
Book Review: *Abuso Mutuo* and *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano*

Abuso mutuo: Ensayos e intervenciones sobre arte postmexicano (1992–2013), by Cuauhtémoc Medina. Selections by Edgar Alejandro Hernández and Daniel Montero. Mexico City: Promotora Cultural Cubo Blanco A.C. + RM, 2017. 472 pp. \$21 (paper), ISBN 978-8417047122

El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano: Ensayos sobre los usos y desusos del exotismo en tiempos de globalización (1992–2007), by Olivier Debroise, with a prologue by Cuauhtémoc Medina. Mexico City: Promotora Cultural Cubo Blanco A.C. + RM, 2018. 332 pp., 20 color illus., 10 b/w illus. \$16 (paper), ISBN 978-6079653323

The 2007 exhibition *La era de la discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México, 1968–1997* was a watershed event for the history of modern and contemporary art in Mexico. Held in the midcentury Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte (MUCA) at the heart of the Ciudad Universitaria of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), it brought together dozens of conceptual, ephemeral, collective, and site-specific artistic practices that had developed outside Mexico's state-run museum system over the course of three decades of social and political upheaval, marked by the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 on one side and the Zapatista uprising and peso crisis of 1994 on the other. In addition to installing more than 300 works by 119 artists, the exhibition's curatorial team, led by Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina with Pilar García and Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, assembled a richly illustrated, 469-page, bilingual catalogue (edited by Debroise) that immediately became the essential reference for any scholar approaching art in Mexico after 1950. This tome is now joined by two important collections of individual writings by two of its curators: Medina's *Abuso mutuo: Ensayos e intervenciones sobre arte postmexicano (1992–2013)*, and Debroise's *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano: Ensayos sobre los usos y desusos del exotismo en tiempos de globalización (1992–2007)*. These new volumes are crucial for understanding the structural underpinnings of Mexico's complex, transnational history of modern and contemporary art and its display.

Like *La era de la discrepancia*, Medina's *Abuso mutuo* and Debroise's *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano* are the products of decades of individual and collaborative efforts by these figures, both of whom came to

prominence as independent curator-critics in the 1990s just as artists in their Mexico City circle were developing alternative spaces and modes of display for their works. Medina, Debroise, and their fellow travelers began operating within an international network of curators and critics, "working in the margins to make the center feel it was missing out on something" (*Abuso mutuo*, 253). Both anthologies expand on *La era de la discrepancia's* central aim, which was to suggest local historical precedents for a generation of Mexican and international artists who had achieved widespread international recognition for their Mexico City-based works by the early 2000s, including Francis Alÿs, Gabriel Orozco, and Santiago Sierra. Medina would subsequently describe his and Debroise's curatorial strategy as "retroactive vampirism": redirecting recent attention and enthusiasm from the contemporary art scene to its antecedents (*Abuso mutuo*, 408). These forerunners included myriad artistic projects from the 1950s to the 1980s that had been condemned to relative oblivion due to a lack of coherent collecting practices and general neglect on the part of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), which controls the centralized nation's federal museums and one of its two most important art schools.

The anthologies by Medina and Debroise are the first and second entries, respectively, in the Debate Contemporáneo series, which was recently launched by journalist and editor Edgar Hernández under the Cubo Blanco imprint, and which greatly benefits from Cristina Paoli's effective, reader-friendly design. Though each writer's approach is different, the collected essays of these close friends and conspirators are rooted in the same

fundamental premises: that “Mexican art” is an inherently transnational phenomenon, generated through exhibitions; and that publicly debated discrepancies in art, exhibition practice, history, and criticism are crucial to the construction of a democratic society. This comes through in the titles of both books, which emphasize the use, abuse, and disuse of national symbols and affiliations on the part of artists, curators, critics, and institutions in the 1990s and early 2000s, for domestic as well as foreign consumption. In this sense, Debrouse and Medina exemplify Mari Carmen Ramírez’s proposal that with the emergence of identity politics and globalization in the late twentieth century, some curators in and from Latin America came to act as cultural brokers, wielding double-edged swords that allowed them to alternately affirm and criticize how artists from the region were being presented in hegemonic centers.¹

Though Medina’s anthology appeared in print first, Debrouse’s manuscript was completed in 2007. However, due to his unexpected death in 2008, *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano* sat for a decade in Arkheia, the documentation center of UNAM’s Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC). Thanks to the efforts of Hernández and Cubo Blanco, it is now available to the public, with a prologue by Medina titled “Debrouse: la historia como iluminación, la crítica como ética.” There, Medina notes that Debrouse was driven by the conviction that the boom in interest in contemporary Mexico City-based artists among international curators and collectors in the 1990s and 2000s was not a new phenomenon, but one rooted “in the combination of exoticism, symbolic diplomacy, and political appeasement” that marked the (conditional) embrace of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and other Mexican artists on the part of US institutions and the art market in the 1920s and 1930s (*El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano*, 10). Debrouse develops this argument in the book over the course of seven chapters, all of which began as lectures delivered in Mexico, the United States, or Europe between 1992 and 2002, many in the context of conferences that were organized to take stock of increased interest in Mexican and Latin American art within art-world “centers.” Rather than organizing these reworked texts according to when they were initially presented or published,

Debrouse ordered them chronologically according to their topics to put forward a relatively continuous history of how notions of “Mexican” art were constructed (and deconstructed) by key cultural agents, from writer Katherine Anne Porter in the 1920s to *museógrafo* Fernando Gamboa in the 1950s, and from artist Rufino Tamayo in the 1970s to collector Eugenio López in the 1990s, via internationally framed exhibitions and institutions. While Mexico City is a key locus for most of the figures discussed in the book, Debrouse also visits other sites where constructions of Mexican art were presented and debated, including the northern city of Monterrey, where Mexican industrialists founded two new museums in the late 1980s, and institutions in Berlin, London, New York, and San Diego, where exhibitions of recent art from Mexico City were mounted more or less simultaneously in 2002.

Debrouse’s interest and expertise in these topics was a function of his trajectory as a scholar and curator. Born in Jerusalem to a French diplomatic family, he lived in many parts of the world before deciding to settle in Mexico City in the mid-1970s. As James Oles has noted, Debrouse held no academic degrees and was the ultimate freelancer—an identity that helped him relate to the four generations of artists with whom he was close over the course of his career.² A writer of art history, criticism, and historically informed novels (and the director of the genre-crossing film *Un banquete en Tetlapayac* [2000]), Debrouse entered the curatorial field with two groundbreaking 1991 exhibitions: *Modernidad y modernización en el arte mexicano, 1920–1960*, for the Museo Nacional de Arte (MUNAL), which inaugurated a new era of revisionist approaches to postrevolutionary Mexican art, and *El corazón sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*, organized by the ICA Boston, which took a transhistorical perspective on contemporary artworks with connections to syncretic Mexican symbols. That same year, Debrouse helped found Curare: Espacio Crítico para las Artes, a nonprofit association that sought to develop alternatives to the exhibition strategies and discourses promoted by Conaculta, the cultural agency of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from 1988 until 2015. (Several of Curare’s members, including Medina and Oles as well as Pilar García, Karen Cordero Reiman, and Francisco Reyes Palma, remain pillars within Mexico’s curatorial landscape; while the organization was involved with

1. Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Contexturas: Lo global a partir de lo local,” in *Horizontes del arte latinoamericano*, ed. José Jiménez and Fernando Castro (Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1999), 70.

2. James Oles, “Olivier Debrouse (1952–2008),” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 30, no. 93 (2008): 228.

some exhibitions and symposia, it arguably had its greatest impact through its eponymous Xeroxed bulletin, which was later published as a more formal academic journal.) Debroise took a permanent curatorial position for the first and only time in 2004, entering the UNAM just as plans for *La era de la discrepancia* were getting under way. His charge was to help build a collection of art made after 1952 (the year the Ciudad Universitaria was dedicated, and, coincidentally, of his birth) for the new MUAC, the nation's first major museum dedicated to systematically collecting art made in Mexico since 1950. MUAC ultimately opened six months after his death.

Debroise's book and its backstory provide the groundwork for grappling with Medina's *Abuso mutuo*, which can be understood as a vehicle for preserving and extending the fertile dialogue they carried out concerning the display and reception of contemporary art in and of Mexico from the early 1990s until Debroise's death. This is evident from the first (and earliest) essay included, which is Medina's critique of the resistance of Mexico's museums to exhibiting and collecting works of installation art, presented in a roundtable discussion tied to Debroise's 1992 Museo de Monterrey exhibition *Si Colón supiera . . . ! 11 instalaciones efimeras* (a few installation shots are included at the back of Debroise's *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano*). Medina's text complements Debroise's curatorial proposition, offering context and rationale for why the works of these contemporary artists from across the Americas, which were brought together to mark the anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the Caribbean, may have been received as foreign imports when, of course, they weren't (many of the participating artists, including Maria Thereza Alves, José Bedia, Jimmie Durham, and Gabriel Orozco, were from or were living in Mexico). The issue, Medina explains, was that federal cultural policy had long privileged painting at the expense of emergent post-medium-specific practices, such as those of the *grupos* of the 1970s, leaving Mexican institutions and publics without the necessary tools for engaging with an expanded field of art of the postwar era.

Medina continues this work of contextualization and analysis in several of the thirty essays in *Abuso mutuo*, which were written between 1992 and 2013, and which are ordered strictly by the date they were presented or published. The volume includes no extended introduction or précis of texts, nor is it organized into thematic or chronological sections to guide readers; editors' footnotes are few and far between. In their two-page preface to the book,

Hernández and art historian Daniel Montero, who selected the texts, state that their goal with the volume was to provide a broader public with direct access to the ideas of "one of Mexico's most influential curators and critics of contemporary art"; they based their selection on those texts that "had a certain efficacy in defining local discourse" in their moment (*Abuso mutuo*, 7–8). Questions sparked by the book's title—Who is abusing whom? What is "postmexican" art?—are left for readers to decipher for themselves.

Abuso mutuo's minimal framing is consistent with Medina's resistance to historicization, which distinguishes his approach from Debroise's. Reading these thirty essays, one gains a sense of the frenetic pace of Medina's participation in scholarly, curatorial, political, and critical projects since the early 1990s. It bears noting that in contrast to Debroise, Medina holds several degrees, including a PhD from the University of Essex; the editors label him a member of "a generation of foreign-trained theorists who propelled the new national art scene" (*Abuso mutuo*, 163). Beyond his ongoing position as a researcher within the UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas and his work as an organizer of major international exhibitions, from *Manifesta* to the Shanghai Biennale, Medina has held curatorial positions at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, and Tate Modern, London; since 2013 he has been MUAC's chief curator. In the broadest sense, "mutual abuse" refers to Medina's participatory observations of how curators as well as artists, patrons (including the state), scholars, and critics in the 1990s and 2000s brokered what it meant to be identified with Mexico or Mexico City within an international contemporary art system inscribed within global capitalism and, thus, marked by significant disparities of wealth, power, and access.

The essays included in *Abuso mutuo* can be divided into two major tracks: those written for group exhibition catalogues and the mass media, which address the practices of artists including Eduardo Abaroa, Francis Alÿs, Minerva Cuevas, Teresa Margolles, Gabriel Orozco, Rubén Ortiz Torres, and Santiago Sierra; and those written for symposia and academic volumes, which examine the contemporaneous emergence of these artists and a crop of independent curators in Mexico City in the 1990s from a structural perspective, in relation to curatorial and collecting practices in Mexico since 1950. The phrase "mutual abuse" is taken from the title of Medina's essay for the catalogue of the 2002 exhibition *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rate of Bodies and Values*, curated by Klaus

Biesenbach for New York's PS1 and Kunstwerk in Berlin (another of the exhibitions Debroise discusses at length, and partially illustrates, in *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano*). In this context, the phrase relates to artistic practices that emerged as responses to life in a teeming metropolis, inscribed within a state of political and economic crisis; it also relates to how the framing of an artist's practice may be negotiated through a push and pull between international and local curators and critics (a paradigmatic case of this for both Medina and Debroise is Lynn Zelevansky's 1993 *Projects 41: Gabriel Orozco* at New York's Museum of Modern Art).

While of the two it is Debroise, not Medina, who embraces a long view of the twentieth century, the essays on cultural policy and exhibition practice in Medina's volume offer a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the structural conditions of the 1950s to the 1980s, which gave rise to a new era of art, exhibitions, and ultimately institutions within the nation. This track, which begins with Medina's opening essay on installations in Mexico, continues with "Estado y cultura: una propuesta de política cultural," an unpublished and unsolicited proposal that Medina presented in 1994 to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the leftist opposition candidate in that year's intensely contested presidential election. In it, Medina offers a cogent assessment and critique of the PRI's highly centralized cultural bureaucracy, characterized by its parallels to those of France and the Stalinist Soviet Union and its contrast to the decentered, privately funded US model. He calls for Cárdenas to systematically dismantle the notion of official culture by granting Mexico's cultural institutions the autonomy held by public universities. Ultimately, the election was decided in favor of *priista* Ernesto Zedillo, and the ministry of culture system remains entrenched today. In the realm of museums, however, stronger alternatives have emerged, including the privately funded Museo Jumex and Museo Soumaya and above all the MUAC, which benefits from university autonomy and whose inaugural collecting and exhibition programs Debroise and Medina were instrumental in shaping, beginning with their work on *La era de la discrepancia*.

As Medina notes in his proposal for Cárdenas, autonomous institutions require qualified, empowered curators (as well as directors and advisory boards). In a previously unpublished 2001 conference paper titled "La más indirecta de las acciones: bastardía de orígenes,

traición a la patria y oportunismo militante del juego curatorial postmexicano," Medina proposes that the introduction in Mexico of the neologism *curador* by the early 1990s to describe an agent who "intervenes in transactions among patrons, officials, publics, artists' interests, and radical discourse" (*Abuso mutuo*, 242) in private and public spaces alike did not signify the importation of a foreign model, but rather an alternative that arose to fill a void left by the gradual defunding and unraveling of national systems in a tumultuous period. He notes the emergence of a generation of independent curators, including Guillermo Santamarina and the late María Guerra, in tandem with a flock of younger artists (locals as well as foreigners based in Mexico City), who recognized the value of forming independent spaces and alliances, from Mel's Café to La Panadería, in lieu of seeking official support. Debroise's projects and Curare were concurrent with this as well; what these curators realized, according to Medina, was that the access they gained required responsible opportunism: "instead of being the victims of globalization, we became its agents and critics in a mirroring game of abuse and mutual misunderstanding" (*Abuso mutuo*, 253).

Abuso mutuo's examination of "post-Mexican" art of the 1990s and 2000s concludes with two reflections on Medina's highest-stakes curatorial project to date: Mexico's official pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2009, *Teresa Margolles: ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* Margolles's practice, which is rooted in physical evidence of violence in contemporary Mexico, is emblematic of the type of work Biesenbach and other curators sought to exhibit in the early 2000s in cultural transactions brokered by agents such as Medina. Faced with news reports in early 2009 of then-president Felipe Calderón's directives to Mexico's diplomatic corps not to discuss the nation's gravest crisis, Medina and Margolles submitted a proposal for the national pavilion that would directly contest official policy by exhibiting works such as cloths that had been soaked with blood at crime scenes in Ciudad Juárez. After being selected by an independent review panel, the exhibition was allowed to go forward in a state of high tension; ultimately, it seems, the state recognized that censorship would have had disastrous consequences in terms of public perception, while sponsoring Margolles's overtly critical works offered inoculation against subsequent critiques in this mode. This episode marked the climax of the historical trajectories

traced not only in Medina's *Abuso mutuo* but, by extension, in Debroise's *El arte de mostrar el arte mexicano*. Nearly one hundred years after the Revolution, the transnational phenomenon of Mexican art on display—framed by Debroise as an art, and by Medina as a

mirroring game—came full circle at the Biennale, as artist and curator faced off against the paternalistic state using the global exhibition as their arena.

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