

by Nilofur Farrukh



Ephemeral Mural, 1968

Alternative

'The artist is always an expression of the people within which he works', are the words of the eminent Mexican artist Diego Rivera. This holds particularly true in the context of the comprehensive retrospective '**The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico 1968 -1997**' launched in early 2007, at MUCA, the main gallery of the Universidad

Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. Its curators, Olivier Debroise, Cuauhtemoc Medina, Alvaro Vazquez and Pilar Gracia bring into focus the various fringe movements of artists from several generations and diverse cultural backgrounds that with alternative models of artistic practices challenged artistic conventions from 1968 to 1997.

The art of this significant period of Mexican History from 1968 of the Tlatelolco student massacre to the Zapaista rebellion of the early 1990s gives an overview of the creative strategies that both supported the social resistance and sometimes became a symbol of a new consciousness.

The world remembers 1968 as the year when the Olympic Games were held in Mexico, a developing country, but for

The title of the exhibition **The Age of Discrepancies** comes from the phrase used in an inspiring speech by Javier Barros Sierra, the Rector of the University in 1970.

His phase 'Long Live Discrepancy' challenged the students to find ways to proactively challenge authoritarian rule by resisting systems that threaten the freedom of societies.

This extensively researched retrospective weaves history and

Julio Galan, *Tehuana en Istmo de Tehuantepec*, 1987



Discourses in MEXICAN Art

Mexico this year is associated with the student massacre, which happened just 10 days before the Olympics; when several hundred were shot down in a brutal action by the police. This action not only shocked the Mexican people but heralded a repressive regime for 26 years that was defeated by the uprising in Chiapas.

the artists' response to it through 300 works by 119 artists which are installed in nine defined sections. The diverse visual material includes paintings, photography, poster design, installation, performance, experimental theatre, super-8 cinema, video, music, poetry and popular culture that reconstructs specific moments of artistic experimentation.



"Fabulas panicas de Alexandro, Ek Herald de Mexico, 16 February 1969

They also represent a range of intellectual and visual tendencies which in some cases took place simultaneously to compete as alternative models of cultural practice. The show draws attention to the importance of new sources of knowledge to understand art history and the relationship between art's historical research and conservation theory and practice.

To enter the **Age of Discrepancies**, the visitor walks through the 'white corridor' by Helen Escobedo lined with warped white boards facing a mirrored wall in an almost ritualistic walk that connects the present to the past.

The first art object that holds your attention is a film on the making of the Ephemeral Mural. Artists are seen working on improvised art painted on the corrugated zinc sheets that covered the ruins of the Miguel Aleman monument, the Mural stood on the campus as a symbol of protest and in support of the students' movement. The film not only sets the tenor of the exhibition by capturing the urgency of the act of defiance, the camaraderie among the artists and their solidarity with the community, which not only survived the Mural but what marked the beginning of artistic strategies

in times of intolerance and repression in Mexican history. The show's first section recognizes the role of Salon Independiente. This space offered many seminal ideas in exhibitions of Arte Otro (Other Art) organized by Helen Escobedo that challenged the outdated system of training and moribund aesthetics. The artists 'using sculptures, color, space, this group created environments using movable works in which visitors could activate' with the visitors no longer just as passive spectators; this art anticipated contemporary art seen in Europe and America decades later.

On the right hand of the large hall were located a series of paintings dominated by the mural titled Jazz by Kazuya Sakai. This vibrantly colored work combines a lyrical flow with a formal structure to introduce the movement of Geometricism. Based on an exploration of structuralist theories, its exponents created a space for their formalistic concerns.

The Panic World section had on display cartoon strips, comic books, films, sculpture, painting and assemblage and stage design by artists for plays and films by Alejandro Jodorowsky, the Chilean actor, playwright and filmmaker. These works were produced mostly under the banner of the Panic

Movement which was led by Alejandro Jodorowsky and co-founded by playwright Arrabal and artist Topor. The guiding ideas of the movement were terror, humor, and simultaneity which its members faithfully expressed in categories not popularly recognized as High Art.

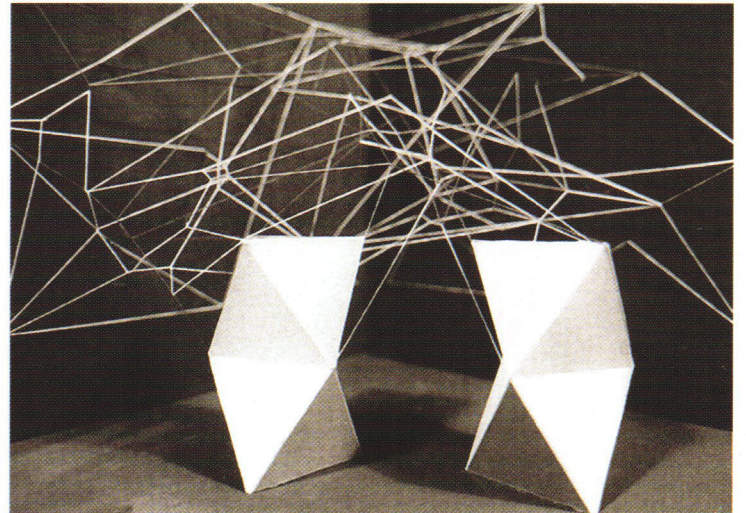
An alternative network built around the production, distribution and exchange of artists' publications like artists' books, mail art and early conceptual videos was grouped under Conceptual Margins. Through this Mexican artists who traveled or lived abroad challenged the nature of artistic practice at home. The influx of non-Mexican artists living and practicing in the country also forged creative networks and communities. Old editions of the Plumed Horn were displayed to show its breakthrough in editorial content and design philosophy. It was an influential periodical that offered its international communications network to the students to help overcome the disinformation campaign after the Tlatelolco massacre.

This bi-lingual Spanish and English publication was started in 1962 in Mexico City. Its name refers to the horn of American Jazz and the plumed serpent of the Mesoamerican

Coco Fusco y Guillermo Gomez Pena, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992-94



Hersua, *Ambiente psico-somatico*, 1970



cosmology soon became a symbol of the fusion of cultures as it was widely distributed in Latin America. It was however forced to close down due to the repressive actions that followed the student uprising.

Artists' Books became a popular form to further their ideas in print. Also prominent at the exhibition were feminist works that conveyed the Female Artist as Hero project question the local stereotypes in gender roles and relationships. Magali Lara explored a feminine language of desires and feelings in a book as art object. Here was seen the emergence

of a feminine identity among women artists in the marginal expression. Many artists collaborated in the artistic enterprise of El Archivero, founded in 1985, promoted the production of artists' books and sought market for this alternative practice, organizing thematic shows and events for novels, mail art and rubber stamp art.

The fifth section titled Urban Strategies focused on the phenomenon known as Grupos. These collaborative practices invited a review of the prevailing art system centered around individual representation. Photographs resurrected from



"La toma del Balmori", March 1990



Marcos Kurtycz, *LIBR*, 1980

"La toma del Balmori", March 1990



archives were hung with pegs like clothes on a washing line to recreate a moment in Mexican history when photography provided an alternative to the media censorship and played a vital role in conveying information, documenting it with an intensity and a sense of commitment with regard to the

emergence of social movements against human right violations and accidents due to overpopulation during the great Mexican earthquake. Mobile photographic shows took the medium to audiences on the streets where they were hung along the footpaths to claim the public space as its new territory. This also was in defiance of the official disregard for this dynamic medium. The independent photographers of this group were visible social agents who brought conditions of the gay community, drag queens, rock musicians and prostitutes to the fore.

Some artists employed printmaking as a tool of communication for popular movements like labor unions and neighbourhood associations. The members of Germinal painted murals on large sheets of cloth which were later

carried in protest marches. With the inclusion of multiple voices particularly from the social fringes privileged an art with social commitment. With a group of people Francisco Tolendo, a prominent figure, established the Casa de Cultura in Juchitan with the intention of rescuing Zopotec culture

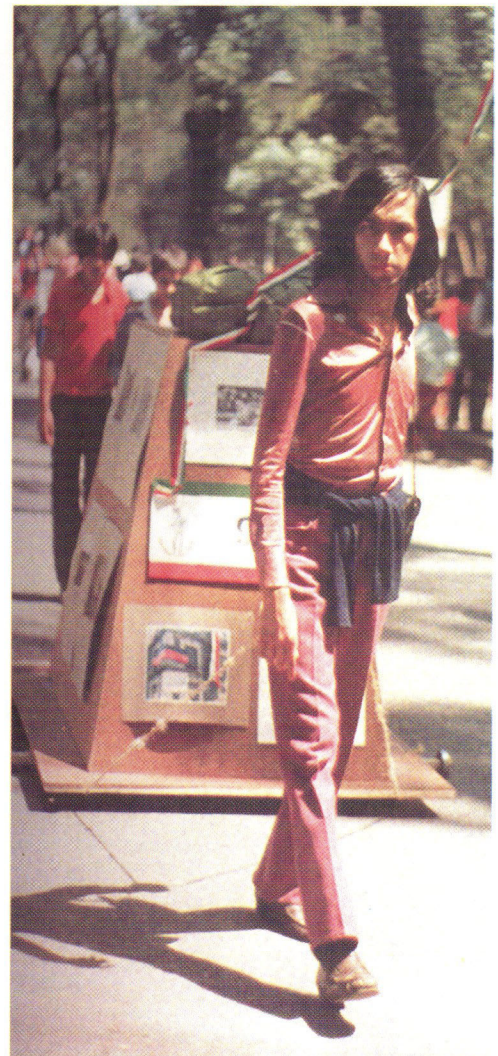
and to provide the local people with greater access to culture. A picture of a film screening under a thatched roof indicates how limited resources did not stand in the way. Tolendo also experimented with found organic material and indigenous skills to create a new kind of hybrid art that distanced itself from the urban and Western references that dominated Mexican art in the 1950s and 1960s. Several of his works in original and in photographs are included in the exhibition. The last three sections Identity as Utopia, Expulsion from Paradise and Inclemency expand on the artistic practice since the 1980s, of individual artists, that emphasizes diversity within Neo Mexican art. The personal as political was reinforced in Identity as Utopia as the devastating earthquake of 1985 continued the search for identity with a profound

critique of the discourse of modernization. The pioneer of video art in Mexico, Pola Weiss presented 'video dance', a work that uses movements and feelings to convey a search for identity. Carlos Aria's submission Jamadas (1995) a long piece of embroidered cloth that was partly fixed to the wall as the rest of it hung down to drape on the floor of the gallery explored traditional embroidery to create imagery of lines and textures with stitches. While creating a space for this traditional domestic craft, the artist also seeks to create ambiguities regarding the gender connotations of embroidery. The nineteenth century symbolic representation of the body as a Mexican cultural icon was eroded with a shift in meaning and concept with the works of artists like Julio Galan who invests the body with new meaning connected to issues of

Martha Hellion, *Life Still Life*, 1974



Armando Cristeto, 1980





Rodolfo Zanabria, *Los Libra Brocheta*, circa 1987

the self.

Provocative works in the exhibition that bring into debate the exploitative side of the migrant population that crosses the frontier into USA, presented stories from the Mexican perspective.

Exhibits in 'Expulsion from Paradise' engages with post-colonial discourses of James Clifford, Homi Bhaba and others that confronted the legitimacy and pretensions of universalism of Western cultures. Works like *La Malinche* by Jimmie Durham in the show joins the debate that questions the hegemonic politics of art that rob the local context of its importance through canons of exclusivity.

'Inclmency' the last part of the show includes young artists of the 1990s that, because of the narrow vision of the state's

cultural institutions, were forced to work outside the prescribed space. Their art practice makes visible the parallel art systems within Mexico, one which is conservative and controlled and the other with its cutting edge discourse that has won global recognition. These contradictions lead to a new representation of culture using parody to discredit a regime with its failed modernization and conditions of chronic violence that led to the Zapatista uprising.

The conditions and the strategies of resistance highlighted at *The Age of Discrepancies* in Mexico finds resonance, at multiple levels, with the six decades of the art practice in Pakistan. The state interference in the making of the national cultural policy and the transformation of national cultural institutions into propaganda tools for the dominant ideology



View of the Exhibition

led to the politicization of the arts. This politicization became overt during Zia ul Haq's Islamization thrust in the 1980s. His discriminatory Hudood Ordinance against women and human right abuses proved to be the turning point for progressive artists that led the movement of dissident art. As the narrative of the marginalized for the first time entered art, it joined the protest of poets, writers and women activists to confront the state.

The awareness created during this era led to a body of art that for the first time, in the public space recognized gender apartheid and suppression of women rights. The defiant art of the 1980s both documented and confronted human right

abuses and protested against art censorship. With the ban on the human figure - particularly the nude - from official exhibitions, an exhibition of banned paintings was held on the sidewalk in Lahore. Artists saw their work attacked and thrown out of galleries by pro-state vigilante groups. The reaction to this led to a subversive vocabulary shown at clandestine shows that could be taken off on short notice. Working within this environment the art evolved along different trajectories with a renewed confidence and its collective and individual strategies forged stronger links with the community while widening the chasm between the state and its cultural institutions.