EN

TOOLS FOR UTOPIA

30.10.20——21.03.21

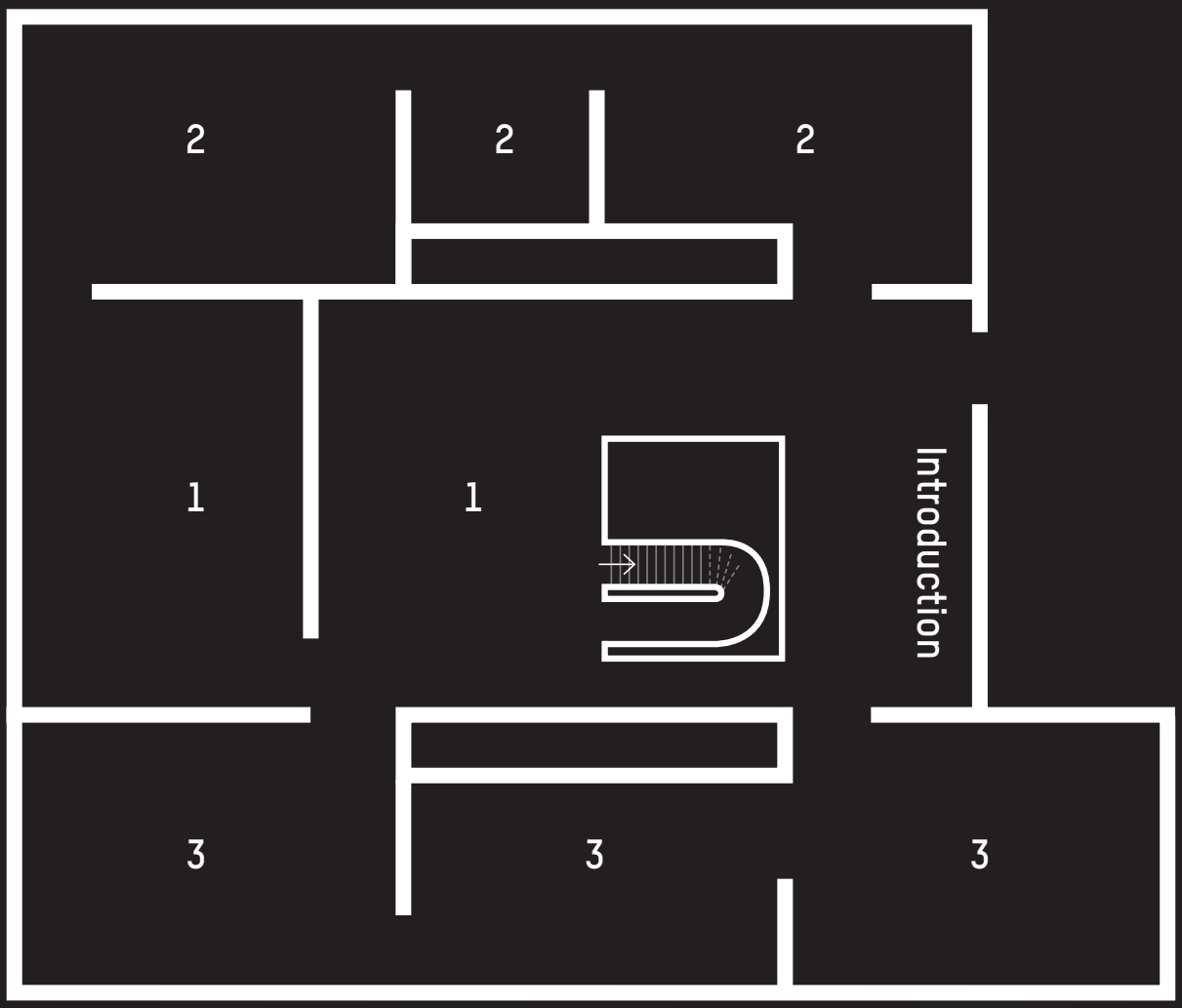
SELECTED WORKS FROM
THE DAROS LATINAMERICA
COLLECTION

KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Floorplan

Ground floor



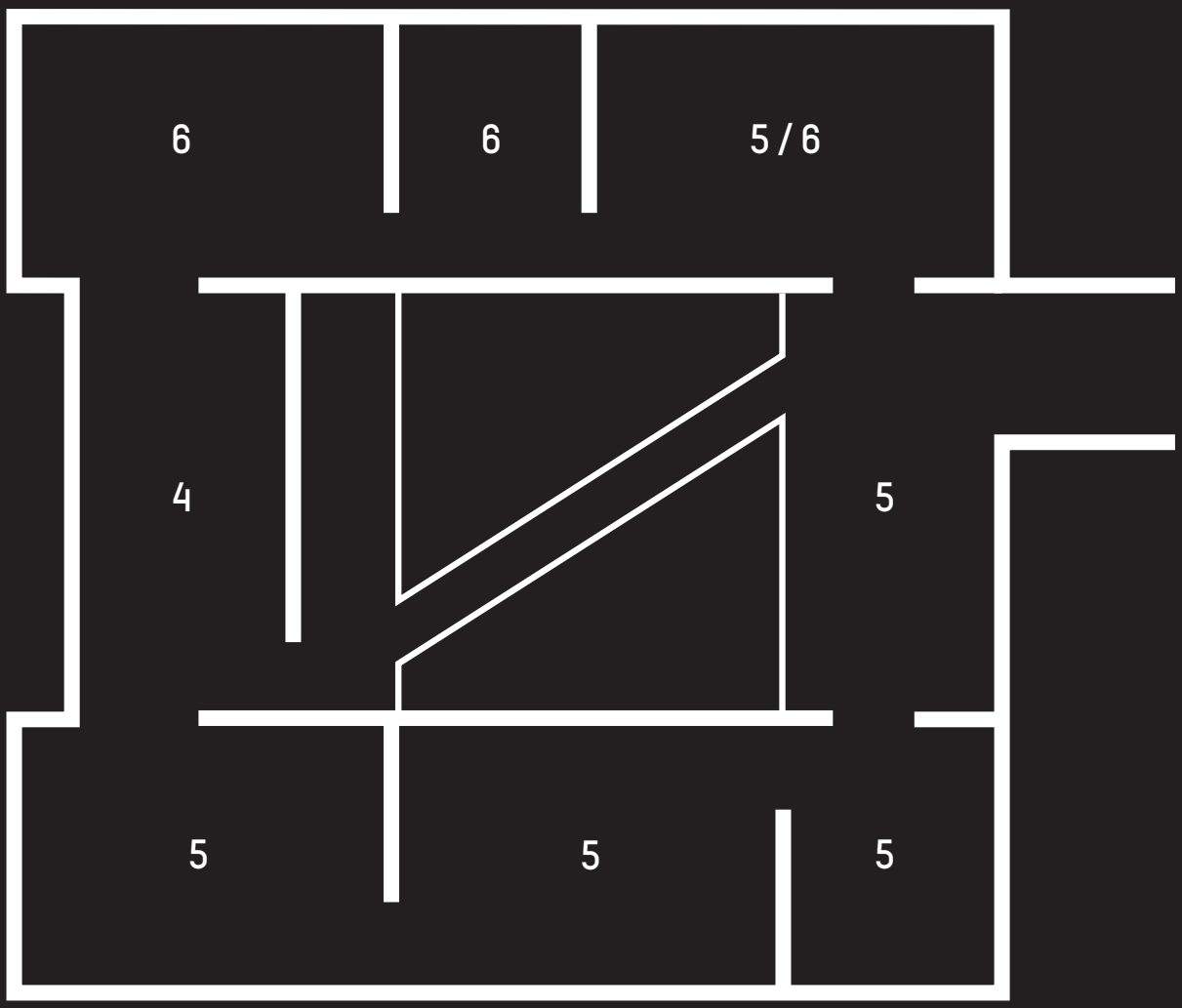
Rooms

1 Breaking the Frame

2 New Vocabularies

3 Another World Now

Upper floor



4 Real Things, not Fictions

5 Vulnerable Bodies

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Introduction

In his programmatic text *El marco: un problema de la plástica actual* (The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art), published in 1944 in Buenos Aires, the Uruguayan artist Rhod Rothfuss expounded his musings on the frame: a painting – he declared – should "begin and end with itself," and, "the edge of the canvas plays an active role in the work of art." Looking at the edge and – by consequence – beyond and outside the frame became for Latin American artists a mark of distinction of a sort: unlike their European predecessors, interested in more structural issues, they presented Concrete Art as a pictorial language of engagement and treated its central dictum – invention – as their most powerful revolutionary tool. The obliteration of the rectangular frame – however basic it might seem – rendered the compositions more dynamic, enabling them to interact with their surroundings in new ways. Not only was the contemplative viewer galvanized into a participating subject, but the work of art compelled them to relate directly to "real things, not to fictions" *(Inventionist Manifesto, 1946)*.

Tools for Utopia's point of departure is the works created between the early 1950s and late 1970s by artists from Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Argentina. Conceived in times when many of the Latin American countries were being torn by both internal and international conflicts and ruled by brutal, corrupt and unpredictable dictators – these works, be they Concrete, Neo-Concrete, or Conceptual, were a means of transgression. Not only were they created in response, but were perceived as an artistic counterproposal to the experience of totalitarian political systems: a sign of genuine engagement and an experiment that included the ingredients of social and political utopia.

The exhibition employs the ambiguous and polysemous term "utopia," proposing that works of art can be practical tools for enacting it. Rather than a fantasy of immediate referentiality, the show advances a return to the modern notion of utopia developed by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* (1954). For Bloch, utopia is synonymous with the critical possibility of going beyond dichotomies that divide the world (and the imagination) into clearly separated "before" and "after," "inside" and "outside," "optimism" and "pessimism." It blurs them, mobilizes the dream, becoming both a weapon and a form of resistance.

In looking at historical works alongside contemporary ones, the show examines the ways in which the urge to create art that "generates the will to act" and invites an active inhabiting of the present *(Inventionist Manifesto)* is continued, further complicated, and questioned by artists of subsequent generations. How have Latin American art movements of the mid-20th century served as a catalyst for the cultural, social, and political imagination? What do these ideas and hopes stand for today? What remains of their aesthetic heritage and wide-ranging political ambitions? These questions would seem to be particularly relevant in the context of the current social and political tensions being experienced not only in Latin America, but also globally. *Tools for Utopia* is seeking ways in which this reservoir could inspire and activate us today.

1 Breaking the Frame

The transcendence of flatness and the two-dimensionality in the work of art was the key postulate in *Teoria do Não-Objeto* (Theory of the Non-Object) published in 1959 by Ferreira Gullar. Invoking the European and Russian avant-garde, this Brazilian poet defined a "non-object" using vocabulary related to the *event*. He wrote of the need for the viewer to change both place and role, opening up to the surrounding world and abandoning such established dichotomies as realism versus abstraction, object versus viewer, reality versus fiction, and so on. Gullar urged an escape from the stasis of the work and painterly representation in favor of a "living organism" – an experiment that would involve the audience against the backdrop of the world itself.

Argentinian artist Julio Le Parc has not only abandoned traditional means of expression (painting, sculpture, drawing) in search of different experiences, but he also eschewed the formulas and frameworks that had defined his sphere of work. Through integration with technology, craft, and political engagement, he believed that art could become a complex tool for the investigation of visuality and provide a window into the future. His optical images constructed with the assistance of engineers were meant to generate complex visual effects: the space of painterly representation seemed to be extending beyond the surface of the painting.

By shifting paintings into the three-dimensional realm, the Brazilian Hélio Oiticica was also seeking ways of challenging the traditional relationship of the viewer to the work of art. In his *Relevos Espaciais* (Spatial reliefs,1960) he seems to be removing certain color motifs (usually red or yellow) from his paintings and transforming them into three-dimensional spatial structures. Over time, he created labyrinth-like structures in which the viewer's perception of the work was changing as they were moving around the space. One of the most radical manifestations of Oiticica's ideas however was the *Parangolés* series: these 'habitable' paintings were designed to be worn by samba dancers in the Brazilian favelas. In a stratified society, oppressed by the junta, these joyous, provocative works conveyed a powerful political meaning.

Hélio Oiticica (1937 – 1980) was a Brazilian visual artist and art theorist interested in the spatial qualities of paintings. Early in his career, as a member of Grupo Frente, he exhibited a deep fascination with European Modernism. Later, as a co-founder of the Neo-Concrete Movement, he distanced himself from European traditions and embraced the poet Oswald de Andrade's conception of "Anthropofagia" which called for a new Brazilian culture that absorbed and

transformed the influences of the European avant-garde, thus breaking the cultural hegemony of the nation's former colonizers.

The Neo-Concrete movement emerged in Rio de Janeiro as a reaction to the perceived rigidity of Brazilian Concrete Art as practiced in São Paulo. The Neo-Concretists, among them Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape, rejected what they saw as the commodification of the art object and embraced a poetic, participatory, and multisensory artistic experience. In their two-dimensional work, the artists replaced the strict, rational geometry of Concrete Art with gentle, more organic forms. Moving into the three-dimensional realm, they turned the audience into participants in order to challenge the traditional relationship of the viewer to the work of art.

During the 1960s, Oiticica's formal experiments gained an additional dimension, the audience's experience becoming one of the constitutive elements of his art. Works of art were no longer mere objects that were meant to be perceived, but active elements in the creation of participatory spaces. Oiticica integrated this new conception of art with his earlier experiments: by shifting paintings into a three-dimensional reality he changed the way they were perceived, making the "painting" dependent on the viewer's movements. It was at this time that the artist had begun the ground-breaking series of *Relevos Espaciais* (Spatial reliefs), hanging wood constructions painted red and yellow, which effectively liberated color within three-dimensional space. He designed many maquettes for these complex forms, but few were constructed at full scale.

Hélio Oiticica reached a crucial point in his integration of color, structure, time, and space with the *Parangolé* series: these flexible color structures were a result of his involvement with the inhabitants of Mangueira Hill, a Rio de Janeiro shanty town, who prompted his immersion in the world of traditional Brazilian samba. The *Parangolés* were designed to be worn or carried while dancing to the rhythm of samba and represent the culmination of Oiticica's efforts in encouraging the viewer's interaction with the work of art and liberation of color within three-dimensional space.

Julio Le Parc (b. 1928) is an Argentinian artist based in Paris. He studied at night at the Academy of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, and was politically engaged on campus. Shortly before graduating, he dropped

out of his studies as an act of rebellion against what he felt was an imposed institutional hierarchy.

"No more mystification," read the flyer that he distributed to audiences at the Paris Art Biennial in 1961. The slogan would seem somewhat out of tune with the practices of the Argentinian artist, given his position as one of the chief representatives of Op Art and Kinetic Art – movements that were often heavily inflected with illusion. For Le Parc however, the visual effects generated by a work of art had a completely different significance: rather than deceiving the viewer, they were meant to function as a laboratory into which the viewer was drawn to participate in the production of entirely new experiences.

Le Parc began working with light shortly after emigrating to Paris in 1959, where he created a series of distinctive works that made use of "skimming" light: constructed with a lateral source of light which was reflected or/and broken up by polished metal surfaces, these works seemed to be in continuous movement. Striving to find new means of expression and brand new aesthetical sensations, he was ready to abandon the frameworks that had defined his sphere of work. His fascination with cybernetics, experimental scientific methods, and systems theory was linked to a search for alternative sets of norms, new universal principles, and sensations on which to base new scripts for the future.

As co-founder of the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (Visual Art Research Group, 1960 – 68), he has tried – as he himself puts it – "to elicit a different type of behavior from the viewer [...] to seek, together with the public, various means of fighting off passivity, dependency or ideological conditioning, by developing reflective, comparative, analytical, creative or active capacities." Le Parc seems to be accomplishing it through color, line, light, shadow, and movement, composed to make still forms – move, solid structures – dematerialize, and light itself – become material.

2 New Vocabularies

Although the evolution of Modern Art has a complex history in Latin America, one thing is clear: a desire for radical change fueled the projects and explorations of the artists who were active between the 1950s and 1970s. The suffocating political circumstances and the unprecedented progress of modern-day science and technology, inspired new sensibilities and artistic alliances. The artists were not only prepared to abandon the conventions that had previously delineated their working methods, but also to suspend the prevailing lexicon in search for new principles on which to base their conceptions of the future.

Many of them formed groups that included scientists, engineers, dancers, poets, and graphic designers espousing various principles in laboratory-like situations where the objective was less a robust, polished product or a synthetic formula but a *process*. The manifestos formulated by such groups – be it Madí (initiated in 1946 in Buenos Aires), Grupo Ruptura (active in São Paulo from 1952 onward), Grupo Frente (created in Rio de Janeiro in 1954), or the Neo-Concretists (founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1959) – are crucial to understanding the myriad ideas circulating. These groups advocated spaces for experiment, invention, and dreaming in societies that were governed by restrictions and fear. Forged in a spirit of egalitarianism, syncretism, and partnership, they became a way of defying the existing hierarchical and abusive political systems.

Instead of describing and representing the relations that form the world, the artists of the Latin American avant-garde wanted to test and shape them: "Neither expression (Primitivism); nor representation (Realism); nor Symbolism (decadence). INVENTION," the artists from the Arturo group emphatically declared. This constant push to rethink existing vocabularies and norms generated a sense of agency and hope, in line with Gyula Kosice's belief that art would be the source of a new humanism for the 20th century. However utopian his urge may have been (especially when judged from the perspective of the 21st century), the language of art was indeed a tool enabling communities to deal collectively with traumatic experiences for which the individual might struggle to find words.

Mira Schendel (1919 – 1988) was a Brazilian artist born to a Swiss Jewish family. She was raised in Milan after her mother's marriage to an Italian count. Schendel studied philosophy at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, but following the passing of racial laws by the Fascist government in 1938, Schendel was expelled from university and stripped of her Italian citizenship. Fearing for her safety, she left the country in 1939, traveling first to

Switzerland and then Austria before taking refuge in Sarajevo until the end of World War II. Returning to Italy as a displaced person, Schendel emigrated to Brazil in 1949, where she began her career as an artist.

During the 1950s in São Paulo, the Ruptura group brought together artists sharing an affinity for Concrete Art: poets, philosophers, and visual artists. The Concretists vowed to liberate art from any unnecessary displays of individualism, making it subject solely to the sort of objective, abstract rules that govern mathematics. While Schendel remained remote from any desire to rationalize the creative act, she shared an interest in the physical aspects and structures of language, which was in part a result of her personal experience. She spoke three languages fluently, but she never felt at home in any of them. She used Portuguese for her daily chores, while Italian was the domain of her emotions, and German was the language of philosophy. Her speech reflected a slight accent in all three. The absurdity of language and her inability to find a place for herself within it became a central focus in her work. Schendel incorporated language into her drawings, sometimes entire phrases drawn from various languages. Most frequently, she painted individual letters scattered chaotically across the page.

A vital element of these experiments was the material she used as her support – rice paper, a stack of which she'd once received from a friend. Thin, almost translucent, the texture of the paper made it a paradoxical material, whose essence seemed rooted in the diaphanous. Such a quality enabled a flow of letters, numbers, and phrases, drawn along each side, to merge into one another. "The world on the other side turns out to be the one we already have before our eyes," she explained.

Gyula Kosice (1924 – 2016) was an Argentinian visual artist, poet, and art critic. He was born into an ethnic Hungarian family in the village of Košice (now the second-largest city in Slovakia) and moved to Buenos Aires as a child. In 1944, he contributed to *Arturo* magazine, his text having the tone of a manifesto as it included the premonitory phrase: "Man is not to end his days on Earth." Two years later, he commenced work on a visionary design of free-floating, mobile habitats that drifted at 1,000 to 1,500 meters above sea

level. He claimed that pursuing solutions to the challenge of a swiftly multiplying human population required moving beyond the framework of conventional thought.

That same year, Kosice created a wooden structure using hinges and wing nuts. The viewer was encouraged to move parts of the structure and to position them as they wished, making *Röyi* (1944/52), one of the first works of art to rely on the participation of the viewer. Shortly after the creation of this work, Kosice withdrew from Arturo to form a group called Madí, which fostered experimentation in all areas of aesthetic production, from sculpture to music, poetry to theatre, as well as dance, eventually producing 15 collections of poetry and essays to his name.

Both the artist's paintings and sculptures from that period incorporated mobile elements whose positioning could be altered by the viewer. Kosice tried to liberate paintings from the limits imposed by the frame, creating colorful surfaces in various shapes interconnected by steel elements. His best-known works featured experiments with light and water. Interested in architecture, he remarked that architecture had always bound humans to the Earth and that it was art's mission to release it from the terrestrial. In his *Hydrospatial City* – a project that evolved over 30 years – he outlined a holistic vision for humankind's future, one which fully embraced the promise and possibilities of the technological revolution.

Manifestos The seismic upheaval that Latin American Art went through between the 1950s and 1970s was already under way in the 1940s when artists, rather than travelling to a Europe devastated by the war, turned their attention to their own contexts, their own imaginaries, and focused on developing their own utopias. Gathering in groups they formulated manifestos that grew out of inquiry and discussion within local intellectual circles. These manifestos were sometimes short, or sometimes lengthier, they could be playful or academic, polemical or more poetic. What they all make visible however is a change in the artists' way of thinking not just about art's scope and its role in society, but also about the potential of art to transform it in response to all too real circumstances that were riven by tensions and conflicts.

The presentation of a selection of historical manifestos provides bold and fertile insights into some of the motives, beliefs, and energetic visions concealed behind the works being presented in the exhibition. What is common to most of them is the spirit of collaboration (across genres and disciplines) and the conviction that art is no longer a mere description or a subjective representation of the world, but a complex tool for the investigation of reality. For their authors, art, like politics, has tangible effects on reality: it delineates the ways in which we see the world, connects the real with the possible, and is the only way to imagine collective life as being other than it is. It is in such a spirit that the written texts provide evidence of an experimental urge and are a way of hearing artists' voices: their zealous hopes, their forceful reactions to the surrounding, often unbearably violent reality, and their genuine commitment in relating to "real things, not to fictions."

3 Another World Now

There were many ways in which Latin American artists were trying to abandon the canvas, breach the frame, discard the plinth, and address the surrounding world. Their works, whose form frequently remained loosely defined, constantly changing parameters, represented on the one hand an attempt to give an account of the dramatic changes and a reaction to an abruptly industrialized world, while on the other providing specific commentary on the current political situation. The period between the late 1950s and 1970s was marked by internal and international conflicts in many Latin American countries that were ruled by brutal and corrupt dictators coming to power as a result of recurring military coups. This was an era of insecurity, rigid politics, and harsh censorship that could only be addressed in politically engaged abstraction.

Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto experimented with the techniques of Kinetic and Op Art, but rather than tricks and illusions, they were interested in questions of lateral relations between objects, planes, and the audience that extended beyond the surface. Their decentralized works, created within the context of Venezuelan politics that was both excluding and highly hierarchic, were activated by the bodies of viewers. They didn't privilege any position, every view was equally relevant and as such, they were expression of a dream of another society, another politics, and another world.

This kind of experimental engagement and the radical questioning of the boundaries between subject and object, as well as those between viewer and work and work and the surrounding world is also visible in works created by Gego. Her modular wire structures that unfold across the floor, walls, and often ceiling allowed the artist to expose the fragility of bodies and borders alike. Casting their shadows onto walls and floors, they become both a virtual and actual presence within the gallery space. They invite to look beyond the actual artwork and as such they point to the world outside.

Gego or Gertrud Louise Goldschmidt (1912–1994) was a Venezuelan artist born to a German Jewish family in Hamburg. She attended the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart where she graduated in engineering and architecture in 1938. The increasingly dire circumstances of Jews in Nazi Germany led the family to flee Europe to Venezuela in 1939. In the 1950s, Goldschmidt began producing art and adopted the professional name Gego. Being exposed to the contemporary abstraction produced in the country, she subsequently created a unique and distinctive body of work

defined by its delicacy, transparency, and lightness, all structured around investigations into the aesthetic possibilities of the line. In Venezuela, Gego's skills were in demand in a fledgling nation where educated, progressive thinkers were vital to the economy's future, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s, a period during which European Modernism had a significant impact throughout Latin America. The political authorities looked towards Modernism as a source of ideas and tools that would convey Venezuela into the future and enable the country to catch up with the United States of America. Gego did not share such overarching optimism. Her life under the Nazi regime proved that Modernism could provoke a response by darker forces. She transformed many of its ideas into a new artistic language. Instead of using new, solid materials to create her works, Gego preferred to use old cables, wires, cords, nylon and metal pipettes.

The series of *Dibujos sin papel* (Drawings without Paper), an example of which is presented at the exhibition, is constructed entirely through the manual manipulation of industrial materials. The resulting sculptures consist of multiple interlocking planes, extensions of Gego's two-dimensional investigations into the possibilities of the line and its ability to produce form and volume projected into three-dimensional space. Hung from the ceiling, *Tronco No. 2* (Trunk No. 2, 1975) casts its shadow onto the walls of the gallery, to suggest its virtual, and not only actual, presence within the gallery space. In these and other of her works, the artist challenged the idea that boundaries have a purely physical character. The ideas behind the work's title remain ambiguous: does it refer to the wire mesh or the shadow it casts upon the wall?

Carlos Cruz-Diez (1923 – 2019) was a Venezuelan artist whose practice focused on understanding how color functions in the world. The visual effects achieved in his experimental paintings were often introduced into public space. One of the most well-known projects of this type can be seen at the international airport in Caracas.

Cruz-Diez believed that art should reveal the true ways in which the mechanisms of perception function by pursuing the as-yet-undiscovered potential that lies in the space between

what we think we see and what is actually there. The first works from the *Physichromie* series were created in the late 1950s. In them, Cruz-Diez combined his interest in abstract art with objective rules regarding the activation of the viewer, an essential part of how a work of art is perceived. Such an approach was shared, during the period, by a broad group of artists, including Brazil's Neo-Concretists. Unlike his peers, however, Cruz-Diez was not politically engaged, which resulted in the authorities looking upon him more favorably and considering his works of Op Art and Kinetic Art – which drew upon the progress of modern-day science and technology – as being allied to the cause of the country's broad program of modernization.

Striving to revolutionize painting, his own technique consisted of painting on narrow strips of cardboard after which each one was placed on a flat surface and separated from the next by a strip of aluminum or cardboard. The painting changed depending on the shift in the viewer's perspective which led to Cruz-Diez describing his works as reservoirs of events that the viewer was obliged to set in motion. In this way, he challenged any clear-cut divisions between the active artist and the passive viewer. Moreover, his decentralized works created in the context of Venezuela's rather dysfunctional politics sought to express notions of alternative, non-hierarchical structures of power.

4 Real Things, not Fictions

Tools for Utopia is concerned with the tensions between reality and dream, private and public, past and present – and, primarily, the given and the possible. It features works that transcend representation, shedding light on spaces beyond and outside the work of art, becoming active agents for the transformation of society. By placing contemporary works in dialogue with historical ones, this show traces the ways in which Latin American artists in different historical moments and various contexts have used their works as emancipatory tools. For many of them, aesthetics, like politics, has tangible effects on reality: it delineates the ways we see the world, defines zones of visibility and invisibility, and connects the real with the possible.

The artists presented here perceive the vital link between political change and the emancipation of bodies. For them, the body is a tool of resistance and self-determination. They make marginalized and injured bodies visible – be it an undocumented or a female body in traditional (patriarchal) societies, indigenous bodies within Westernized culture, or transvestite and queer bodies within heteronormative normality. They frequently employ their own bodies, articulating opposition toward the different forms of violence that continue to shape societies.

In 1968 León Ferrari vehemently stated: "Art will be neither beauty or novelty, art will be effectiveness and disruption," aligning himself with the rebellious spirit of the times: "The successful work of art will be that which, in the context in which the artist moves, has an impact similar to that of guerrilla attack in a country on its way to liberation". Artists often work like the most receptive seismographs: capable of detecting otherwise imperceptible movements, sensitive to minute tremors and displacements in our societies, which they are able to identify and record, presaging impending quakes. Attentive, engaged, and driven by the surrounding reality (both artistic and political), they dare to dream and (re)imagine the future.

Regina José Galindo (b. 1974) grew up during the time of the civil war in Guatemala (1960–1996) when more than 200,000 people died and thousands were forced to leave the country because of the violent conflict between leftist guerrilla organizations and the government. Galindo's practice has been shaped by her country's turmoil that persisted in the wake of several peace treaties that had been signed in 1996 and within the context of a newly democratized society. Her works are both provocative and shocking: she not only strives to acknowledge the thirty-six years of civil war that her country endured, but also attempts to stir her Guatemalan viewers from passivity, disrupting a numbness born from long years of violence. She repeatedly submits

herself deliberately to extreme situations (the line between her body as subject and object is extremely subtle), investigating both active and passive positions within a field of power relations. However, when placing herself in vulnerable situations – such as in *Limpieza Social* (Social cleansing, 2006) when she was waterboarded (a form of torture that simulates drowning) – she is rarely a mere victim. Her vulnerability is a way of exposing our susceptibilities: seeing her torture, does the viewer feel an impulse to intervene, look away, or watch her body distorted in pain? The artist is apparently using her body as a metaphor for the collective social body, transforming personal rage at injustices into public acts that demand a response.

Antonio Dias (1944 – 2018) George Perec's observation that "space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it" could be the motto for Antonio Dias' *Do It Yourself: Freedom Territory*, that he created in 1968. These simple adhesive strips taped to the floor apparently mark a movable and transitory area of freedom. There is an inside and outside and as spectators, we are invited to wander through the grid and assume different positions: that of perpetrator, oppressed, or maybe even that of uninvolved bystander. Created during a period of cultural revolution and the eruption of student protests in Paris (where Dias settled, a self-imposed exile, in 1966 following a military and civilian *coup d'état* that changed the course of Brazil's history), Dias' work is a powerful and timeless commentary on the political, social and artistic forms of open and concealed oppression. His *To the Police* (1968) – a group of bronze cobblestones – is another instruction given to the viewer and an ongoing invitation to participate in political resistance. In their refusal to communicate anything further about their context (they could be a commentary on the situation in Dias' native Brazil, the turmoil in Paris in May '68, or the tensions happening around us today), these works would appear to be affirming the nature of aesthetic experience: their meaning does not only mirror the artist's intentions, but is materialized and activated in the act of their reception.

5 Vunerable Bodies

The centuries of colonial exploitation and years of dictatorships in many Latin American countries forged a permanent state of exception in which hierarchy and abuse were the norms that organized the public life. The artists presented in this section make visible the extent to which such structural violence and normalized brutality is sustained by differing forms of everyday aggression. Many works, especially those created by female artists, are devoted to the status of women and their role in a society in which their rights are still highly restricted. Rigid segregation of gender roles, domestic violence, imposed standards of beauty, naturalization of sexual harassment are all deeply rooted in an aggressively patriarchal culture. The series of self-portraits created by Ana Mendieta are an expression of the refusal to conform to the male gaze through the representation of seductive, eroticized women's bodies. By deforming and exaggeratedly exposing it, the artist presents herself as fully controlling her body and appearance.

The feminist sensibility foregrounds all those bodies that occupy the position of the "feminine" and are subjugated by patriarchal, heteronormative, and colonial power: homo- and transsexuals, mutilated, disabled, and racialized bodies, indigenous people, missing and undocumented migrants. These "misfits" that are inappropriate from an official point of view would seem to be opposing any regime of imposed 'normality' and represent a refusal to satisfy the productive demands of a (turbo)capitalist system. The figure of a mourning mother powerfully epitomizes helplessness and a sense of utter injustice.

The works of art, rather than constructing their own reality, are a way of giving voice to those that have been silenced and are not seen or heard. The artists are zooming in on spaces that exist outside the system and power structures to address – precisely from such a perspective – issues of power, exclusion, abuse, forgetting, isolation, and hope. It is in this sense that they are tools to transcend parochial horizons, disrupt normality, voice dissent, and shield the individual's dignity. They acknowledge what otherwise would have been lost and transform forms of precariousness into resistance and survival.

Belkis Ayón (1967 – 1999) "Although my work deals with a theme as specific as the beliefs, rituals and myths of the Abakuá Secret Society, this does not mean that it is devoted solely to the population that practices and professes this faith. Above all, I am interested in questioning human nature," is how Belkis Ayón described her practice in 1993. Working almost exclusively in gradients of black, white and gray, her work focused on Abakuá, a secret male-exclusive religious practice developed on the northwestern coast of Cuba by Calabar people who had been brought there as slaves in the 19th century from southern Nigeria. The artist became familiar with their

rituals from their oral tradition, creating an iconography mixed with symbols from various religions. Her collagraphs evoke traditional Western paintings of religious motifs. In *La familia* (The family, 1991), Sikán – the only woman ever to be mentioned by the Abakuá tradition – is wearing a cross (a Christian symbol, but also a sign of the Efik people) and is surrounded by the rooster, representing purification, and the goat, the emblem of tenderness and innocence. It is worth noting that all the female characters in Ayón's paintings are deprived of mouths, symbolizing the absence of women in the Abakuá religion. It is in such a manner that the artist not only addresses the issue of local, indigenous, often lost but highly syncretic practices, but also articulates universal experiences of intolerance, gender discrimination, and the control exerted by those in power. By making a woman her main protagonist, she tells an alternative story and exposes the complexities of Afro-Cuban culture, implicitly denouncing Western supremacist attitudes that have marginalized it.

Jorge Macchi (b. 1963) In *Precarious Life,* Judith Butler argues that the experience of grief has often been considered depoliticizing, as it is said to "[return] the subject to a solitary situation." For Butler, by contrast, grief "furnishes a sense of political community," since it cuts across ideological divisions and makes visible the ethical basis of social bonds. In his highly poetic practice, Jorge Macchi creates a sense of ambivalence: his works are at once attractive and unsettling, intimate but powerful, apparently silent and delicate but nevertheless revealing a sinister side. Sometimes – in a surreal manner – he rediscovers an object's form or quotidian qualities: he zooms in on their details, placing them outside their usual context and playing with inversions, jokes, and deliberate mistakes, he foregrounds what has been omitted and ignored. At other times, such as in *Cuerpos sin vida* (Lifeless bodies, 2003), he reveals what we are missing or what we choose not to see, however real and close it may be. Captivated by the intriguing, delicate, and abstract form, the viewer quickly discovers the work's traumatic contents: these are newspaper clippings reporting the strange kidnappings, rapes, and deaths that were happening throughout the country. Even if such stories were not making front page news,

their reality was irrefutable and the artist would seem to be chronicling these individual tragedies that apparently disappear in their repetitiveness. However dramatic they are – they vanish into oblivion the moment we scroll down or turn the page. In this visually poetic work, the artist is not merely mourning but returns these deaths to (blurred) visibility. His work, an ephemeral, but collective pietà, is an open critique of violence and of our daily acceptance of it.

Paz Errázuriz (b. 1944) In 1975, the year when Paz Errázuriz' first work was published, Chile was a country without a democratic government, with a curfew in place, and regular disappearances of, among others, reporters, journalists, and freelance photographers. It was also a country that was about to become a "test case"– a project of hard-line neoliberalism – called the "Chilean Miracle" – inspired by Milton Friedman and his Chicago School. In defiance of such a context, Errázuriz began taking photographs of outsiders and rebels, bringing to the fore an imagery of political and artistic undercurrents and zooming into spaces functioning under brutal patriarchal repression and total control of the state security apparatus. Her works have, since then, been marked by issues of imprisonment, dissidence, and taboo. She is interested in "closed, marginal spaces of minorities that exist outside the system, outside the realm of power": her camera captures trans performances in the Talca brothel in *La manzana de Adán* (Adam's Apple, 1987), love within the confines of the Psychiatric Hospital in Putaendo (1994), and women in an old age home that she portrays as princesses and queens (1983 – 2000). Her sensitive gaze wanders between laughter and tears, hope and frustration, love and abandonment. An important aspect of Errázuriz' work is that it is the subject photographed who makes her a photographer, who gives her a status of the author. Her work does not merely consist of simply *capturing* and *taking shots* of others (an impulse natural to the masculine photographer-hunter figure), but in entering in intense and often long-lasting relationships that she establishes with those she photographs. Her photographic essays enable fragile lives to enter the visible world through celebration of their distance.

Miguel Ángel Rojas (b. 1946) is often recognized as a figurative artist, interested not so much in style as subject matter. It is on such a basis that he attempts to come to terms with conceptual, symbolic, and political themes such as sexual difference, indigenous politics, social displacement, and most recently, political violence related to drug trafficking in his native Colombia. In 1973, he began one of his most stunning series of photographs, the *Faenza* series, that documented clandestine sexual encounters between gay men at the Faenza Theater, a decaying B-movie cinema built during the 1920s in Bogotá. Rojas took these photographs surreptitiously, concealing his camera under his jacket or in a suitcase. The resulting images are ghostly records of the affective and physical experiences of a largely invisible, criminalized community. His monumental *David* (2005) addresses another taboo: the immediate consequences of military conflicts during the Colombian drug wars. For this work, the artist photographed a Colombian soldier – a victim of a mine – in a heroic stance echoing Michelangelo's sculpture of *David,* a statue that symbolized the city of Florence's opposition to tyranny. The perfection of the classical idea of beauty is shockingly contrasted with irreparable human injuries. Only when working on his series did Rojas become aware that his model – the same as his companions, other mutilated soldiers at the Military Hospital in Bogotá – was a young peasant: a discovery that obliged the artist to regard war as being not only a result of political and economic, but especially cultural inequalities.

6 Personal Territories

Public space is the primary stage of all totalitarian systems: when the city, the streets, and institutions cease to belong to citizens they become spaces of individual or/and collective oppression. Even if the peak of state-sanctioned violence was reached during the military dictatorships that gripped the majority of Latin American countries at differing times during the 1960s and 1980s, the later transition to democracy was a highly complex and ambivalent process in many of these countries.

Maps are tools that assist in spatial orientation and positioning, they identify areas and chart known localities. In creating them, Guillermo Kuitca is, however, not so much trying to identify where he actually is, but rather to "know where he is not." His fragmented, often displaced maps, city plans, and architectural floor plans are fraught with feelings of longing, fear and desire. Rather than objective reports, they seem to be interweaving different levels of reality and charting personal territories. His maps on mattresses, a powerful example being *Afghanistan* (1990), represent a haunting encounter of the private and public. The intimacy and security of the bedroom is affected by greater historical and political forces, shifting borders and entailing banishment and loss.

The city is a background for lives, individual assertions and narratives. The larger scale constantly interacts with the smaller: endless mega-cities with their labyrinthic, organized urban movement are spaces where human beings are trapped and forced to follow delineated directions. But they are also spaces of quotidian acts of disobedience, disruption, refusal, and hope. By charting and often also inspiring them, art participates in imagining alternative ways of being together, resisting and inventing new life forms – the real, rather than fictional.

Eduardo Berliner (b. 1978) "Like many children," states Eduardo Berliner, "my first contact with death came through a beloved animal. The dog I considered my own, a great big Brazilian mastiff, got cancer and had to have its hind leg amputated. (...) When I saw the great big animal without his hind leg I couldn't believe my eyes. Looking back, I realize that this was perhaps my first visual experience of the idea of collage. The power of absence and the violence of the cut." It is very interesting to observe that the first visual experience of the idea of the collage was, for Berliner, related not to the power of presence, addition, and unexpected juxtaposition, but to the power of absence. It appears that this is exactly where his creative imagination and capacity for fabulation originated. His oneiric, often very brutal, watercolors are collages, but rather than compositions involving fragments or unconscious images in the

playful spirit of the Surrealists, they are somnambulistic images that are fusions of memories, desires, fears, and all sorts of information that bombard us daily (attracting and repelling us). It seems as if Berliner is relating his nightmares or simply recording the city's latent violence, crime, and all sorts of perversity – a disquieting play between abstraction and the most blunt figuration. It is exactly in such a gap that these works return our gaze – the intrusive discomfort we feel before some of them is a recognition of our own dreams and daily experiences.

León Ferrari (1920 – 2013) began his artistic career in 1955 with a series of sculptures in various materials such as ceramic, wire, and wood. During the 1960s his works were characterized by an illegible writing in which the written word organizes visual space – writings that are primarily drawings rather than texts. It was during this period that his works acquired a strong political element, addressing the relationship between violence and religion (which resulted in his condemnation by the Catholic Church and eventually his exile). In 1976, after he had settled in São Paulo, he experimented with new techniques such as photocopying, heliographic prints, and microfiche and started a series of works that he described as "an architecture of madness." In these plans, he uses architectural images taken from Letraset, distorting their basic rules and creating contradictory and absurd spatial organizations and connections. Elsewhere, he substitutes tiny figures with cars in impressive vistas of elevated crisscrossed highways and impossible intersections. The cars and figures are trapped in urban labyrinths and forced to move in one direction with no apparent way out. There is a feeling of oppression, enclosure, and suffocation, Ferrari would seem to be exploring the violence of urban life, but more importantly forms of control in contemporary society. In *Cruce* (Cross, 1983/2003), he makes a reference to the Christian cross, aligning the Church with other oppressive, as he sees them, systems of order – the state and panoptical architecture.

The exhibition

Duration of the exhibition	30.10.2020 – 21.03.2021
Entrance fees	CHF 18.00 / red. CHF 14.00
Opening hours	Mondays closed, Tuesday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Public holidays	Open on 24, 26 and 31 December 2020, and on 1st and 2nd January 2021, from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Closed on 25 December 2020
Private tours / schools	T +41 31 328 09 11 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch
Curator	Marta Dziewańska

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