

***Copiar el Edén: Arte Reciente en Chile* by Gerardo Mosquera (ed.)**

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Mosquera, Gerardo (ed). *Copiar el Edén: Arte Reciente en Chile*. Santiago: Puro Chile, 2006. 645 pages. \$100.00 cloth.



Few, if any, art books in Chile's history have been as widely publicized and as (in)famous as *Copiar el Edén: Arte Reciente en Chile* (*Copying Eden: Recent Art in Chile*). Edited by celebrated contemporary art curator Gerardo Mosquera in 2006, this massive 645-page volume has become its own traveling institution, making debuts in Chilean art society as well as other venues worldwide.¹ Numerous press conferences for the book have formed part of a broader, concentrated effort to make Chile's contemporary art production visible to a global arts community. However, the book's framing, selection of artists, and intense publicity campaign have sparked critiques aimed at its politics of representation. While some may hail the book as Chile's contemporary art bible many believe that it, despite its mass, contains considerable blind spots.² This review summarizes key arguments presented by the book's contributors and reviews some of the volume's contributions and omissions.

Copiar el Edén is a bilingual editorial project initiated and organized by Chilean gallerist Tomás Andreu (owner of Galería Animal). His preface argues that this editorial project was necessary for both a national and international audience since he claims both are unaware of Chile's contemporary art production. Promoting the book's "non-institutional" and "independent" perspective, Andreu emphasizes Mosquera's role in designing the structure of the book and in selecting its contributions (15).³

In the introduction, Mosquera establishes the book's historical parameters, offering a view of visual arts from 1973 to 2006, framed by the impact of the military coup and its traumatic rupture of everyday life, which he argues set off new artistic processes that are marked by the

consolidation of postmodern and neo-avant-garde poetics (24). Using the perspective of an informed outsider, Mosquera takes full responsibility for the book's 74 featured artists who were selected using criteria centered around value, rigor, instinct, and the context of the works in their specific, historical moment (24).⁴ Mosquera emphasizes the book's visual format (with 497 color reproductions), which he places in opposition to the general tendency of Chilean arts publications to privilege what he calls an "excess of text" over reproductions.

Mosquera affirms that Chilean art since the 1970s is "sophisticated, complex, and critical" with generalized characteristics, including an adhesion to conceptualism, an analytic predominance over the visual, and a tendency towards deconstructive practices over direct representations (32). He also focuses on the concept of *descalce* (awkward fit), a local postmodern mantra frequently used in Chilean arts criticism referring to the uneasy friction between images, representations, and meanings. Mosquera highlights how this concept's reference to imagistic disjuncture is used to trace the movement from original to copy, a trope that is recurrent in his discussion of Chilean art practice.⁵ *Descalce* is also recognized for its capacity to critique the perfection of canonical boundaries, creating a zone of subversive possibility through a dialectic of lack and excess (21).

After a thorough assessment of the analytic strengths in contemporary Chilean art practice, Mosquera bluntly asserts that Chilean art is "a plateau with no peaks—no outstanding individuals, movements or energy," and lacking "drive, spark and daring," comparing it to a "soccer team that plays well but never scores" (33). These harsh critiques seem aimed at dislodging constrictive legacies in Chilean art rhetoric and practice, rather than limiting potentialities. Indeed, Mosquera asserts that this volume foreshadows a new moment of transformation in the local art scene where a maturing and introspective spirit will help to confront the limitations and challenges it has faced in its recent past (23).

Perhaps most illustrative of this renewed spirit is the self-reflexive essay written by Adriana Valdés that explores the history and complexity of the relationship between art and writing since 1973. Valdés associates the intractability and density of the critical language, developed under the dictatorship, with a creative process that eluded censors and that (following Walter Benjamin) sought to be "completely useless for the purposes of fascism" (54). She acknowledges that the influence of this style of writing was so traumatic that its symptoms continue to be felt today (53).⁶ Like Valdés, Nelly Richard focuses on the relationship of arts criticism to artistic production, giving a socio-historical account of the *Escena de Avanzada*, an umbrella term used to identify an interdisciplinary group of artists and theorists that sought to rearticulate the relationship between art and politics without the ideological subordination of art to politics (114). She laments that while the *Avanzada's* legacy led to discursive density surrounding contemporary art works, radical intervention is no longer present (119).

María Berríos focuses on the lack of a Chilean art market and artists' dependence on the state, university, and private institutions to survive, arguing

convincingly that artists are limited by the *fondartización* of their practices (96).⁷ Justo Pastor Mellado explores the art scene of the 1990s, comprised of a generation he sees primarily influenced by their accessibility to travel and their need to move beyond a rhetoric of neo-victimhood. He argues that this group of artists has been unfairly reduced to postmodern analytic frameworks, and instead characterizes their production as extra-national and anti-narrative (140).⁸ Catalina Mena explores the plight of young artists and argues that performativity (and not performance art) is predominant in Chilean contemporary art, as is appropriation, which, despite its prevalence, she sees as potentially subversive (156).⁹ Mena's questionnaire is especially revealing as it provides young artists' reflections on the dilemmas facing the Chilean art community. The last section of the book, compiled by Josefina de la Maza and Catalina Valdés, features a thought-provoking and interdisciplinary sampling of citations from influential Chilean contemporary art sources. The bibliographic compilation includes numerous historically relevant magazines, books, and artist catalogs, but many sources tend to be repetitive since the diversity of authors is limited.

Copiar el Eden offers neophytes an entry point to contemporary Chilean art. Its contributors use the book as a platform to reflect upon their own roles in shaping the Chilean art scene while also historicizing important political and social contexts. The most developed analytic emphasis remains on artistic production during the military dictatorship with less specific information about Chile's youngest generation of artists. Importantly, the essays offer conflicted, rather than consensual, assessments of contemporary art production in Chile.

Nonetheless, the collection contains significant analytic gaps, lacks a discussion of feminist art, and offers minimal information about intersectional issues including gender, class, race, and ethnicity.¹⁰ While almost all the contributors discuss the academization of art, there is little mention of the inequalities in resources and opportunities that leave 62 percent of Chile's population without access to university education, nor is there systematic attention paid to artists who work outside of academic institutions. Another unfortunate editorial decision was to organize artists alphabetically, leading to a contiguous juxtaposition of radically different works, obfuscating important generational and historical shifts in aesthetic production. Ultimately, the greatest detractor of this volume is precisely the authority it commands. While Mosquera and his team were surely rigorous with the sources they consulted, many informed insiders and outsiders working with contemporary Chilean art would agree that there are critical and historically contingent artists that were excluded from the volume. Therefore, while the book does provide a diverse array of contemporary Chilean artists (mainly from Santiago), its omissions leave substantial work for future scholarship.

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Notes

¹ Between 2006 and 2009, this volume was presented at the Museum of Modern Art, São Paulo, MALBA, King Juan Carlos Center, NYU, Museo del Barrio, Tate Modern, and most recently at the Venice Biennial.

² Gerardo Mosquera. 2009. "Copiar el edén: la biblia del arte chileno." In *Arte al Día* (Accessed on March 01, 2010). For a discussion of the anxiety caused by Mosquera's publication in Chile, see: Pablo Holguera. 2006. "[School of Panamerican Unrest.](#)" (Accessed on 15 July 2008).

³ Galería Animal is a commercial gallery located in Vitacura (an upper class neighborhood in Santiago). Many critics have questioned whether Galería Animal's commercial interests played a role in the selection of artists for this volume, thus Andreu's emphasis on its "independent" selection process.

⁴ Unfortunately "value," as understood by Mosquera, is never fully described nor unpacked.

⁵ Allusions to the importance of the copy in contemporary Chilean art are prevalent throughout the book, from the title, "Copying Eden," to its cover design, which features a tattooed reproduction of this title on the skin of a young woman. Mosquera explains that the title is paraphrased from the national anthem, and is curious because it frames Chile as a felicitous copy of paradise, rather than as Eden itself. He argues that the title, like a copy, can be read as a "proud pleasure in coming in second" (33).

⁶ Valdés argues that curator Justo Pastor Mellado's writing style is exemplary of these lingering "symptoms" (54). A. Valdés. "Servants to the Word: Art and Writing in Chile." in *Copiar el Eden: Arte Reciente en Chile*. pp 50-61.

⁷ Fondart is Chile's only state-funded arts grant program and has come under attack for its formulaic and bureaucratized funding parameters. Many artists are critical of its selection criteria since its format encourages university affiliation and academic proposals. See Mena's essay in *Copiar el Eden*.

⁸ While it is true that many artists from this generation are heavily influenced by globalization, Mellado's account naturalizes tourism as the primary lens available for mediating transnational perspectives. The trouble with this assumption is that it fails to account for socio-economic differences that limit equal access to the tourist industry. It is also important to emphasize that

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artists who were raised in Chile under the dictatorship will have disparate approaches from those who have traveled abroad due to exile. Similarly, gender, class, and ethnic divergences will differentiate practices and perspectives amongst this very diverse generation of artists.

⁹ Carolina Mena argues that performance art is not prevalent in contemporary art production, citing only one active performance art organization in Valparaíso (156). While I agree that performance art is marginal to official arts institutions in Chile, there are numerous Chilean artists who identify primarily with performance (most not included in this volume) and at least three artist collectives that organize international performance festivals.

¹⁰ Both Mena and Mosquera refer to Chile's homogeneity as a partial reason for these omissions. Mena states: "This is a country [...] characterized by radical homogeneity: the African race does not exist here, indigenous communities (which are very much reduced) do not have any sort of presence, and migrations are rare and restricted to a pair of neighboring countries[...]" (154).

These accepted and over-simplified generalizations are anachronistic and increasingly being contested by contemporary cultural critics.