando Vázquez recalls that for Derrida, the performative is unrepeatable even as it cannot be thought of as a singular event: "su posibilidad singular es la *repetición*... El performance está hecho de marcas, de citas, tiene una herencia inteligible pero al mismo tiempo es diferimento de ella" (Its singular possibility is *repetition*... Performance is made of marks, of citations, it has an intelligible inheritance but at the same time is made different from that inheritance) (Ovando Vázquez 2007). From ritual prayers and cheers to talking to oneself, repetition is characteristic of both shared and intimate discourse (See Cook 1994). Research projects based in gesture, then, can simultaneously follow how its repetition makes possible the intimacy of bodily performance with the constitution of a public archive of signs as well as the creation of an intimate archive (as in the case of Mayer and Lerma) and the public performance of a common "we."

The particular social and aesthetic capacity of gesture is perhaps clearest in a seemingly simple example, a work by Chilean avant-garde artist Lotty Rosenfeld. Francisco Zegers describes *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento* (A Mile of Crosses on Pavement) (1978, 1980) as "la reiteración de (un) gesto" (the reiteration of (a) gesture) (7). While they do not theorize gesture formally, all contributors to the volume dedicated to this work

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(in which Rosenfeld paints a line perpendicular to the broken lines that divide the lanes of traffic on a street) use the word *gesto* to describe it. They note the work's repetition in a series of altered sites, "intervenidos" (interventions) in Washington, D.C.; East Berlin, Germany; and Santiago, Chile. Zegers' description is precise and revelatory: "Rosenfeld utiliza como modelo las líneas discontinuas que separan las pistas de circulación; un *signo* de tránsito que interviene, cruzándolo perpendicularmente con un blanco idéntico a su trazado, generando una serie de signos + en el pavimento" (Rosenfeld uses as a model the discontinuous lines that separate the lanes of circulation; a *sign* of transit that intervenes, crossing it perpendicularly with a white identical to its trace, generating a series of + signs in the pavement) (Zegers 1986: 7, emphasis added). In this utterly unspectacular performance, so influential in the history of political art, conceptualism, and performance, Rosenfeld's body registers lightly on the hard pavement and dramatically inverts the value of the mathematical symbols of + and -. Diamela Eltit calls the work "la insurrección al código/ por gestos peligrosos, simples, populares" (the insurrection of the code/ by dangerous, simple, popular gestures) (Eltit 1986: 13), and Nelly Richard credits its corporeality with creating its collective nature. Rosenfeld's work dwells in the paradox of gesture as body and as sign, as the intimate and the public. It is thus uniquely capable of defying the prohibition against interfering with certain social codes—"No hay diálogo con estas señales./ No se discute con estos signos" (There is no dialogue with these signals./ One does not discuss with these signs) (Eltit 1986: 11-12)—and inventing new meanings for them. The work's enactment of gesture as code as much as body makes these aesthetic and political interventions possible. It sticks its finger into and short-circuits perhaps the most powerful archives of knowledge: those that connect linguistic and visual signs with their meanings.

Kendon calls gestures "'excursions': phrases of action recognized as 'gesture' move away from a 'rest position' and always return to a rest position" (Kendon 1995). I close by foregrounding the presence of gesture in the interdisciplinary terrain of Latin American visual and performance studies in order to suggest that it offers generative and creative excursions: between north and south, sign and body, visual and performative. In ongoing research, I explore the possibility that gesture offers a means to address what I see as a crucial challenge facing socially and politically informed art and scholarship on the American continent and beyond—that of the contemporary form of critique in the 21st century. It prompts us to revisit and renew Brecht's concepts of *gest* and *gesture*, which made possible the "alienation effect" (A-effect) in political theater, a fundamental concept for the theory of critique in the 20th century. Brecht wrote that,

Everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized; that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture. The actor has to find a sensibly perceptible outward expression for his character's emotions, preferably some action that gives away what is going on inside him. The emotion in question must be brought out, must lose all its restrictions so that it can be treated on a big scale. Special elegance, power and grace of gesture bring about the A-effect. (Brecht 1978: 139)

Political theater deploys gesture to transform emotion into an external sign of social power, which thereby may be vulnerable to critique.²⁶

Yet Brecht's imagination of an entirely *externalizable* gesture implicitly emphasizes its discursive operation over its subtle being in body. When gesture loses its paradoxical nature and becomes pure sign, despite Brecht's wishes, it risks reinscribing the very "social gest" he wishes to critique. We see this take place in the fascinating and troubling *Diccionario de gestos: España e Hispanoamérica*, published in Colombia in 1980, which contains information on gestures gathered by "experts" from countries across Spanish America and Spain. The dictionary reveals social anxieties around sexuality, with its entry for "INVERTIDO (HOMOSEXUAL, PEDERASTA, MARICA) Y SIM" (Invert [homosexual, pederast, faggot] and sim. [original capitalization]) taking up five full pages, and including eight different photographs of the gestures that signify these words. There is a veritable explosion of synonyms, recorded gestures, and attempts to picture sexuality here (Meo Zilio 1980: vol. 2, 30-34). When linguists and social scientists try to externalize and systematize gesture only as sign, frantic excitations erupt, mostly in the shape of the gestures pointing to these non-normative subjects.

In contrast, Rosenfeld and Efron find a politics that dwells in the paradox of gesture: inside its mixture of the bodily and the discursive, the affective and the sensorial, as contradictory but coexisting forms of knowledge. José Muñoz offers a corrective to the homophobic *Diccionario de gestos*, proposing that, "Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture" (2009: 67); for him, they offer a time and place for a lingering and lost presence, the ephemeral trace of queer histories. It may be that the densest layering of cultural knowledge through gesture happens on and through bodies especially marked by race, gender, and non-normative sexuality (see also Brody 2008). In ongoing work on gesture, I press further into how gesture's paradoxical intersection of semiosis and corporeality—like Lotty Rosenfeld transformation of - into +— also offers these (and other) subjects a contemporary form of creation and critique.

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working on a new book project on theories of fiction in contemporary artistic and popular visual culture, entitled "Non-Literary Fictions: Invention and Interventions in Contemporary Latin American Visual Culture."

Notes

¹ In Chile, the Centro de Estudios Visuales is dedicated to "situar, crítica y metodológicamente, el problema del régimen escópico contemporáneo" (situate, critically and methodologically, the problem of the contemporary scopic regime), and proudly proclaims that "se ubica, geográficamente, en Sudamérica" (it is situated, geographically, in South America) (<http://www.centroestudiosvisuales.cl>). In Brazil at the Universidade Federal de Goiás, the Visual Art faculty offers a postgraduate course in visual culture, and the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales includes an interest in visual culture. A complete list of such programs in departments in the region, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. I am in the process of building one and would welcome contact from colleagues working in these fields and building new programs.

² For overviews of these fields, in addition to the works cited see: Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2002; Tracy C. Davis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Henry Bial, ed., *The Performance Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2007.

³ A brief list of major contributors to cultural studies reveals the depth and breadth of this relationship: anthropologists Nestor García Canclini, Roger Bartra, Roberto da Matta, and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla; sociologists Martín Hopenhayn, Renato Ortiz, Jesús Martín Barbero, José Joaquín Brunner, Sergio Miceli, and Norbert Lechner.

⁴ See Richard 2004. On the development of "cultural sociology" in the 1980s, see Nestor García Canclini, "Cultural Studies from the 1980s to the 1990s: Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives in Latin America," *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 329-346.

⁵ In his revised edition of *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2009), Nicholas Mirzoeff defines the field not just for its interdisciplinarity, but also as the study of "the visual construction of the

social field”: “visual culture is not an object-based field in the manner of film studies or art history, but a comparative one, analogous to comparative literature, rather than English, French or Spanish. By means of cross-cultural, cross-platform and cross-temporal comparison, visual culture endeavors to create a decolonial genealogy for the paradoxical convegence of war, economy, religion, the environment and globalized visual media” (Mirzoeff 2009: 1-2).

⁶ Three decades later, Carrie Noland uses graffiti as her point of departure for a theory of how “kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained” (Noland 2009: 2-3).

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<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2010/03/07/mckenzie.haiti.graffiti.champ.cnn?iref=allsearch>. See also my treatment of pro-Castro graffiti in Cuba (Gabara 2000).

⁸ On critiques of modernity in Latin America, see Mary Louise Pratt, “Modernity and Periphery: Towards a Global and Relational Analysis,” in Elizabeth Mudimbé-Boyi, ed., *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures and the Challenge of Globalization*, Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2002, 21-47.

⁹ Kac was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1962 and lived in Brazil until moving to Chicago in 1989.

¹⁰ Flávio de Carvalho performed an experiment on June 8, 1931, walking against the current of a religious procession he encountered on the street in São Paulo. He published a book about the event, *Experiência no 2* using a “método arqueológico, com recomposição de fatos, detalhes, emoções, passada a aventura e o perigo” (archeological method, with the recomposition of dates, details, emotions, once the adventure and the danger had passed) (seen Sangirardi Jr. 29).

¹¹ Diana Taylor argues, in contrast, that “there is nothing [...] necessarily avant-garde about the field” of performance studies (xviii).

¹² See my *Errant Modernism*.

¹³ Giunta even describes anthropologist Nestor García Canclini as the only scholar working “the symbolic strategies of economic development” (Giunta 2007: 5).

¹⁴ Giunta is currently co-director, with Roberto Tejada, of the Center for Latin American Visual Studies (CLAVIS)-Modern + Contemporary Art at the University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁵ Ricardo Domínguez, individually and in collaboration with Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), has engaged

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Zapatista politics and visual and narrative aesthetics since 1994. See <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/zapata.html> and Jill Lane and Ricardo Domínguez, "Digital Zapatistas," *TDR* 47:2 (2003), 129-144.

¹⁶ Mexican artist Pedro Lasch has made this point about the resignification of the *pasamontañas* in his series "Naturalizations/Naturalizaciones" begun in 2002; see <http://www.naturalizaciones.com/>. My thanks to him for our conversations about this idea.

¹⁷ A publication of the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional was titled, *Las voces del espejo: Cuentos, poemas y dibujos del zapatismo, para construir futuro* (Voices of the Mirror: Stories, Poems, and Drawings of Zapatismo, to Construct a Future)(1998), and collected drawings by *chiapaneco* children with essays, poems, and stories written both by major literary figures and by Zapatistas.

¹⁸ The Zapatistas here are riffing on *la otra campaña* (the other campaign), the name given to an initiative launched in 2006 in which they traveled throughout Mexico making contact with other resistance groups.

¹⁹ Not coincidentally, on this point Schneider cites two scholars working in Latin American and Latino/a studies: Diana Taylor and José Muñoz.

²⁰ Rolnik has written extensively on Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, who experimented with psychology, the body, and phenomenology in the 1960s and 1970s. On Rolnik's project of creating an archive about Clark's work through interviews, see "The Body's Contagious Memory Lygia Clark's Return to the Museum" <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/en>.

²¹ It is worth noting, though, that while they recognize these women for their labor in making archives, they do not mention the grounding of this work in feminist theory. The two men's description of their own struggle with the archive could be read as a brief summary of feminism's theoretical interventions in questions of affect, experience, exclusion, epistemology, and power: "our task was to be at once academic and emotional. We would develop a research project surveying the period, centered on ordering the archives of artists, critics, curators and exhibition designers. We had to rescue dusty works long ago consigned to attics or gallery storage, and search for the few scratched photographs that someone had just happened to take of a crucial performance: in these ephemeral constructions, or even in the unexpected confrontation between a police patrol and a group of artists working in the street, remembered or recorded on film, there resided a fragile energy that we had to project. Expelled from

'national culture,' these works and these stories need to be returned to the public gaze and revisited from new perspectives, more in tune with current passions and theoretical positions." (Debroise and Medina 2007: 27)

²² My work on gesture is part of a book manuscript in progress, "Non-Literary Fictions: Invention and Interventions in Contemporary American Visual Culture," in which I develop a theory of non-narrative, visual fiction, which artists create as a means of political intervention in the American continent since the 1960s. It is important to add here that *gesto* in Spanish also refers to the face and facial expression. Space limitations do not allow for discussion of this question here, but see related work in my "Fighting It Out: Being *Naco* in the Global *Lucha Libre*." *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 26 (2009): 277-300.

²³ On "Gesture Studies," see the website and journal for the society founded in 2002, <http://www.gesturestudies.com/>. While the mission statement includes the humanities and arts as well as social sciences, the executive board of the society is composed exclusively of linguists, psycholinguists, and psychologists; and recent issues of the journal and the program for the 2010 conference include practically no discussion of the arts. I note this fact not as a criticism of the society, but rather to point to the need for more work in the field from the side of the humanities and arts practice.

²⁴ *Gesture and Environment* has suffered a stilted history: Efron left the academy for work in the public sphere in Argentina, abandoning active research into gesture. While the book was reissued in 1972 (and published in Argentina in 1970 as *Gesto, raza y cultura*), when Kendon published his proposal for a field of "Gesture Studies" in 1995, he notes that it was still unique for its subtlety and thoroughness. Van Veen was a New York City mural painter influenced by socialist realism.

²⁵ Taylor's theory of repertoire has helped shape my thoughts about gesture and repetition (See Taylor 2003).

²⁶ Gest and gesture are distinct but related concepts for Brecht, who writes further that, "The object of the A-effect is to alienate the social gest underlying every incident. By social gest is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period" (Brecht 1978: 139).

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