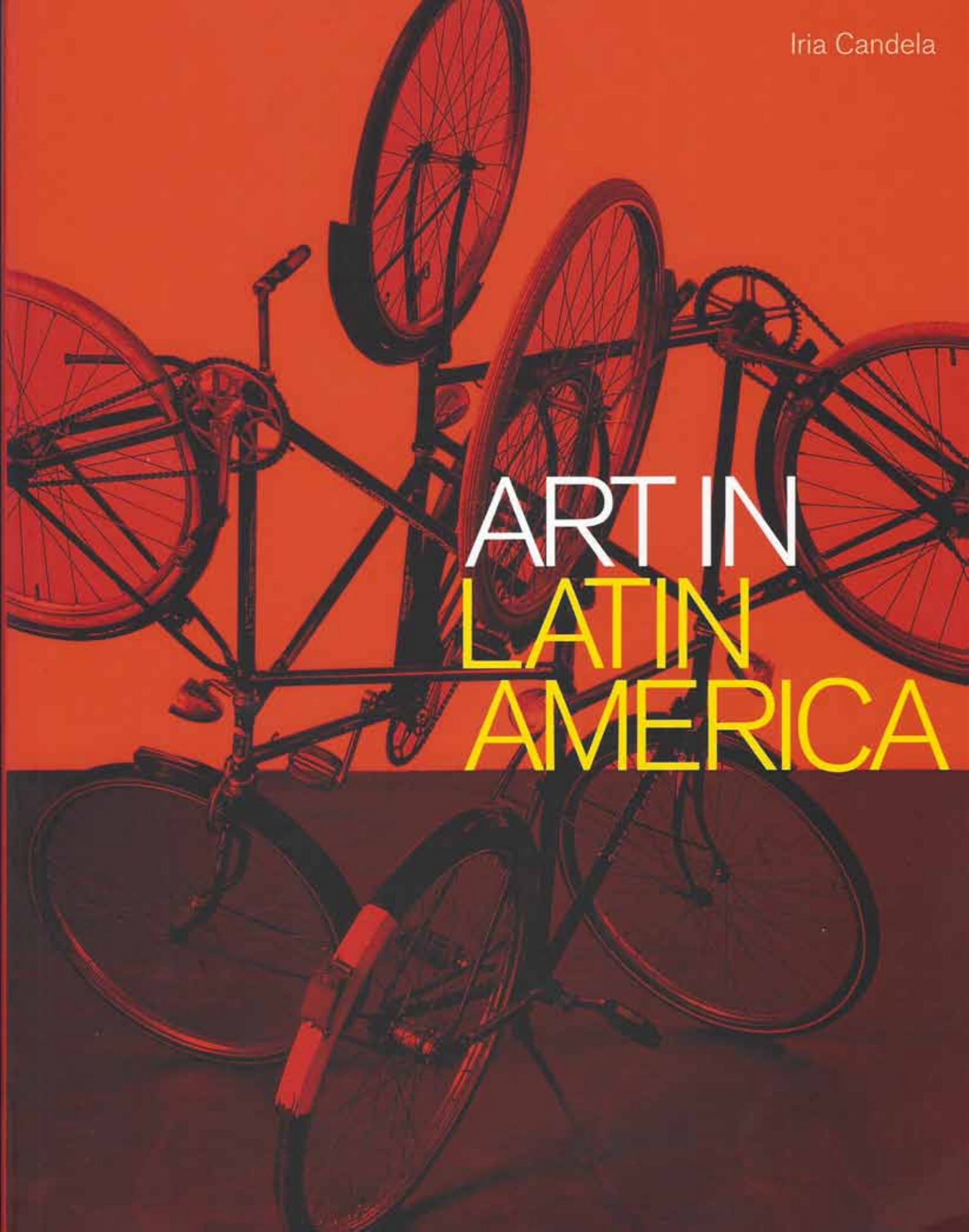


Iria Candela



ART IN
LATIN
AMERICA

of the falling, at the fall, at the overdue date, the date of decadence, that it keeps what it keeps. A memory appeared no longer has a chance; it can do little but doze off. A harmonious, reconciled, euphoric memory – a happy memory – I can't imagine it doing anything other than getting lost.³³

The great enemy of Wildi Merino's video art is the distancing of reality through excessive formalism – she recently remarked that 'art has to do with life not art'. Her work nevertheless exhibits a refined formal structure. Contriving a concise style with which to integrate the broken speech of marginal or traumatised people, Wildi Merino has had to distance herself from the formal conventions of documentary cinema: she never uses the conventional voice-over, never attempts to disappear as the creator of the interview, nor does she use the camera to capture the interlocutor in the manner of television reporting. Many of her works are filmed in neutral indoor spaces, with a fixed camera set opposite the interviewee and a white wall as background. That might suggest an aggressive style. The contrary is true: in Wildi Merino's work, it is not people that she interrogates but reality, and her scrutiny implicitly understands that reality as invariably fractured.³⁴

When, in *The Invisible*, she records only the bodies of the immigrants, this is not a strategy of contempt but a clarification of the way in which society views the immigrant as a headless, faceless subject lacking civil and political representation. The 'invisible man' is this illegal immigrant who, at the end of the video, describes how he was able to cross the Franco-Swiss border one night on foot without being seen because the border-guards were watching football on their tiny television set. The video's other protagonists testify to the way in which Swiss society constantly brings them face-to-face with their marginality and their voice is therefore the abstract and symbolic voice of all Latin American emigrants.³⁵ The composition of the shot (the video form) clearly derives from a concept; Wildi Merino articulates a visual analogue (the headless body) for the 'invisibility' of the illegal worker. The artist herself has very concisely observed: 'The form arises from the content.'³⁶ Because there is no face, because spectators cannot look the protagonist in the face, they are forced to listen to the immigrants, who finally *speak*. Then, inevitably, viewers hear the immigrants' thwarted, weakened, incomplete language – a language that begins timidly to vocalise memories, desires and protests that have so often been repressed.

The language of the forgotten

Perhaps the most important quality of the video *Cinco puntos 2005 (Five Dots)*, made by the Ecuadorian artist Tomás Ochoa in an Argentine reform school for minors, is its determination to dismantle the 'authority' of the film-maker. In the early 2000s, Ochoa, like Wildi, directed a series of videos in which individuals marginalised by the system were given the opportunity of speaking to the

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ART IN LATIN AMERICA

'While there have been many books surveying 'Latin American Art' in broad terms, what has been lacking is an up-to-date publication that gives a sense of the context and scope of the rapidly expanding interest in contemporary Latin American artists' work. Iria Candela's book fulfills this need splendidly, and her writing is a pleasure to read: precise, lucid, on target and well-informed.'
Guy Brett, curator and art critic

Latin American-born or based artists included are Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Narda Alvarado, Francis Alÿs, María Fernanda Cardoso, Donna Conlon, Regina José Galindo, Carlos Garaicoa, Jorge Macchi, Ernesto Neto, Rivane Neuenschwander, Tomás Ochoa, Gabriel Orozco, Miguel Ángel Ríos, Doris Salcedo, Santiago Sierra, Javier Téllez, Ingrid Wildi Merino, Héctor Zamora and David Zink Yi.

Over the last twenty years, the visual arts in Latin America have witnessed a boom akin to that experienced by Hispano-American literature during the 1960s and 1970s. In the last two decades a brilliant constellation of artists has emerged; and like the generation of writers before them, they have set about renewing the disciplines of their art with fearless imagination and originality. Despite the growing importance of contemporary art from Latin America, there has been up until now no book to thoroughly explore this phenomenon. *Art in Latin America* covers this vibrant art scene since 1990 through a detailed study of new and unconventional art practices. It offers an original and in depth interpretation of more than one hundred works in the fields of sculpture, installation, performance, video and public art.

Iria Candela is Curator of International Art at Tate Modern.

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Cover: Gabriel Orozco, *Cuatro bicicletas (siempre hay una dirección)* 1994 *Four Bicycles (There is Always One Direction)*

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camera. In *Espejo* 2002 (*Mirror*) this meant the men and women queuing from the small hours in front of the United States Consulate in Guayaquil (fig.45); in *SAD Co.* 2003 the former workers of an Ecuadorian goldmine employed by a North American multinational; and in *6mm3 – El cuarto oscuro* 2004 (*6mm3 – The Darkroom*), the inhabitants of an Andean mountain village that had been submerged after the construction of a dam. *Five Dots*, however, challenges these earlier works by incorporating the voices of the persons portrayed in entirely participatory fashion (fig.46).

In *Five Dots*, it is not the author of the video who interviews the protagonists but the teenagers themselves, the young internees in the Center for Socio-Educative Orientation (COSE) in Mendoza; they take their places both before and behind the camera in order to construct their own narrative as both protagonists and producers of the audiovisual discourse. Ochoa (b. Cuenca, 1965) met the young detainees after giving a workshop in photography and video at their institution and confined himself to lending them the camera so that they could film a series of self-portraits. He further suggested two exercises to them: singing 'songs, phrases picked up in the street, invented by them, dreamed about, altered by remembrance' and reading 'excerpts of the "punishment technology" studies conducted by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975)'.³⁷

Five Dots therefore presents three types of footage: 1) frontal shots of the detainees singing songs learned in the street or invented at the reformatory; 2) a series of similar takes, frontal and in colour, of the same protagonists reading sentences from Foucault about the punitive system; and 3) a collection of brief shots that serve as transitions between scenes, filmed in black and white and slow motion, and which show the faces and semi-nude bodies of the detainees at various moments of their stay in the reformatory. The songs deal mainly with drug consumption, possession of arms, fear of solitude, the loss of love and their youthful hopes and dreams. One verse sung by three voices runs 'and again and again and again I escaped from *el COSE* ('y otra vez, otra vez, otra vez, del COSE me fugué'). The sentences from *Discipline and Punish* mainly refer to the need for political and judicial authorities to publicise crimes and punishments. Thus we hear from the mouths of the detainees themselves sentences such as 'the art of punishment must rest on a whole technology of representation' or 'a secret punishment is a punishment half-wasted'. Among the black and white images is a brief shot – perhaps filmed in front of a mirror – of a detainee looking through the camera.

Ochoa has said that the value of *Five Dots* consists in its timid attempt to allow the young prisoners to generate, however briefly, their own discourse, as against that physically and psychologically imposed on them by the forces of order: the psychiatric and judicial authorities and the communication media. He thus



directly confronts 'the indignity of speaking for others'³⁸:

It is in heterotopias, or counter-spaces, preeminently jails and reformatories, where metaphors, codes and imaginary worlds that implode meaning flow freely. This implosion takes place at different semantic levels but it is expressed with the body and on the body. [*Five Dots*] examines the relationship between exercising punishment based on control over the body of the convicted subject and his resistance to power by virtue of his capacity to produce symbols. The project's title refers to the tattoo that most young prisoners have in one of their hands, five dots tattooed between the thumb and forefinger, which mean that, when the hand is shut tight, a mortal ambush is being laid: four of them are on our side, the fifth one is army or police. When marginal, discontinuous, disqualified, non-legitimized wisdom is involved, it facilitates the arousal of submerged wisdom: Foucault contends that 'the knowledge that the dominant culture does not need for itself is the only one that is not assimilated by power, that is, it is the only one that shall not be assimilated as a weapon of repression'.³⁹

In *Five Dots*, this 'submerged wisdom' rises to the surface by means of a video practice that places the camera in the hands of the disqualified social community. Although the origin of this strategy can be traced back to the experiments with collective cinema made as early as the French demonstrations of May 1968, in Latin America the first community-authored projects began only in the latter part of the 1980s. In 1987, for example, the Brazilian documentary-maker Vicente Carelli created the collective *Vídeo nas Aldeias* (Video in the Villages), which brought video production and post-production equipment to various indigenous communities in Brazil and has since produced more than eighty documentaries and video-works. In 1996, the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar suggested that the Museo del Oeste in Caracas provide still cameras to the inhabitants of the poorest slums of the city in order to exhibit the resulting photographs on a continuous basis in the museum's exhibition spaces. Since 1998, the collective Chiapas Media Project/Promedios has been producing and distributing videos made by the peasant communities of the states of Chiapas and Guerrero in the south-west of Mexico, thus showing that, even in the areas worst affected by poverty, it is possible to organise a form of knowledge 'not assimilated by power'.⁴⁰

In addition to recovering this legacy of communitarian strategies, *Five Dots* also enters into dialogue with two recent pieces of video art that use music and songs to portray communities marked by violence. *Bocas de ceniza* 2003 (*Mouths of Ash*), a series of videos made by the Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría, is made up of close-ups of persons directly affected by the armed conflict between the revolutionary guerrillas and the paramilitary forces in his native country. Each of the people portrayed sings a song in which he or she expresses – and perhaps redeems – a part of the pain inflicted on them through

the atrocities perpetrated during the Colombian drug wars. Another video made in the same year, *Nueve (Nine)* by Brooke Alfaro, shows two rival gangs from Panama City, 'Los Palestinos' and 'La Banda de Tabo', singing rap. The title refers to a semiautomatic 9 mm automatic pistol, which is the preferred weapon of the members of both gangs. The video was projected in the form of a two-channel installation onto the facade of a building situated in one of the most dangerous slums of Panama City.

In *Five Dots*, Ochoa counters the discourse that presents young detainees of COSE as delinquents who must be punished; by handing them the camera, the prisoners speak for themselves. They are half-child, half-adult and have created startling self-portraits whose social codes vary between unaffected playfulness and pure survival.⁴¹ One of the headlines included in the 'ethnographic dossier' that complemented the project, published after the escape of some of the detainees, states: 'Of the ten fugitives from COSE, seven are charged with homicide.' Like the Mexican teenagers portrayed fifty years earlier in Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), the Argentine protagonists of *Five Dots* inhabit a world of terrible injustice and violence. This is no fiction: after Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America is the second most violent region in the world. Of the twenty-three countries with the highest rates of criminality, thirteen are in Central or South America. In states such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Honduras, murder is the principal cause of death. This extremely high level of homicide, directly motivated by extremes of poverty and social inequality, has led to an explosion in the number of prisoners and penitentiary institutes. As a BBC report recently revealed, on the basis of data from the United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders,

there are more than 590,000 people in Latin American jails. Many detention centres are overcrowded, and some have no electricity or running water. There has also been a rising number of riots, hunger strikes and fires. Joanne Mariner, deputy director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch, told the BBC that many prisons in the region have currently two to four times more inmates than they can hold.⁴²

The critique made by *Five Dots* must, in any case, be understood as transcending the specific conflict that it portrays, that is, the imprisonment and punishment of young 'criminals'. In the same way as the ultimate objective of *Discipline and Punish* was to 'study the metamorphosis of punitive methods on the basis of a political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations',⁴³ the video thus made in collaboration between Ochoa and the internees of the COSE is intended to demonstrate the possibility of an artistic practice that rescues dissident and marginalised discourses and subverts the established order. Relative to this intention, Carlos Jiménez has said that to 'convince is always to inflict a double defeat: to defeat the defeated and to defeat

him again so that he assimilates as his own the victory of the vanquisher. Thus the convinced is a victor amnesic of himself; the vanquished presenting himself as the victor. In *Five Dots*, Tomás Ochoa attempts to drive this perverse hypostasis to a turning point'.⁴⁴

Interrupted cinema

A large part of the video-work of the Argentine artist Jorge Macchi (b. Buenos Aires, 1963) can be inscribed within an important tendency in experimental cinema and alternative video art: that of subverting the mechanisms and codes of representation of the film medium itself. In a number of videos made between 1992 and 2007, Macchi has proposed a humorous variation of the various paradigms and codes of hegemonic cinema. Where Wildi Merino challenges the silence imposed on marginalised emigrants and Ochoa confronts the violent logic of the punitive system, Macchi makes an institutional critique of the film apparatus as an essential instrument of ideological propaganda.

As Noel Burch noted in his famous essay *Theory of Film Practice* (1969), most films constantly deploy an established narrative structure, which he described as 'the institutional mode of representation'. In avant-garde film practices, there seems always to have been a desire to challenge these conventions, which may have been present from the first but became particularly noticeable from the 1960s on. This experimental strategy – which we might term 'the alternative mode of representation' – tends to foreground or directly denounce the internal functioning of the cinematographic system. That is, it tends to deconstruct, interrupt or disturb filmic narration in order to emphasise that all films are social constructions and, as such, a channel by which ideology is transmitted.⁴⁵

Two works made by Macchi in the 1990s radicalise this tactic of invasion or de-naturalisation of the conventional film narrative. *La flecha de Zenón* (*Zeno's Arrow*), co-directed with David Oubiña in 1992, is an animation of barely eighty seconds' duration showing the countdown that habitually precedes film projections. The work includes the beeps made by the counter every time it marks a number (10, 9, 8...) and is entirely predictable until the figure '2' appears. At this point, Macchi perverts the 'natural order' of cinema so that, instead of the film beginning, the spectator continues to see the countdown, which now shows the figures resulting from successive division by two: 2; 1; 0.5; 0.25; 0.125; 0.0625, 0.03125; 0.015625... (fig.48). The numbers, however, become smaller and smaller, eventually turning into a miniscule horizontal line that disappears before our eyes – though they do not cease to exist since we can still hear the beeps. The surprise effect of *Zeno's Arrow*, a film about a film that will never begin, invites us to reflect on the nature of time in cinema